

**Basic Christianity
and
The Christian Life**

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I

Basic Christianity

God's Greatest Glory

Genesis 50:20

But as for you, you thought evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring to pass as it is this day, to save many people alive.

God ordains all things that come to pass. Not a sparrow falls to the ground without a specific decree from God. Even the very hairs of our head are all numbered:

Matthew 10:29,30

Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered.

Where the sparrow falls, or the hair lies, is decreed by God, as is what happens to it afterwards. Extrapolate the ordination of one sparrow or one hair to the working of the entire universe, and we can just begin to get some idea as to how all-powerful, all-knowing and almighty God really is. This is the God that all men are duty bound to worship. He is the only God worthy of worship. Any other god who falls short of this is merely a figment of men's own imaginations:

Psalm 50:21

Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself.

Because God ordains all things that come to pass, and because God is perfect, we must conclude that all things that come to pass are working together for good:

Romans 8:28

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

The greatest good is God's glory. He is the all-powerful, all-knowing, almighty God worthy of worship, so He must get all the glory. No glory should ever go to a lesser creature such as men, or gods who are figments of men's imaginations.

Not only do all things that come to pass work out to God's glory, but God so ordains everything that it all works out to His *greatest* glory. He can't work out anything to a lesser glory, otherwise He would be less than perfect. For example, if there were, say, ten different ways to get from A to B, God would be bound to choose the one way which would lead to His greatest glory. He couldn't choose to come to pass any of the other nine ways. Extrapolate this concept to all possible events that could happen in the universe, and all interconnections between all events, and we just begin to get some idea of how God works all things to His greatest glory. There is only one path God can ever ordain, and that is the sequence and interconnection of events that actually come to pass, which is always what is to His greatest glory. All other theoretically possible ways, God will not ordain to come to pass, because it will not be to His greatest glory.

All this is very straightforward so far. However, before we can really come to believe this, there seems to be two insurmountable problems in the way:

(1.) The first one is the argument that, if God is in control of all things, then that just turns rational creatures with a will of their own, like angels and men, into robots. If we are forced to do what God decrees we do, and can't choose to do anything else, how can God account us responsible for our actions?

God has endowed rational creatures with a will, and although the will of man has now, after the fall of Adam, lost all ability to do good (sin is the second problem which we will come to later), the choices men make are fully theirs, despite the fact that God has decreed them, as He indeed decrees all things. This might seem a difficult concept to grasp at first, but God is not only in control of all events and interconnection between events, but the wills, desires and affections of men as well. This fact just goes to show how even greater God is. Again, we only begin to see this when we start to contemplate it.

(2.) The other seemingly insurmountable problem is that of sin. If God is in control of all things, then how is it that there is so much evil in the world? Surely evil can't come from God? Well, sin *has* come into the world. God has ordained it to come to pass, so we must conclude that this is because His greatest glory can only be served by its

presence. But sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God. This fact presupposes the existence of rational, created beings with positive laws having been given them by God. Sin can't exist in God alone because He's not a created being, neither is He under any law. As soon as God created rational creatures and gave them even just one positive law, at least the theoretical existence of sin (i.e. their breaking this law) came into being.

Consider the following examples of evil acts:

(a.) Adam ate the forbidden fruit and brought all mankind into an estate of sin and misery. But God ordained this, as He knew it would be to His greatest glory in the end (which Adam did not and could not know). Only by there being a fall into sin can there be a plan of redemption, which would glorify God far more than if there had been no fall, and therefore no plan of redemption, at all.

(b.) The crucifixion of Christ was at the hands of wicked men, who shall be duly punished for their wickedness. But only by the crucifixion of Christ could God's plan of redemption be brought about:

Acts 2:24

Him being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain.

These wicked men had no idea of what God's plan was, but had their own selfish motives for crucifying Christ, so they are culpable and God is not.

(c.) Similarly, we can extrapolate this concept to the holocaust of World War II, suicide bombers, indeed every sin against God's commandments we can possibly think of. God ordains them all to His greatest glory – otherwise He wouldn't have allowed them to come to pass in the first place. He frustrates many a plan in men's minds.

So we now see how even greater God is. Not only is He in control of all events, all interconnection between events, the wills, desires and affections of all rational creatures, but all sinful acts and thoughts of men as well.

Finally, it could be objected that if a wicked act, e.g. the crucifixion of Christ, comes to pass, and as it therefore must be to God's greatest glory; then why should such acts be called wicked and men punished for them, when, after all, God's greatest glory is being served by them?

Romans 6:1

Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?

Well, the answer lies in the fact that God is all-knowing and all-powerful, therefore He knows what to decree, and indeed has the power to decree it – all events that come to pass being only ever worked out by Him to His greatest glory. Men and other rational creatures are neither all-knowing nor all-powerful. They can neither see the future nor powerfully make sure that anything they decide to do can come to pass anyway. God can always frustrate them if what they intend is not to His greatest glory.

So, because men are not capable of knowing or effecting what is to God's greatest glory, God has given them another rule to live by instead of the rule of "whatsoever comes to pass." The rule of life given to men is the moral law, which is summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments. This is *always* our rule of life. However, on many occasions, e.g. the crucifixion of Christ, God does not actually decree what is in keeping with the moral law to come to pass, but what is a transgression of it (i.e. sin). This, only God has the right to do, because only He can see when it is best to decree what is (to men) evil, for the purpose of leading events to His greatest glory in the end. Men can never see or know this. God is perfectly just in consequently judging men for breaking His commandments, even though God might actually decree oftentimes for their actions to come to pass – for His greatest glory.

So we see that our rule of life is the moral law, which we are duty bound to keep; whereas God's rule of life is His greatest glory, which He is bound to decree. We can't begin to fathom how God's greatest glory should come about. But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't:

(1.) Begin to realise all this, and therefore see how great God is.

(2.) Love God's holy law and live our lives in the light of it, and it alone.

(3.) Give God all the glory in all things and:

Isaiah 2:22

Cease from man whose breath is in his nostrils, for wherein is he to be accounted of?

(4.) Realise that God's greatest glory may be (and often is) displayed through unpleasant experiences for ourselves – indeed, even eventually our death. We have no right to believe that God will not bring on us unpleasant adversities; but when they come, we have the comfort of knowing that they are all working out to God's greatest glory, because He has brought them to pass. Therefore, we need never fret, in any circumstance, knowing that God is always glorified to the greatest possible extent in all things that come to pass.

What Does God Require Of Us?

There is a God

Many people today deny the existence of God, but, despite their protestations, this is an untenable position to hold. All we need do is look to the Creation around us, the sky, the sea, the hills and forests, and we can do no other than come to the conclusion that there is an all-powerful Creator God who designed it all and keeps it all in being. God's eternal power and Godhead can clearly be seen from the things that are made by Him.

We are therefore without excuse

The reason that many people in our day deny this to be the case is not because science has proven otherwise, but rather it is because they don't *want* to believe it. Many people are violently against the idea that there is a God who created everything, because the consequence of admitting such a God exists must lead to the conclusion that all of us are therefore answerable to Him. We can't escape this conclusion. If God exists, then we are answerable to Him because we were created by Him. Therefore if we continue to ignore the fact that God exists, we are without excuse when it comes to the judgment to which such a God must hold all his rational, created beings accountable.

The Conscience

Creation tells us that there is a God, and by inference that we are accountable to Him. This is all that Creation can tell us in and of itself, but it is enough for us to be without excuse if we neglect to then find out what God requires of us. It is therefore our duty to find out what God requires of us, and we should not be able to sleep until we have not only found this out, but once having found it out, put it into practice in our lives. God has also given all men a conscience, which will not give them rest until they have done this. Men do all sorts of crazy things of their own invention in order to try to placate their own

consciences, but in the end none of them work, because of the very fact that they have invented these stupid ideas themselves, rather than gone looking to God Himself for the revelation that He has given mankind to show us what He requires.

God's Revelation

Creation shows us that there is a God and that we are all responsible to then find out for ourselves what God requires. In fact God's revelation as to what He requires of us is not very difficult to find at all. Most people know it. At least three major religions all acknowledge what this revelation of His law is. It is summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments, which are common to Christians, Muslims and Jews alike. The problem is that most people in today's world simply don't want to be told what to do and how to behave, because they are happy with making their own rules up, and not being responsible to anyone for their behaviour. So they deliberately forget God. The one thing truly needful to solve all the problems of mankind, and to create a world of good, humble, God-fearing, caring people has been lost sight of completely. Without this, the world will never get any better, rather it will get worse, and no amount of man-made ideas will change the situation, just maybe cover the problems over for a time.

The Solution

If everyone kept the Ten Commandments, the world's problems would be solved at a stroke. No longer would the world be full of people out to get what they can for themselves, living selfish lives and not bothering much about other people less well off than they. A world full of people loving God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength, and their neighbour as themselves would solve everything at a stroke. So why don't we do it?

A further problem

Here is the proof of the sad fact that none of us are able to keep the law of God, even when we know what it is. None of us can live up to

that standard. Indeed, our natural instinct is to rebel against God's law and deliberately hate it, wanting to live for our own pleasure and invent our own morality instead. We think that we shouldn't be responsible to a God, especially one who gives us a law that demands of us more than we can do. This, we say, is the ultimate in unfairness. How can we believe in a God that is so cruel?

God's Ultimate Solution

First of all, God created man upright, but Adam, the first man (this fact is common to all three major religions. It is the evolutionist, who doesn't believe in a first man, that is out of step here), sinned by eating the forbidden fruit, and all mankind descending by ordinary generation from him, i.e. all of us, inherited a totally corrupt nature as a result. This is why we can't keep God's law no matter how hard we try. Try keeping the Ten Commandments in thought, word and deed for a day, or an hour. All I have to say to you is the phrase "dirty thought," and you've had one. Don't pretend that you haven't. This is the wretched condition we are all in by nature.

Again, it is argued that it is unfair of God to subject all men to being born into such a condition, when it was only Adam that fell in the first place. Well, for a start it is not unfair of God. He can create a world any way He likes, and it is not up to us to complain. But more than this, God *has* provided a way of escape from our condition. So there *is* a way out. Even so, most men prefer not to believe the problem exists in the first place, than to believe a problem with a way out.

Remember what we have learned so far:

- The fact of Creation shows us there is a God.
- The fact there is a God means that we are responsible to Him.
- The fact that we are responsible to Him means that we must search out what duty this God requires of us.
- When we find what duty He requires of us we find out that we can't keep this law ourselves.
- When we find out that we can't keep this law ourselves we must search out to see whether God has a way of escape, and if so, to take hold on it with all that we have, or face the consequences.

Cry for Mercy

No longer do we now have Islam and Judaism with us. Both these religions believe that, despite Adam's fall, we are still able to keep the law ourselves. They won't see that the real problem is within us, so they won't see the need to go searching any further for a solution. We need to see the depth of our own inability to keep God's law, and to cry out for Him to have mercy on us. God has no obligation to answer. If God sent you or me into eternal conscious torment in body and soul in hell fire forever, it would only be what every one of us deserves as the just punishment for our sins. God is always perfectly just, He cannot be otherwise.

But God is also a merciful God. He sent His Son Jesus Christ into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. Cry to Him for mercy. He is our only hope.

Zephaniah 2:3

Seek ye the LORD, all ye meek of the earth, which have wrought his judgment; seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the LORD'S anger.

Becoming A Christian

Misconceptions

On the subject of becoming a Christian, there are a lot of misconceptions.

Many people believe that they are born a Christian. Everyone has a culture that they are born into, and this is usually based on some religion, whether it be a Muslim, a Hindu, a Buddhist or any other religion. Many think that being a Christian is similar, and speak particularly about European and American countries being “Christian” countries, as though all those born in these places are automatically born a Christian. But we only have to take a quick look at these countries to realise that this is not so. In such countries church attendance is very low, and the vast majority believe that we all evolved from monkeys, everything happens by chance and when you are dead that is the end. This is atheism, and not Christianity. So we can’t say that anyone is born a Christian because of the culture they come from. The best we can say is that a few people may have had a Christian influence in their upbringing.

Some people think that becoming a Christian is like joining a club – you just become a member if you want to. But why join a church? A lot of people do join churches because they want friends or a social life. But why not join the local Women’s Institute or go to a whist drive or something else instead, if that’s what you want? Christianity is not merely a social club.

Other people think that they can give Christianity a try, as a sampler to see if it works, so they start going to church and joining in church activities. Invariably, of course, it doesn’t work for them, so they come away, give up church altogether, and become very bitter against Christianity, saying, “Well I gave it a try and it didn’t work.” But why should God bother with anyone who is not going to be genuine with Him? We can’t just “give Him a try” to see if it works, because He will make sure it doesn’t work for us.

Finally, many, many people think they can strut into heaven based on their own good works. But this attitude does not take into account the sinful nature we all inherited by the fall of Adam. We can never do enough good works to please God, our sinful nature drags us back all the time:

Romans 8:8

So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.

Isaiah 53:6

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way.

So, we have a problem – our sin. Consequently, becoming a Christian is far more than any of these things.

The Problem

The sad fact is that we are all lost sinners, who not only cannot save ourselves, but by nature we do not even believe we need saving from our sins. Our hearts have been so dulled to the reality of things:

Psalm 14:2,3

The LORD looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God. They are all gone aside, they are altogether become filthy; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

We need to recognise this fact before we can even begin to see the solution. Our sinful nature, of course, tries to conceal this from us, so most people in this world continue on totally oblivious to any problem. This is what Christ said would happen:

Matthew 7:13,14

Broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat; because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.

This is not helped by the fact that in the church there are many false teachers who pander to this sinful nature and deny the seriousness of

the situation, because immediately after the above quote, Christ warns His people to:

Matthew 7:15

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.

Yes, even many church leaders will say that everything is all right, we should not be negative, sin is not a problem, God will save everybody, so just feel good about yourselves and be happy. But this philosophy is the way of this present evil world. It won't work in the end, because it is totally opposed to what the Bible actually teaches us about human nature.

The Solution

Firstly we need to recognise the problem. We must see our need of a Saviour before we can come to Him. Christ said:

Mark 2:17

They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

Those who think they have no need of the doctor, will never go to him. Similarly, those who think they have no need of a Saviour, who think they are righteous in themselves, will never go to Christ. Only those who see their sins and therefore their need of Christ will have a heartfelt, sincere, genuine desire to seek help from God. This is what we need. Once we see our inability to save ourselves, we can cry to God for mercy. Then God can begin to work in our hearts, grant us faith and repentance (both of which are gifts of God, we cannot whip them up ourselves), and bring us to a true saving knowledge of Himself.

The prophet Ezekiel spoke about a new heart which the LORD can give us:

Ezekiel 36:26

A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.

Christ spoke about being “*born again*” (sadly, a much misunderstood phrase today):

John 3:3

Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

And if we truly come to Christ for salvation, we become a “*new creature*”:

2 Corinthians 5:17

Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

This is what it is to become a Christian. Christians are all those who have truly been born again of the Spirit of God, had a new heart put within them, and have been saved from the consequence of their sins by the substitutionary blood atonement purchased by Christ on the cross.

Romans 3:24,25

Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God.

Ephesians 1:7

In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.

Hebrews 9:14

How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

Hebrews 9:28

So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for Him shall He appear the second time without sin unto salvation.

The Christian Life

Having been given a new heart, this does not mean that we become perfect straight away. We still have the old nature within us, of which Christians are all too aware that it drags them back into their old ways time and time again. But once the new heart has been put within us, we can at least begin to please God, and the Christian life from then on is one of nurturing the new heart and mortifying the old heart as we slowly grow in the Christian faith:

Romans 8:13

For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.

Romans 6:12,13

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God.

2 Peter 3:18

But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To Him be glory, both now and for ever. Amen.

The Word of God

How do we do this? We must stick close to the Word of God. Only by becoming familiar with the Bible and its contents can we wean ourselves off the vain philosophies received by tradition from our fathers (1 Peter 1:18), and onto the truths of Christianity. We must be careful however. So many churches call themselves “Bible-believing,” yet they all teach different things. We should not follow men, or movements, but the Holy Spirit will teach us and lead us into all truth. Stick close to the Lord and He will not let us be led astray.

John 14:26

But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, He shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.

1 John 2:27

But the anointing which ye have received of Him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in Him.

The Evil Heart

This world is full of evil. Evil everywhere. And I don't mean just in faraway places on the news bulletins, but closer to home. We experience it every day in our lives. People cheating on us. People lying to us. People trying to take advantage of us all the time. People with hatred in their hearts for one thing or another. Why do you think that is? Why do people do that? What's the answer?

The Bible tells us the problem and gives us the answer. The problem is the human heart. Every one of us has got an evil heart. That's the problem. We get told so many times, even by religious leaders, to "have faith in human nature." But how can we, when we see the world in the mess it's in? When we see people cheating one another all the time? And we're told by psychologists that we should have a sense of our own self-esteem, self-worth, self-confidence. But we can't. We've got nothing in ourselves to esteem, nothing in ourselves to have confidence in. We're so evil, selfish and self-centred in our hearts.

Genesis 6:5

And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

Psalms 53:2,3

God looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, that did seek God. Every one of them is gone back: they are altogether become filthy; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

Ecclesiastes 9:3

The heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead.

Jeremiah 17:9

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?

Mark 7:21-23

For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil

eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man.

That's it. There's the problem. The human heart. The heart of each one of us is evil. We were born like this. There's nobody that does good, no not one. Can we not see that yet? Or are we stupid enough to carry on living an evil life, a selfish, self-centred life, and pretending that everything's fine, when it's clearly not? That's foolish. That's stupid.

Now, that's the problem. So, you may say, where's God then? If God exists at all, why doesn't He do something about it? Why does He let the world carry on like this? It's not fair. How can there be a God, if all this has happened to me? These are common, legitimate questions.

Well He has done something. He's solved the only problem that there is, the problem of the human heart. There isn't any other problem. No political movement can solve anything. No religious movement can solve anything. We, as individuals, simply need to recognise our part in the problem. It's not just something out there that I don't have to bother with, that's nothing to do with me. Yes, there's plenty of evil out there in the world, and that's the problem of each individual that causes it. But what about us, our own personal responsibility, our own sins? That's what we're responsible for.

Most people try to laugh this all off, and pretend their sins before God don't exist. But it's exactly the evil of our own hearts that's the problem. And we, as individuals, are responsible for our own sins, whether we accept that or not. If we don't do anything about it, God is quite rightly going to judge us, and give us whatever punishment we deserve.

But God has solved the problem. There is a way out. He sent a Saviour into the world, our Lord Jesus Christ, to save His people from their sins. That's what His name means:

Matthew 1:21

Thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.

God sent Jesus Christ, the Son of God, into this world for one purpose, to die on a cross in the place of all those who come to Him.

It's very simple. Do we want to be saved from our sins? From our sinful nature? From the evil of our own heart? We can't change ourselves. None of us. It's impossible:

Jeremiah 13:23

Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil.

Have we come to realise the evil, the self-centredness, in our own heart and want to be saved from it? Well, we can be. All any of us has to do is to call on our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ for mercy. God is a merciful God. But we've got to accept the problem, and be genuine when we approach Him.

We don't have to join this church or that organisation, or do this great thing or that great thing to be accepted by God. Simply call on Him in prayer.

Isaiah 55:4,5

Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

God will answer every genuine prayer. And we'll know when He's answered, because He'll give us a new heart and a new nature. A nature that can now begin to live a good life. You know as well as I do that Christians are nowhere near perfect, and never will be in this life. But they've all been given a new heart and a new nature, a nature that can at least begin to hate the evil of their old hearts and begin to change, to become useful people in this world, and not useless and self-centred any more.

That's the answer to all the problems of the world. God changes people, one heart at a time. We all need to call on our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ for salvation, and know the heart change that only He can give.

The Emptiness of Life

What are we living for? We get up, we eat, we do what we do, we sleep, then after a few years we die. That's it. What's the point? Why bother?

And here's another thing. After we're dead, who remembers us? Yes, many of us will have family members who'll miss us, although it has to be said, that's not the case with everybody by any means. But, even the family members we've left behind will die eventually, and then we'll be completely forgotten about. Go to a graveyard. Some of the more modern graves will have flowers on them, but most are forgotten about completely. And that's going to be us one day. So what's the point living, when we're going to be forgotten?

And while we're living, what are we doing? To most people, the only reason for living is to enjoy themselves. But what's the point? So, we live for a few years, we have what we might call a "good time," and then we die. There's one question I'd like to ask about that kind of life. What good is it to anybody else? It's not. It's pointless.

And if we only ever live for ourselves, quite often we're not going to be able to get what we want, so we'll constantly be frustrated. There's no complete satisfaction in this world, no matter how hard we try to obtain it. So what's the point?

King Solomon was one of the wisest and richest men that ever lived. And this is what he said about his own life:

Ecclesiastes 2:2-11

I said of laughter, It is mad: and of mirth, What doeth it? I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life. I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards: I made me gardens and orchards I got me servants and maidens also I had great possessions I gathered me also silver and gold I gat me men singers and women singers. And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy Then I looked on all the works that my hands had

wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.

At least acknowledging that there's a problem with living for self, is the first step to finding an answer. But we don't even want to acknowledge there's a problem at all. We just want to carry on living for ourselves, for what we want, for what we can get out of life. But do you know what that is? A complete waste of a life. It's done no good at all. Oh yes, we might've enjoyed ourselves, but so what?

Why shouldn't God punish us for a life like that? Why shouldn't He? It's pointless. It's empty. It's a complete waste of time. God has put every one of us on this earth for a purpose, to be useful. Not to live for ourselves and waste our time. King Solomon eventually came to this conclusion:

Ecclesiastes 12:13,14

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.

Fear God and keep His commandments. That's the whole duty of man. Not wasting our lives living for ourselves.

Proverbs 9:10

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Wisdom isn't pretending God doesn't exist and living for ourselves. That's exactly the opposite, that's foolishness.

Psalms 14:1

The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.

And if there is a God, we're responsible to Him. He put us here. He gave us life. He's given us every breath we have. Every one of us needs to repent of the foolish self-centred lives we've all lived in the past, and turn to Him. Yet we hate the very idea of keeping His commandments so much. What's wrong with them? His commandments are not grievous. They're delightful.

Luke 10:27

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.

What's wrong with that? Nothing. It's a beautiful way of life. The only problem we've got, is that our self-centred hearts don't want to do it. In fact even if we tried, we'd find it impossible. Which is why we need a Saviour. We can't save ourselves. We can't change ourselves. We're stuck with hearts that only want to live for ourselves. And we find it impossible to change. But if we truly repent of our sins, and call on the one Saviour God has sent into the world, our Lord Jesus Christ, we can be changed. He will give us a new heart, a new nature that wants to please God, that'll be able to please Him. And we'll find we can at last begin to live useful lives.

No other religion believes in a Saviour who saves us from our selves, our own selfish natures. In every other religion, you have to do something to placate the god or gods concerned. But we can't. Whatever we're asked to do, we won't be able to do it, because we're so self-centred by nature. We're not good enough. But Christians have a Saviour, who saves His people from their sins. We don't have to do anything to placate Him. We just have to repent of our sins, genuinely want to live a new life, and call on Him to change us. He's there for the asking.

Or do we want to carry on living for ourselves? Living an empty life, or maybe trying to placate some god, when we just know we can't do it. Do you know what Jesus Christ said?

Matthew 11:28-30

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

The striving can be over. Come to rest in Jesus Christ. He's ours for the asking. Free of charge. Just find somewhere quiet and pray to Him. And I guarantee He will not disappoint us.

Dirty Washing

A few years ago I looked after my aunt's house while she went into hospital. She was telling me about the neighbours, and mentioned that the lady next door was very nice, but her husband had a nasty temper. Everybody around knew about his temper. They must have heard him shouting. But nobody ever talked about it. It's as though they tried to shut it off in their minds. They didn't want their otherwise comfortable lives upset by anything unpleasant, so they just tried as best they could to pretend it wasn't there.

Some years ago, I was walking down a street and passed by a family argument outside a house. Someone got so worked up they threw a brick through the window. As soon as the brick had been thrown, everybody suddenly went deadly quiet, and the whole family quickly disappeared together inside the house and shut the door. That gave me the impression that this happened quite regularly, and the family were embarrassed by it and wished it didn't exist. But it did.

And what about pornography? It's very popular. But everyone who engages in it, likes to keep it quiet. Their "literature" lands on the doormat in discreet, plain brown envelopes. They think to themselves, everybody else is (supposedly) doing it, so it must be harmless, it's just a bit of fun. But they'd never talk about it in polite company.

We've all got dirty washing. Something we don't want others to know about. Something we find embarrassing. Something that exists, but we never talk about it. We might even try to "normalise" it, saying to ourselves, lots of people are like this, so it must be all right. But it's there, and it's not all right.

Just because everybody else is doing something or accepts something as "normal," doesn't mean it's right at all. Even if it's just a natural reaction, a natural instinct we do without thinking, that still doesn't necessarily make it right.

So why do we all have this dirty washing that we don't like to talk about? It's because we don't want to face up to ourselves.

The Bible teaches us about human nature:

Jeremiah 17:9

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?

That's why these things go on, and we find them embarrassing. The problem is within the human heart. But we don't like that idea. It's uncomfortable. We don't want to acknowledge that there's a problem with ourselves. But it doesn't matter how uncomfortable it is, we have to deal with it. We can't live our lives pretending it doesn't exist. We can hide it from everybody around us, but it's God we have to deal with, not men, not the majority, not our natural instincts, but the one true living God, Lord of heaven and earth.

And we'll find these things impossible to get rid of from our lives by our own efforts. In fact, in a lot of cases, we won't actually want to get rid of them at all. We quite like them. We want to hang on to them. But they're still, in God's eyes, sin.

That's why we need God.

But why are these things sin? Why should we get rid of them? Well, God doesn't like them. That should be incentive enough for us to get rid of them, we shouldn't need any other reason. But we also need to get rid of them for our own benefit too.

Sin is addictive. We can't control it, like being on drugs, or dependent on alcohol. It ends up taking us where we don't want to go. I would suggest that most drug addicts do genuinely want to give up, but they just can't.

Sin is selfish. It's only there for our own selfish ends. It has no useful function whatsoever. The cub scouts have a motto that they should do one good deed a day. Of course we should be doing far more than that, but let's start there. How many of us do one good deed to a stranger every day? We can't even do that, let alone live our entire lives being useful to others.

Sin hurts everyone around us. Think of the long-suffering wife of someone addicted to pornography. Think of the family of someone

with a temper. They have to cope with it every day. Look how sin affects everybody around us. We might enjoy it, we might think it's "normal," we might try to pretend it doesn't exist, but what about them? Don't just try to sweep it under the carpet, and say it's harmless. Face it. It hurts everybody around us. Are we really happy with that?

It's not "normal" at all. God hates it, it hurts others and it's of no use whatsoever. We need to acknowledge it as sin, not shy away from it. We're addicted to it. We can't get out of it ourselves. But that doesn't make it right.

Every one of us needs to be changed. And we can't change ourselves. But there is a solution. God came into the world to do exactly that. To save us from our sinful nature, our deceitful hearts. He sent Jesus Christ into the world to save all those who see themselves as sinners, those who recognise the problem in their own hearts and turn to Him. We must recognise our problem, want to change and then come to Jesus Christ. That's the only way out.

We all need God to clean us, to renew us, to break us free from the addictive domination of sin in our lives. Only if we come to God through Jesus Christ, we can be free indeed.

John 8:36

If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.

Free from bondage to our selfish natures. Don't we want that? Or do we want to destroy ourselves by giving in to our sin, our self-centredness? We're our own worst enemies. We need to be saved from ourselves more than anything else.

If we just want to carry on being self-centred, selfish, living for self, doing absolutely nothing useful in our life, we can do. Go ahead. But then don't ever complain about the mess the world is in, or about our lot in life. Saying, "I don't believe in God, because He's done this to me, or that to me, or He's made me like this. It's His fault not mine."

God has provided a solution to every situation we may find ourselves in. Jesus Christ can set us free now, today. If only we call on Him, cry to Him. Ask Him to forgive our sins and change us for ever. Nobody

else can help. Call on Jesus Christ in prayer today, and if we are genuine, I guarantee He will not disappoint us.

Can A Christian Lose His Salvation?

2 Peter 2:20-22

For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them. But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire.

When we come across passages such as this in the Bible, we may get the impression that it seems to be teaching that true believers, if they are not careful in their Christian practice, can lose their salvation.

In the Christian life, for many different reasons, it is so easy to become discouraged and backslide. This is the experience of all of us at some stage in our Christian walk, and at these times it is a real concern to many genuine Christians as to whether they can backslide so much they actually lose their salvation. It really bothers them.

The subject before us is, “Can a Christian Lose His Salvation?” And the answer is that a truly born-again Christian, who has had a new heart put within him by the Lord, and who has become a new creature in Christ, and who truly has the Holy Spirit residing in him, cannot lose his salvation. Once he has been born-again, he can’t be “un-born-again,” he is a new creature in Christ and so is saved to eternal life and cannot be lost.

Indeed we have scriptures to this effect, and these are a great comfort to the true believer in times of trial in his life:

Romans 8:38,39

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.

Philippians 1:6

Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.

John 6:37

All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.

John 10:27,28

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.

Hebrews 13:5

I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.

So, in the light of such promises, how do we explain texts like the one in 2 Peter 2:20-22, which at least appear to suggest that you can be a Christian for a while and then later completely fall away? Maybe we know some people who seem to have done this. They may have been our companions in the church maybe for many years, but they gave up, and are now completely back in the world with no interest in Christian things any more.

We have to explain these passages, which seem to teach that true Christians can fall away, in the light of clearer passages of Scripture. Scripture should always interpret Scripture. There is never a contradiction in the Bible, because it is the word of God. There might appear to be a contradiction, but it can always be explained rationally if we study the Bible hard enough. This is why Bible study is so important.

The Parable of the Sower

The parable of the sower is a story Christ taught about the different types of people who hear the gospel (Matthew 13:3-23; Mark 4:3-20; Luke 8:4-15). Christ compared types of ground into which seed is sown to the different ways people respond to the gospel. He mentions four types:

The first type of hearer is compared to the seed that fell on the path. People hear, and there is no response, they just walk away. I am sure we know many people like this, but we are not talking about these sort of people here, this is not our subject.

The fourth type of hearer is compared to the seed that fell in good soil. This is where we want to be. If the seed falls in good soil, it grows and produces fruit. This is the true believer, who has truly been born-again, had a new heart put within him by the Lord and has become a new creature in Christ. He does respond to the gospel message, the Lord saves him and, significantly, he produces fruit. What is the fruit that the true Christian produces?

Galatians 5:22,23

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.

This is all very straightforward so far. At least it's clear where these two types of people stand. But there are two other types of ground, the thorny ground and the stony ground.

The thorny ground hearers hear the word, and respond to it. They have a root in themselves, so they are truly born-again. They start to produce fruit at first, but other things soon enter in and they become unfruitful. The things that enter in are the "*cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things*" (Mark 4:19), which choke the word, and stop the fruit production. These are true believers but they become almost indistinguishable from unbelievers. They'll get to heaven, but only as though through the fire. All their worldly works will be burned up and they will suffer loss:

1 Corinthians 3:15

If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.

This is why there are so many calls in the Bible for us to be diligent, to walk worthy, and so on. Not because we can lose our salvation, but because we can become unfruitful.

We are called to add to our faith, fruit:

2 Peter 1:5-8

And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Adding fruit to our faith makes sure we are not unfruitful. And that passage continues:

2 Peter 1:9

But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins.

So, note that those who do not add these fruit of the Holy Spirit to their faith, still have faith, because we are told they have been purged from their old sins. They are still saved, but unfruitful.

Compare these to the stony ground hearers, Christ tells us that these represent those who hear the word and “*immediately receive it with gladness*” (Mark 4:16). They join the church. They may be in the church for a long time. They may hold high positions in the church. But they have never been born-again. We’re told they “*have no root in themselves*” (Mark 4:17). Therefore they cannot produce fruit of any kind. They are the hypocrites in the church. They can be flushed out when tribulation or persecution comes on the church. They’ll be off like a shot.

Maybe a muslim army comes into the village and at gunpoint tells everybody to convert to Islam or die. The stony ground hearer will have no problem converting. But the truly born-again Christian just cannot deny his Lord and would rather die than say a few simple words. Some, in weakness, will do it, but they will be so heartbroken with what they have done afterwards. God will forgive them, and the experience will make them stronger to resist the next time something similar happens. But here we see the difference between Christians who only outwardly profess Christianity as their faith – as soon as persecution comes, they are nowhere to be seen – and truly born-again Christians who have had a new heart put within them – these are willing to die for their faith if necessary. This is the reason why God sometimes brings persecution on a church, namely to purge it.

Three “Falling Away” Passages

Anyway, it is hypocrites that are in mind when we come across passages that appear at first glance to teach that a believer can lose his salvation. No, a true believer cannot lose salvation, but a hypocrite, who has never been born-again, and therefore has never had salvation in the first place, can appear to be a good church member for a long time but he will eventually fall away from his profession, unless of course he is truly converted and becomes a true believer in his heart.

Let us look at the three main passages that seem to teach a falling away, and from these we can learn how far it is possible to go in outward religion without having a new heart:

2 Peter 2:20-22

For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them. But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire.

Here, we see that the people concerned have “*escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*” and they have “*known the way of righteousness.*” They have head-knowledge, but not heart-knowledge. They know their Bibles very well. They can pick up the way people speak in the church and copy it. But all this is just outward with no heart change. Like a pig who has had a bath. It now looks nice and clean on the outside, but it’s still a pig, with a pig’s nature. It can sometimes be difficult to tell the difference between a hypocrite and a true believer who has been truly cleansed from the heart. But, if left to himself, the hypocrite will, eventually, by nature, show what he is truly like. The pig will always go back to the mud and get dirty again.

But what about this passage in Hebrews 6:

Hebrews 6:4-6

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.

These people have “*tasted the heavenly gift,*” were “*made partakers of the Holy Ghost,*” and have “*tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come,*” surely these are true believers? No, they fall away. We are told in v.9 that none of these things accompany salvation:

Hebrews 6:9

But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak.

It is fruit that accompanies salvation, which none of these people have, because they don't have a new heart. They have just “*tasted*” such things, and not embraced them fully. We can't think that we can simply “give God a try.” Many people think that they can start going to church just to give it a try to see if it works, but inevitably, they give up in the end, and afterwards they boast to their friends, “Well, I gave God a try once, but it didn't work, I didn't get anything out of it, so I've given up now.” God is not going to bother with any of us if all we are going to do is give him “a try.”

Actually, this passage says a very solemn thing about these people. It says that such people who have “*tasted*” these things, if they subsequently fall away, it is **impossible** to renew them again to repentance. The least we can say is that they become more hardened against the gospel, and, humanly speaking at least, it is a lot more difficult to reach them after their experience.

But what about having been “*made partakers of the Holy Ghost?*”? Surely this refers to true believers?

Well, Christ said:

Matthew 7:21-23

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

This passage teaches us that it is possible to prophesy, cast out devils and do many wonderful works in Christ's name (or at least think we can), but still not be a true believer. All twelve disciples were sent out and given power to do all sorts of real miracles, and this twelve included Judas Iscariot, who was never a true believer:

Matthew 10:1

And when he had called unto him his twelve disciples, he gave them power against unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all manner of sickness and all manner of disease.

The fact that we can do, or think we can do, these things, is not evidence of a new heart.

The third passage we need to look at is in Hebrews 10:

Hebrews 10:26-29

For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?

These people had “*received the knowledge of the truth*,” which refers to only head-knowledge, and not a change in the heart. But what about their being “*sanctified*” by “*the blood of the covenant*”?

The word “*sanctified*” means to be “set apart.” All truly born-again Christians are “set apart” in a special way, and indeed the more they grow in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,

the more they are continually being “set apart” from the world throughout their Christian life. Christ said:

John 17:17

Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

But the people mentioned in this passage in Hebrews are sanctified in a different way, they are set apart as Christians only outwardly. In a similar way, we have a passage in 1 Corinthians where only one person in a family is a believer, but the whole family is considered to be “set apart” at least in some outward way:

1 Corinthians 7:14

For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy.

Here, an unbelieving husband is said to be “*sanctified*” and the children are said to be “*holy*,” but this doesn’t mean that any of them are truly born-again because it clearly states that the husband is still an unbeliever. This must only refer to an outward separation.

In any case, in Hebrews 10:39 we are again told that these things being spoken of do not relate to true believers:

Hebrews 10:39

But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition [which is the subject of the previous verses]; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul.

So we see in all three of these passages which at first appear to suggest that a Christian can lose his salvation, we find that they don’t refer to true Christians at all. They are all speaking only of hypocrites, who profess the true religion outwardly, but have never had a heart change. In the end, all of these will fall away, unless the Lord intervenes, gives them a new heart and saves them.

Objection

There is one major objection that many people have to the truth that once we have been truly saved, we can never be lost. They will say that

if we are saved and can never be lost, that means that we can sin all we like, and God won't mind, we'll still get to heaven. Where is righteousness in that?

Anyone who thinks this way does not have, or at least does not understand the concept of the new heart properly. If we have been truly born-again, the very idea of sinning as much as we want will be horrifying to us. God has put a new heart within us. We no longer chase after the desires of the old heart. With the new heart, we now hate sin, and we love righteousness. We no longer have an inclination to "want" to sin all we like. People who have never experienced the new birth, can't understand this because all they have experience of is the old heart which is quite happy to sin all the time. With the new heart, sin is now distasteful to us. A true believer still falls into sin, because they have still got remnants of the old heart within them, but every time that happens, they hate themselves for doing so. They mourn over themselves, sin always bothers them, which it didn't do before their conversion.

We therefore see the absolute importance of making sure we have a new heart, and are truly one of the Lord's people. Without a new heart, we can't be saved. One day this world is going to be judged. God:

Acts 17:30,31

....now commandeth all men every where to repent: because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.

We are all sinners by nature and need to escape from the wrath to come. If we do nothing, we are condemned already for our sin:

John 3:18

He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

John 3:36

He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.

The Bible teaches:

John 3:3

Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Hebrews 11:6

But without faith it is impossible to please him.

Romans 8:8

So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.

To receive salvation from our sins at all, we need a new heart. The Bible describes this in various ways:

John 3:7

Ye must be born again.

Ezekiel 36:26

A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.

2 Corinthians 5:17

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

Ephesians 1:13

Ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise.

Conclusion

We must renounce our self-confidence, recognise our inability, repent of our sins, cry to the Lord Jesus Christ to save us from our sins, acknowledge that we can't save ourselves, ask for the gifts of repentance and faith, ask for a new heart to be put within us. Then, and only then can we begin to produce fruit.

And, if we are a true Christian, realise this: the millionth time we fail, and sin against the Lord, yes, it will grieve us, and we will hate ourselves

completely for it, but we have the most wonderful comfort in the fact that we can never be lost:

John 10:28

And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.

Should We Impose Christian Standards on Others?

There is a right and wrong in this world. The Ten Commandments are a summary of God's moral law. This defines right and wrong in an absolute sense.

Christians should love and do righteousness and hate and avoid wickedness. Christians should try to keep themselves from sin. They can only do this with the aid of the Holy Spirit who comes to dwell within them.

But unbelievers don't have the Holy Spirit, so they can't keep themselves from sin.

Romans 8:7

Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.

Isaiah 26:10

Let favour be shewed to the wicked, yet will he not learn righteousness: in the land of uprightness will he deal unjustly, and will not behold the majesty of the LORD.

So why should we try to force them to stop sinning, by passing laws? We should tell them what's right and wrong in God's sight. We should flee from sin ourselves. We should be an example to them of living a godly life. We should tell them the danger, that if they continue in sin they will justly end up in hell fire. But if they just laugh at us and continue to sin anyway, we can't stop them. Should we even try to stop them? Should we legislate against sin and force that legislation on others, who have no ability to keep it?

Revelation 22:11

He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still.

There are several Bible texts to examine on this subject.

Romans 13:1-7

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.

Every government, even the most wicked, is ordained of God. And Christians should always obey the government, except when it tries to force us to sin against God. Then, and then only, we should refuse and take the (unjust) consequences. It's never up to us to fight the government, or try to replace it.

For example, Christians today do not like legislation being passed in some countries legalising same-sex marriages. They are against the law of God, but these nations have decided it is not against their law. Let them pass these laws, even though we don't approve. But if a nation's government then says to us that we must allow same-sex marriages to be performed in our churches, then they are trying to force us to sin, so we must refuse and take the consequences. Maybe our church will be fined, or closed down altogether, or we would be put in jail. This is totally unjust in God's eyes, but we must put up with it.

We're told here that all governments, even the most evil, are there for our good. So we're not to rebel against any authority, no matter how bad they are, because God has put them there. We're told that if we do good works, the government shouldn't be a terror to us. We're told that only if we want to do evil, should we be worried about the government. A government's job is to keep the peace, stop anarchy, and to "*execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.*"

But what is meant by “good” and “evil” here? God’s laws and the nation’s laws will not necessarily coincide. We’re probably going to be agreed that murder, theft and lying should be against the law. Everybody wants to live in a society with these laws, they make our lives more comfortable. But not worshipping the one true God is “evil” in God’s sight, but not necessarily in the government’s sight. Adultery is “evil” in God’s sight, but not necessarily in the government’s. Christians get their morality from God’s law, which will differ from the law of the land. The government gets its morality from other sources.

We’re told here that a government’s duty is to promote “good” and punish “evil.” But if the government defines “good” and “evil” differently from God, what do we do? We should let them. We should never rebel and should continue ourselves defining “good” and “evil” in God’s way. But this means that we should be prepared at any time to become subjects of unjust punishment. The government is still ordained of God.

So, if, for example, the Christian church is banned by the government, we still meet underground, and be prepared to take the consequences. Daniel didn’t even bother trying to be discreet about it:

Daniel 6:10

Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime.

Consequently, he was thrown into a den of lions. And on another occasion, his three friends would not bow down to Nebuchadnezzar’s statue, and they told him exactly why:

Daniel 3:16-18

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.

But, the question is, If we Christians were in power, should we try to pass laws legislating against sins against God? If we were in a position

to do so, should we try to change the laws of the land, to be more in keeping with God's Commandments? Should we, for example, pass laws against Sunday trading? Or, what about passing laws forcing people to attend church? Well, when the kings of Israel and Judah did so, they were commended by God for it. But the fact is that, in reality, not many of us are going to be in the position where we have the opportunity to change laws anyway. So it shouldn't worry most of us.

1 Timothy 1:8-9

But we know that the law is good, if a man use it lawfully; Knowing this, that the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers....

Here we're told, "*the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient.*" But this doesn't mean we should pass laws in keeping with God's commandments and force the lawless and disobedient to keep them. That is a misunderstanding of this passage.

God's written laws are not for true believers because they have the law written on their hearts. They have the ability to keep God's law as long as they stick closely to the Holy Spirit's leading. The unbeliever doesn't have this privilege. When we are told here that the law was made for the lawless and disobedient, it means that God's written law is particularly for them for two purposes: firstly to shew them the kind of life that pleases God, and secondly to make them realise they can't keep it. Consequently, they come to see they are sinners before a holy God, and that should lead them to Christ to save them from their sins:

Galatians 3:21-25

Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid: for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law. But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe. But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.

Deuteronomy 14:21

Ye shall not eat of any thing that dieth of itself: thou shalt give it unto the stranger that is in thy gates, that he may eat it; or thou mayest sell it unto an alien: for thou art an holy people unto the Lord thy God.

This passage is interesting in that it shows that the dietary laws were just for the Jews, not for Gentiles. Jews here are forbidden to eat anything that dies of itself. But it was all right for them to give or sell these dead animals to strangers. Similarly, Christian standards are for Christians. We should leave unbelievers to do what they please, although we should warn them of the consequences and not compromise with their ways ourselves.

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.

God will judge those outside the church. It is not up to us to judge them or impose laws on them in any way. But what about inside the church? If anybody is practising evil inside the church, and it's "*reported commonly*" (v.1), in other words people outside the church hear about it, giving the church a bad name, then it does come under our jurisdiction. In that case, we are to throw the perpetrator out of the church and keep away from them. That's all we can do, that's where our responsibility ends. We are not here to impose laws on anyone outside the church. We're here simply to make sure we keep ourselves unspotted from the world.

James 1:27

Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

We throw people out of the church only if they are bringing the church into disrepute. We don't throw people out of the church just because we disagree with them. For example, we may believe that 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 teaches that ladies should cover their heads in public worship, and that men shouldn't. But we're not to force women to wear head coverings in church, even though we may believe I Corinthians 11:1-16 says they should. It is up to the individual to come to the Biblical conclusion on things, not for us to impose what we believe to be right on others.

If we did try to force them to wear head coverings before they've come to a right opinion about it *for themselves*, then we are no longer walking charitably:

Romans 14:15,16

But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died. Let not then your good be evil spoken of.

Romans 14:20-21

For meat destroy not the work of God. All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offence. It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak.

We are told:

Romans 14:23

whatsoever is not of faith is sin.

It has to be the faith of the individual that approves any action, not the faith of the church officers, otherwise the church officers are forcing someone to do something against their conscience, which here is called “*sin.*”

Only in serious cases, where the reputation of the church is at stake, should we hand someone over to Satan, i.e. throw them out of the church, until they repent. There are two such situations mentioned in the Bible:

That of blasphemy:

1 Timothy 1:19-20

Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck: Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme.

And incest:

1 Corinthians 5:4-5

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

But, one may say, the pope blasphemes God every day in every Mass. And the Archbishop of Canterbury breaks the seventh Commandment by allowing brazen, open homosexuals to get into high positions in his church. Surely, these are just the sort of serious crimes that the Bible talks about in these passages. So they should be thrown out, and delivered to Satan that they may learn to repent. Yes, they should. But they’ve taken over the ruling power in their respective churches, so we can’t get rid of them.

The apostle John had this problem in a church:

3 John 1:9-10

I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church.

John wrote his third epistle to solve a problem. He wrote this epistle to Gaius, a man in the church who was a true believer, and told him what the problem was. He asked Gaius personally to receive these brethren that Diotrephes, the evil leader in the church, wouldn't receive. He also told Gaius of Demetrius (v.11), indicating that he was also a trustworthy brother in the Lord, and that he could help him in this matter. See what John is doing. No call to come out and form a new denomination, but rather calling the true believers to stay in the current one, despite the evil in the leadership, and organising them to operate like a church within a church. This is the Biblical pattern.

Not only is the government going to persecute the believer, but the church is as well. In fact Christ Himself had nearly all of His opposition from the visible church of His day. They eventually handed Him over to the civil powers to kill Him. So, we can expect no different:

John 15:18-19

If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.

Christians are going to be hated by everybody:

Mark 13:12-13

Now the brother shall betray the brother to death, and the father the son; and children shall rise up against their parents, and shall cause them to be put to death. And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake: but he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved.

So, should we impose Christian standards on others? It's really a hypothetical question, like, "What would the world be like if Adam had

never sinned?” Or, “How many angels can you get on the end of a pin?” We are not to bother ourselves with these things:

2 Timothy 2:23

But foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do gender strifes.

Titus 3:9

But avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain.

The subject of whether we should impose Christian standards on others, is not a concern to the Christian at all. We’re never really going to get the opportunity. From both the secular and religious leaders, we’re more likely to be on the receiving end of unjust laws, not making laws ourselves:

Mark 13:9

But take heed to yourselves: for they shall deliver you up to councils; and in the synagogues ye shall be beaten: and ye shall be brought before rulers and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them.

Is Christianity A Political Movement?

What do we think of the Crusades? I mean, those wars in the Middle Ages waged by various popes of Rome, supposedly in the name of “Christianity,” against Muslims and Jews. There was such a terrible, terrible slaughter amongst both those communities, just so that the pope of Rome could say he owned the “holy” sites in and around Jerusalem. If any of us are truly Christian at all, surely we should abhor the whole concept of all that. The Crusades are a total disgrace to the name of Christ, and a terrible witness to Him.

So many people are put off Christianity by what has happened in the name of Christ throughout history. The Spanish Inquisition. The “Troubles” in Northern Ireland. All in the name of religion. All in the name of Jesus Christ. How can anyone even want to become a Christian if that’s all they see?

These atrocities are the works of men. An army will fight better if you tell them that God is on their side. That’s why men always try to involve religion in their petty wars. Religion isn’t the problem, men are. Thankfully that’s not what Jesus Christ came to give the world. Christianity is altogether different from waging wars and persecuting those who don’t agree with us. But how do we get our unbelieving neighbours to understand that, in the light of what they read in their history books?

All we can do is point them to the Bible. There they can find out what Jesus Christ was really like:

Zechariah 9:9

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.

Matthew 11:28-30

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

There they can read what Jesus Christ really taught:

Matthew 5:3-12

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.

Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

Where is the warmonger here? Jesus Christ was the Prince of Peace:

Isaiah 9:6

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

Luke 2:14

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

But there are some verses in the Bible, which have been deliberately misinterpreted in an attempt to teach that Christ's followers should physically fight for His cause:

Matthew 10:34-36

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household.

This is not Christ telling us to take up arms and fight for Him. God forbid! If that was the case, this passage would be teaching we should

go to war against our own families. No. We're told elsewhere that Christ came to bring peace between God and men. Here, He's simply telling us that because some people won't believe – maybe even some in our own families – there will inevitably be division:

Luke 12:51

Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division....

But what about:

Revelation 19:11-16

And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself. And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords.

This takes place at the end of time, showing Jesus Christ coming as the great judge of all the earth. He came the first time to this world in humility, to show us that the only way to the Father is through Him:

John 14:6

I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.

Matthew 10:39

He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.

Luke 14:11

For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

What do we, today, think of Jesus Christ? What do we think of the idea of humility as the only way to the Father? Do we think of it as being

weak and pathetic? Or do we think it's beautiful? What we think of Christ in this world now, will determine where we'll spend eternity. This picture of Christ as a judge and warrior, is here to show us that He is the One with whom we will all have to do:

2 Corinthians 5:10

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.

Christians are never called to spread their faith at the point of a sword. No. No. No. It's not possible anyway. Our faith is all about an internal change in the heart of each individual who embraces it, and we can't make that happen, only the Lord can. We're called to love our enemies:

Matthew 5:44,45

But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.

But here's the next question. We're agreed we shouldn't go to war in Christ's name, but can we set up a political movement in His name? Should we fight, by all legitimate, peaceful means possible, to change the government's mind so that it more reflects "Christian" values?

The answer is, No. Otherwise Jesus Christ would have done that when He was on earth. He never came as a political leader. In fact, He said as much at His trial before Pontius Pilate:

John 18:36

Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence.

We don't fight, either physically or through any ballot box or protest movement. Christ's kingdom is not of this world. It's spiritual, heavenly. Our weapons are not physical weapons, but spiritual ones:

Romans 14:17

For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.

Ephesians 6:12,13

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

We don't don physical armour to fight physical enemies, but spiritual armour to fight spiritual enemies:

Ephesians 6:14-17

Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God....

And our best weapon of all is *prayer*:

Ephesians 6:18

....Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints....

That's the Christian life. Fighting, either physically or politically, is the way the world operates, and we leave the world to it. No matter what men try to do, the Lord is in control of everything anyway, so we've no need to worry:

Psalms 118:6

The Lord is on my side; I will not fear: what can man do unto me?

We're not here as a great social movement for change. An unbeliever being forced by law against his will to keep the Ten Commandments is still an unbeliever on his way to hell-fire. God isn't going to be pleased with him. He needs Jesus Christ to come into his heart and change his life so that he'll love the Ten Commandments and want to keep them

from a willing heart. Then the Lord will delight in him, and he in the Lord:

Jeremiah 9:24

But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the Lord which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the Lord.

Psalms 119:97

O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day.

But what about people like William Wilberforce, who managed to get parliament to abolish slavery. That was a good thing, wasn't it? Yes, but he was in a privileged position. Whenever we have influence, it's right that we should use it for good. Like Queen Esther saving the Jews from destruction, or Joseph saving both Egypt and the Israelites from famine, for example. They were in the right place at the right time. They were doing the Lord's will in the situation they found themselves in. They weren't actively opposing or fighting any authority.

Every weekend throughout the summer of 2019, there were protests against the Chinese government in Hong Kong. The Chinese media make a point of telling us that the leaders of the protest movement were Christians. They go to church. They are students at Christian colleges. Some of them are even pastors. Before every protest they hold prayer meetings. They sing hymns. Then they go out and fight the police. As a result, the Chinese government thinks, wrongly but understandably, that Christianity is a political movement. They see it as a destabilising "Western" influence, against themselves. But we're nothing of the kind.

Jesus Christ Himself was not a Westerner. In China, I attended a small fellowship containing Christians from four different continents. Christianity is international. Every tribe, tongue and nation is invited to embrace Jesus Christ for the salvation of their souls:

Revelation 14:6

And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people....

Christians are individuals who have been changed by God and are now living differently from the world. We're no threat to any government. But, it only takes some people to raise opposition against a government in the name of Christianity, and all Christians will be tarred with the same brush. Ordinary Christians, who don't oppose anybody, who are just trying to live their simple, Christian lives, are going to be regarded all together as enemies of the State.

Christians should always submit to whatever government is in charge. Even the most wicked government that rises up, is ordained of God. And Christians should always obey. It's never up to us to fight it, or try to replace it, otherwise we find ourselves fighting against God:

1 Samuel 15:23

For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft....

Acts 5:39

....if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God.

There is only one exception to this rule, and that is when the government tries to force us to sin. Then, and then only, should we refuse. And even then, if caught, we mustn't fight, but meekly take the (unjust) consequences.

Submitting to all authorities that have been set over us – not only the government, but also our employer, and parents too – is part of our very witness to the world:

1 Peter 2:13-15

Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men....

There is only one thing we are told to pray for with regards authorities, and that is to pray that they would allow us to be free to be able to live godly Christian lives:

1 Timothy 2:1,2

I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.

Notice here that Paul didn't say that the Christians should campaign to stop the Roman authority's atrocities. The Romans were cruel. They were evil. But he didn't suggest fighting the government, or demonstrating in the streets demanding change, or even trying to get Christians onto the Senate. Instead, Paul asked prayer for the authorities that the Christians "*may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.*"

Jeremiah told the exiles in Babylon to pray for a similar thing:

Jeremiah 29:7

And seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray unto the Lord for it: for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace.

Our spiritual life is the most important thing we Christians are to be concerned about. As long as Christians can be free to live good Christian lives, that's all we need to pray for. We don't need to pray for the government in anything else, other than the salvation of their souls as individuals.

Governments will try to make life difficult for us. If we do have any freedoms, we ought to be thankful for them. We should never pray either for or against a government. We never take sides. We only need pray that we may have the freedom to be able to live out our Christian lives without harassment. God will sort out the powers that be in His own good time:

Acts 17:26

[God]hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation....

Isaiah 40:15

Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance: behold, he taketh up the isles as a very little thing.

Psalm 2:4,5

He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision. Then shall he speak unto them in his wrath, and vex them in his sore displeasure.

We are not to think, “If only we had a Christian government, wouldn’t it be wonderful.” Because it wouldn’t. If we had a “Christian” government enacting “Christian” laws, all the unbelievers would be out on the streets rioting and protesting that they couldn’t do what they want to do any more. It would be chaos. So we can’t win either way. Politics is a losing game. We’re not to get involved with any of it.

But aren’t we to be concerned with justice? Yes, of course. But personally, as individuals:

Micah 6:8

He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?

Our individual relationship with the Lord should be more important to us than anything:

James 1:27

Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

The world will always be crooked. It’s unreformable:

Philippians 2:14,15

Do all things without murmurings and disputings: That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world....

To politically fight for any cause in the name of Christ, is just as bad a witness to the world as to physically fight in the name of Christ, as in the Crusades. Fighting for any cause is not Christianity, whether physical or political. Christianity is altogether different.

Let’s be finished with fighting, and concentrate on living holy, righteous and godly lives, which is in God’s sight of great price:

Titus 2:11-14

For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.

Remember the Sabbath Day to Keep it Holy

Keeping one day in seven holy to the Lord is the fourth of the Ten Commandments that God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai:

Exodus 20:8-11

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

The Bible tells us that all men have a conscience with at least some vestige of God's law written on it:

Romans 2:14,15

For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another....

Because we are fallen creatures, our hearts are hardened and our consciences seared or deformed in some way, so we don't keep God's law as we should:

1 Timothy 4:1,2

Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron....

Titus 1:15

Unto the pure all things are pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled.

But there still ought to be some kind of regard for the law of God in all of us:

The first three Commandments concern our relationship with God. Even though men don't acknowledge Him, and may say they don't believe He exists, or may even acknowledge some other fictional deity of their own imagination, God's "eternal power and Godhead" can be clearly seen from Creation itself, so that we're all without excuse:

Romans 1:20,21

For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.

The fifth Commandment tells us we should honour our father and mother. Family is, to most people, a very strong bond. But many set their families up far too highly, expecting far too much of them, almost worshipping them, because it's all they think they've got.

The sixth Commandment tells us not to murder. Everybody would agree with that, although it wouldn't stop them having an abortion.

The seventh Commandment tells us not to commit adultery. Most would agree they shouldn't cheat on their spouses, but given half a chance they'd do it.

The eighth Commandment tells us not to steal. Nearly everybody would agree theft is wrong, although stealing time off their employer doesn't seem to count.

The ninth Commandment tells us not to bear false witness. Most would agree lying is wrong, but every day they'd put on a show to try to impress others they're something they're not.

The tenth Commandment tells us not to covet. Most would agree that greed is wrong, although it doesn't stop them needlessly accumulating unnecessary possessions for themselves.

So nine of the Ten Commandments are always there somewhere deep in our consciences, albeit we distort them. But what about the fourth Commandment?

The fourth Commandment seems to be the one peculiar Commandment that our consciences don't respond to. Our wills might respond if we're asked to work on a Sunday, but that's only because it's normally a day off and we might miss out on our leisure activities, so we'd at least insist on getting paid double time. But our consciences wouldn't react - we wouldn't feel any guilt about breaking it, as we might with other Commandments. Does that mean it's not really part of God's law? Maybe it was just for the Jews in Old Testament times but not for us today. And does it mean we Christians who do try to observe a sabbath day have got it wrong? Maybe we're just whipping ourselves up to believe it's commanded by the Lord, when it's actually not. Why does there seem to be no conscience about a special day for the Lord naturally in our hearts, when there's at least some conscience about all the other Commandments?

I can understand new believers having little or no conscience about the Lord's Day, because I was like that myself once. I remember, just after I was converted, going to a shop to buy a pint of milk on my way home from church. I was with an unbeliever friend, who was horrified, and said, "Christians don't go shopping on Sunday!" That told me off, and I never did it again. When we've only recently become a Christian, we've got a lot to change, and it's understandable new Christians do all sorts of things which aren't right without realising it.

But there are people who've been Christians for a very long time, and they still don't have any conscience about keeping one day a week special to the Lord.

The Chinese church doesn't seem to bother with it. It's never taught. Church services are usually on a Sunday, but that's only because it's the one day of the week most people have off work. In the Middle East, church services (if they're allowed) are often on a Friday or Saturday because that's their weekend. These are convenient meeting times rather than any understanding of a command from the Lord to keep one day special for Him. There's no conscience about it even in pastors and more mature believers. So, is it me that's had it wrong all this time?

A very popular idea is that we don't need to keep one day special any more. That was for Old Testament Jews, and it was the seventh day of

the week, Saturday. The sabbath rest for Christians is not a specific day any more, but the continuous rest we have in Jesus:

Hebrews 4:9,10

There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God. For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his.

And, it's true, we do enter into a rest when we come to Christ:

Matthew 11:28

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

The rest we have in Christ is the real, spiritual rest we all need, the rest which only the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ can give when we come to know Him for ourselves. So, does the fourth Commandment teach that we no longer need a special day any more, now Christ has come?

But the concept of setting apart one day in seven as a rest day has been with us right from the beginning, even from before the Fall:

Genesis 2:2,3

And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made.

Of course God doesn't rest:

Psalms 121:4

Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.

But it's said that God rested on the seventh day to give us a pattern throughout time that we should have six days labour and one day rest. A week comprising of seven days with at least one day's rest is part of every culture in the world, because that's what God gave us originally. When various atheist societies in history have tried to change to a ten day working week, it didn't work, men became less efficient, so they abandoned it. Working six days and resting one is best for our well-being. All of God's Commandments are good for us. They're not rules

and regulations because God is a strict taskmaster. No. He gave us His Commandments for our good.

But men want to be busy, busy, busy buying and selling seven days a week. So the Lord has set this pattern in the Ten Commandments - His moral law for all time – to stop us from working ourselves to death.

The fourth Commandment is not only set as a pattern for us, it's also set as a picture – a picture of that true rest we have in Christ. Old Testament saints came into that rest when they put their trust in a future prophesied Messiah. We come into the very same rest when we put our trust in that very same Messiah, Jesus Christ, who has now come. And throughout the ages, the Lord has given to us this one day in seven rest as a picture to continually remind us of our rest in Christ.

We don't need pictures. They're not necessary to eternal life. Baptism, the Lord's Supper, the church - these are all pictures, none of which are essential to everlasting life. The thief on the cross never had any of them. The spiritual reality they point to is the most important thing. And the sabbath day is another one of these pictures. That's maybe why many Christians think they can disregard it, in the same way many Christians disregard baptism and the Lord's Supper, and many don't join a church. The pictures may not be essential, but they're at least useful to us in our walk in this world. It's good to have them.

So the rest we are to have on the Lord's Day is:

- (1.) A pattern that is good for our well-being.
- (2.) A picture of the true rest we have in Christ.
- (3.) And then there's a third reason for it. It's a specific sign for believers. A sign of our sanctification, our having been set apart from the world by the Lord:

Exodus 31:12-17

And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Speak thou also unto the children of Israel, saying, Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations; that ye may know that I am the Lord that doth sanctify you. Ye shall keep the sabbath therefore; for it is holy unto you: every one that defileth it shall surely be put to death: for whosoever doeth any work therein, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days may work be done; but

in the seventh is the sabbath of rest, holy to the Lord: whosoever doeth any work in the sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death. Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between me and the children of Israel for ever: for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.

Ezekiel 20:12

Moreover also I gave them my sabbaths, to be a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the Lord that sanctify them.

The sabbath has been given as a peculiar sign specifically to the Lord's people, to set us apart from everybody else. So maybe we shouldn't expect unbelievers to have a conscience about it. In fact we should expect them to laugh at us for observing it, because the Lord ordained it specifically to highlight the difference between us. To them, it's crazy to stop trading for a whole day every week because an invisible God tells us to:

Lamentations 1:7

Jerusalem remembered in the days of her affliction and of her miseries all her pleasant things that she had in the days of old, when her people fell into the hand of the enemy, and none did help her: the adversaries saw her, and did mock at her sabbaths.

So, one day in seven as a day of rest has been specifically given to believers by the Lord. But how should we spend it? When we keep the sabbath day, we don't just stop and do nothing. That's not rest, that's laziness. Firstly, we don't carry on our normal everyday work which would otherwise be quite lawful on the other days of the week. It's a day of rest from such activities. That will relieve a lot of stress for a start. And, according to the Commandment, if we have others under us, such as family, servants, or even cattle, we shouldn't demand that they work either. Remember, rest is good for all living creatures.

Secondly, it's also a day the Lord has given us to especially think on Him. Not that we shouldn't think on Him the rest of the week, but the Lord has provided one day a week especially set apart to worship Him, so we should do so.

Having said that, there will always be works of necessity and mercy which, as they arise, should of course be attended to. So working for the emergency services is perfectly legitimate, as is keeping our responsibilities if we're a carer, or if we're a farmer needing to look after our animals:

Matthew 12:8-12

For the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath day. And when he was departed thence, he went into their synagogue: And, behold, there was a man which had his hand withered. And they asked him, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath days? that they might accuse him. And he said unto them, What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out? How much then is a man better than a sheep? Wherefore it is lawful to do well on the sabbath days.

But, you may argue, shouldn't the sabbath day be a Saturday? After all, God rested on the seventh day, not the first. Some people tell us that the Roman Emperor Constantine changed the sabbath day from a Saturday to a Sunday, and that the church has been worshipping on the wrong day ever since, merely by tradition. Some will even go so far as to say if we don't keep a Saturday sabbath, we're in the false church and we need to repent and come out of it. But none of that is true. There is Biblical warrant for changing the sabbath rest day from the last to the first day of the week, because that was the day of the week Christ was raised from the dead. Let's look at some examples:

John 20:19

Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you.

Christ visited the disciples on the evening of His resurrection, which was on the first day of the week. Thomas wasn't there then, but he was there eight days later:

John 20:26

And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you.

Eight days later was the following Sunday, the first day of the week, when they were all meeting together again. So, in the very first week after the resurrection, this new day, the resurrection day, is already being established as the sabbath day of rest and worship for Christians.

Acts 20:7

And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight.

The word “*when*” here implies that it was a regular custom to come together to break bread on the first day of the week, not the seventh.

1 Corinthians 16:2

Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come.

Believers were to regularly give their offerings on the first day of the week. And we’re told that by doing this, no extra gatherings would be required. Which implies that it was also the day of regular weekly meeting. But the first day of the week was an ordinary working day. It would have been far more convenient for them to have continued to hold their meetings on the seventh day, which wasn’t a working day. So meeting on the first day of the week seems to be because of principle, not convenience.

When Constantine adopted Christianity as the official, outward religion of the Roman Empire, he simply made sure that the first day of the week, the Christian Sabbath, became a non-working day so that Christians could freely worship without hindrance. The sabbath day had actually been changed long before.

Revelation 1:10

I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet....

By John’s old age, the first day of the week had become colloquially known as the “*Lord’s day*.”

In the fourth Commandment, we're not told to "remember the seventh day," but to "*remember the sabbath day.*" The word "*sabbath*" means "rest," so we're to remember the rest day. There is nothing magic about the seventh day, Saturday. The Commandment merely establishes that the Lord commands us to rest one day in seven. It doesn't actually tell us which day. The reason given in the Ten Commandments listed in Exodus 20, is that it was because God rested on the seventh day after Creation. But the parallel passage in Deuteronomy, where the Ten Commandments are repeated, doesn't mention Creation, but gives a different example, God bringing the Israelites out of Egypt:

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Keep the sabbath day to sanctify it, as the LORD thy God hath commanded thee. Six days thou shalt labour, and do all thy work: but the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, nor thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thine ox, nor thine ass, nor any of thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates; that thy manservant and thy maidservant may rest as well as thou. And remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the LORD thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched out arm: therefore the LORD thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day.

The sabbath day here is said to remind us of how the Israelites were brought out of slavery in Egypt, and consequently we can apply it today to remind us of how we've been brought out of slavery to our sinful natures into the freedom and rest there is in Christ.

Constantine and the Roman church (especially) did a lot of damage, but they weren't responsible for changing the sabbath rest day from the seventh day to the first day of the week, the Bible had already changed it.

So let's make Sunday, the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, our sabbath day of rest and worship. And let's not be miserable because we can't go out and do things we otherwise would do the rest of the week. Remember:

Mark 2:27

The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath.

Let the sabbath to us be a day of worship, a day of rest, and moreover a day of absolute delight in the Lord:

Isaiah 58:13,14

If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.

Christian Hatred

Most people would find this title an oxymoron, a figure of speech with a seeming contradiction in it. Christians, they say, should not hate at all, but love everyone, unconditionally, all the time – as God (supposedly) does. But is this really so? As we look closer into things, we find that this is not at all the correct response we should have, because we find that God hates certain things, indeed certain people, and that to all eternity:

Psalm 11:5

The LORD trieth the righteous: but the wicked and him that loveth violence his soul hateth.

Isaiah 30:30

And the LORD shall cause his glorious voice to be heard, and shall shew the lighting down of his arm, with the indignation of his anger, and with the flame of a devouring fire, with scattering, and tempest, and hailstones.

Malachi 1:4

Whereas Edom saith, We are impoverished, but we will return and build the desolate places; thus saith the LORD of hosts, They shall build, but I will throw down; and they shall call them, The border of wickedness, and, The people against whom the LORD hath indignation for ever.

If the Christian is someone who is growing in the faith in order to become more and more like Christ, then should he not also be growing in the grace of **godly hatred** as well as everything else?

A common, almost universal, belief in the church today is the idea that God has some kind of love for all men everywhere. And hatred is often spoken of as being split into three distinct kinds: “*malevolent hatred*,” “*priority hatred*,” and “*judicial hatred*.”

“*Malevolent hatred*” is that hatred which Cain showed toward Abel by murdering him, and a kind that God can’t possibly have in Himself. This “*malevolent hatred*” is simply hatred in which the wrong object is hated. Cain’s evil was that he killed a man because that man had

performed a righteous act. In other words, Cain hated the wrong object, namely Abel. God can never have this hatred within Himself because He never hates the wrong thing. But that doesn't mean to say that God never hates anything. God hates, but He only ever hates that which is hateful, namely the wicked walking in their wickedness. Incidentally, Cain also took vengeance into his own hands, which is also wrong:

Romans 12:19

Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.

It is for God alone to repay the wicked fully, although in this world, for the punishment of evildoers and the good of society in general, He has vested the civil magistrate with the power of the sword (Romans 13:1-5).

“*Priority hatred*,” is what we are supposed to show when Christ says we should “*hate*” father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters and life:

Luke 14:26

If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.

This, God is supposed to have had when He blessed Ishmael but showed “*priority*” for Isaac. But this idea of “*priority hatred*” is wrong. If our father, mother, wife, children, brothers etc. are wicked unbelievers, they are therefore rightful objects of hatred, and we must truly hate them while they are in that state, just as we must hate all the wicked. A common belief is that the word “*hate*” doesn't mean “*hate*” but “*love less*.” But that's the same thing. If I tell my wife I love another woman more than her, I just love my wife less, it's not going to impress her. Of course we can lawfully pray for the salvation of unbelieving family members and pray that they may be brought into the light of the truth of God, but as long as they are in such a state we must hate them and their ways.

We must hasten to add that this doesn't mean we should be nasty to them in any way. Hatred is not nastiness. Rather, we should rightly

resist going along with their wickedness and indeed we should rebuke their sinful ways. If people call that hatred, and call us hateful for believing such, then we can't do much about it. They are wrong. As long as we are not nasty or vindictive in any way towards anyone, we must stick to what is right, even if it means losing all our family and friends, for the kingdom's sake.

Jeremiah 12:8

Mine heritage is unto me as a lion in the forest; it crieth out against me: therefore have I hated it.

Following on from this, notice in Luke 14:26, we are to hate our “*own life also*.” Not because flesh is hateful of itself, but rather, every sin that we commit in thought and word and deed, we must hate. It is right to hate sin, even, and especially, when it emanates from ourselves. Since the fall of Adam, our very natures are sinful, so we should hate ourselves for our very wretchedness. This is a far cry from modern psychology that says we ought to have a sense of “self-worth” and “self-esteem.”

Needless to say, God can never have this “*priority hatred*” in Himself, because:

Acts 10:34

God is no respecter of persons.

God judges all men equally. He may indeed “*bles*” wicked men, such as Ishmael, for a time, by giving them plenty in this world, although God knows that they won't be thankful and misuse His “*blessings*,” so He later justly judges them for their sins.

Thirdly, “*judicial hatred*” is that which a judge exercises when, for example, he hands a criminal over for execution. This is the hatred that God has. But it is very often described as a reluctant punishment whereby, against the nature of the judge (in this case, God), he has to condemn and send someone to punishment (in this case, hell fire) when he doesn't really want to. This is not like God at all.

If we love righteousness and hate sin, as God does (except that He does it perfectly and we don't), we will be glad when the wicked are cast

into hell. Only, I hasten to add, because it is just and righteous punishment for their totally depraved natures. If the punishment was not just, i.e. if it were too little or too much punishment, it would be a terrible thing, and God would be a monster to punish a man unjustly in that way. But God is just, perfectly just, and that is why we must have no time for the idea that God *reluctantly* punishes anyone. He justly punishes the wicked with exactly the right punishment to fit the crime, so we must rejoice in such punishment, as God himself indeed does.

Deuteronomy 28:63

And it shall come to pass, that as the LORD rejoiced over you to do you good, and to multiply you; so the LORD will rejoice over you to destroy you, and to bring you to nought; and ye shall be plucked from off the land whither thou goest to possess it.

Psalm 35:8,9

Let destruction come upon him at unawares; and let his net that he hath hid catch himself: into that very destruction let him fall. And my soul shall be joyful in the LORD: it shall rejoice in his salvation.

Psalm 137:8,9

O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed; happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us. Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones.

Today in the church, many want to deny the biblical doctrine of hell altogether. “How can a god of love send anyone to a place like hell?” they would say. On the other hand, many recognise that if they want to be Biblical they can’t get away from the doctrine of hell (as it is so clearly taught by Christ in plain, simple words that cannot be mistaken), but they distort the truth by portraying God as being reluctant to send anyone there; in other words, God has got to send some people to hell in His justice, but He doesn’t really want to.

Both of these views are mistaken. If the first view is true, Christ’s plain teachings in Scripture about hell are being ignored and there would be no justice in God with all the wicked getting away with their wickedness. If the second view is correct, God would be eternally frustrated that people are in hell. God cannot be frustrated, otherwise he would not be God.

Genesis 18:25

Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?

Isaiah 46:10

My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.

By far the main reason why people find the doctrine of hell unpalatable is because they can't believe that it is a just punishment for their own sins. This is described as:

Westminster Larger Catechism Q.29

Most grievous torments in soul and body, without intermission, in hell-fire for ever.

This doctrine is offensive to most people because they can't come to believe that any man, apart maybe from a few like Adolf Hitler, really deserves such punishment, particularly for eternity. However we can't escape the simple teachings of Christ:

Mark 9:45,46

And if thy foot offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter halt into life, than having two feet to be cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.

Luke 12:5

But I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear: Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, Fear him.

Luke 16:23

And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.

Christ teaches that hell, with its eternal torments, is a real place. How is it then that man deserves such a dreadful punishment? After all, most men are not that bad, are they? People would rather invent doctrines such as purgatory, where men are punished for a time but not for ever, rather than believe in a place of eternal torment where all men deserve to go. This whole attitude is wrong because it exalts man far too highly. Man is indeed that bad. This is the doctrine of total depravity. The Bible is clear about the state of man since the fall of Adam:

Genesis 6:5,6

And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart.

The whole reason God brought the flood on Noah's world was that man was utterly depraved. And the flood did not change a thing:

Genesis 8:21

I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth....

Jeremiah 13:23

Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil.

The doctrine of total depravity is the one truth that man will do anything to disbelieve about himself. Indeed he can't believe it, without the Holy Spirit bringing to a man the knowledge of his own sin and his own natural state before God.

Jeremiah 17:9

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?

Psalms 51:5

Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.

If the doctrine of total depravity is true, which it is, then man has a nature that is totally depraved and he can't help but sin, in which case the doctrine of hell makes perfect sense. It will seem too harsh a punishment only if we have an exalted view of the human condition.

Therefore, eternal punishment in hell is a beautiful doctrine because, and only because, it is justly deserved, or merited, by our totally depraved natures. We will, and God does, joy in the doctrine of hell rather than wince at it, knowing that those who go there will only ever be those who deserve to be there. If we don't rejoice in the doctrine of hell, then we are saying effectively that God has got it wrong.

We must also thank God of course that he has chosen some from eternity to display his mercy rather than his justice, by graciously saving them from hell fire, where they deserve to go. All men will glorify either God's mercy or God's justice in eternity. The elect should therefore be humbled to the dust, because they know that but for the grace of God, they would be in hell with all the others. If anyone claiming to be a Christian is not humbled to the dust in this way, we must seriously doubt their salvation. Our attitude at all times must be that if we did end up in hell after all, then we would know it would be perfect justice and we would not have any reason to complain against God. Indeed, we would still be saying:

Revelation 16:7

Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are thy judgments.

But, are we not being too “hard” and “unloving” when we say that we should rejoice in the doctrine of hell? Should we not be saddened by the fact that people are going there? Not at all. If we did have pangs of sadness at anyone going to hell, then we would be forever miserable in heaven. This cannot be, because we are promised that there will be no more tears there (Revelation 21:4). Heaven will be a place where we will be perfectly satisfied with the justice of God, just as we are not satisfied with all the injustice the wicked perpetrate in this world at present, where they seem to get away with it all. We know that God will judge all men justly and we joy in that, and are not saddened by it at all.

Jeremiah 16:5

For thus saith the LORD, Enter not into the house of mourning, neither go to lament nor bemoan them: for I have taken away my peace from this people, saith the LORD, even lovingkindness and mercies.

As an example, I heard a well-respected “Christian” author and ex-missionary, tell the following story once at a meeting. She said that on Judgment Day, those who never heard the gospel will be going into hell, and as they descend, they will be turning around at those going into heaven shouting “Why didn’t you tell us about Jesus?” According to this theory, those going to hell will be under the impression that it is the fault of those in heaven that they going to hell (for not telling them the gospel), and those going to heaven, presumably, will be eternally miserable because they think it was their fault that they did not tell the

people going to hell the gospel. The truth is exactly the opposite. Those in hell will be in eternal torment, and everyone will know it will be a just punishment for their sins, just as everyone will know the eternal bliss of those in heaven will be all of grace.

Philippians 2:10,11

That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

People find it difficult to believe that God can be so “unfeeling” towards the wicked, but he is not being “unfeeling” at all. Firstly, in any case, God is not “*of like passions*” as we are:

Acts 14:15

Sirs, why do ye these things? We also are men of like passions with you, and preach unto you that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God, which made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein.

Secondly, again, the problem is that, because of our arrogance, we find it difficult to see the human condition properly from God’s perspective.

Thirdly, people have ingrained into them that there is a love of God for all men, which is simply not true. Nowhere in the Bible does it say this, yet it is a common teaching. However, it is noteworthy that people who believe this, always find it awkward to talk about hell. They hardly ever mention the imprecatory psalms, the judicial law, and the slaughters that God commanded in the Old Testament for example. These are “embarrassments” to them. Most of these people tend to jettison most of the Old Testament anyway, saying it was for the Israelites at the time but not for us in this “enlightened” gospel age. They do not realise that it was, and still is, God’s Word and therefore perfect, just and good.

If we say, as we are doing, that we rejoice in hell, then we are compared to fundamentalists of other religions such as Islam. However the hatred that they whip up in Islam is an unjust hatred, a hatred that hates the wrong objects (i.e. non-muslims). God’s hatred is always perfectly just and clean, always hating that which is hateful, i.e. that which is against His holy law, and nothing else. This is the only type of

hatred that we should ever have. There is no excuse at all for hating the wrong object. That is truly sin.

Some people say that God “hates the sin but loves the sinner.” This can’t possibly be true. It is like saying, for example, “I hate the sound of a trumpet but love trumpets.” It is nonsense, because the sole purpose of a trumpet’s existence is to make that one distinctive sound. So if I hate the sound it makes, I must hate the object because it is good for nothing else. Similarly with God. He hates the sin and therefore justly hates the sinner too, because all the sinner can do is sin, it is his only function, he is good for nothing else. Therefore he must be hated and punished justly for it, unless God has elected him unto salvation to the praise of His glorious mercy.

But are we not to weep over the lost, after all, Jeremiah lamented over Jerusalem and Christ Himself wept over it? Are we not to have a “burden for souls” or a “compassion for the lost?” It is a popular misconception that Jeremiah and Christ were weeping over the lost going to hell in these examples. This is not so. They were weeping over the state of Jerusalem, i.e. the visible church, and the fact that truth had been corrupted and God’s glory was no longer displayed in it.

Matthew 23:37

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not.

Christ does not want to gather the whole of Jerusalem, as this verse is often misquoted as saying. Rather it is Jerusalem’s *children* who are the object of His gathering, i.e. the elect within the visible church, whom He does indeed effectually call and save. He does not want to save Jerusalem (i.e. the visible church) itself as an institution, which had been completely taken over by hypocrites who “*would not.*” Although apostasy in the visible church is all under God’s providential control, which we should always rejoice in, nevertheless it is also right to love truth and righteousness. We therefore never despair, but we still mourn whenever we see truth and righteousness cast to the ground and God’s honour being usurped by men, especially in the visible church that outwardly has His name.

Psalm 119:136

Rivers of waters run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law.

In fact in some places in Scripture, God rebukes those who weep for the lost:

Exodus 32:32,33

Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin —; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written. And the LORD said unto Moses, Whosoever hath sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book.

Ezekiel 9:8-10

And it came to pass, while they were slaying them, and I was left, that I fell upon my face, and cried, and said, Ah Lord GOD! wilt thou destroy all the residue of Israel in thy pouring out of thy fury upon Jerusalem? Then said he unto me, The iniquity of the house of Israel and Judah is exceeding great, and the land is full of blood, and the city full of perverseness: for they say, The LORD hath forsaken the earth, and the LORD seeth not. And as for me also, mine eye shall not spare, neither will I have pity, but I will recompense their way upon their head.

Ezekiel 11:13-15,21

And it came to pass, when I prophesied, that Pelatiah the son of Benaiah died. Then fell I down upon my face, and cried with a loud voice, and said, Ah Lord GOD! wilt thou make a full end of the remnant of Israel? Again the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, Son of man, thy brethren, even thy brethren, the men of thy kindred, and all the house of Israel wholly, are they unto whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said, Get you far from the LORD: unto us is this land given in possession.... But as for them whose heart walketh after the heart of their detestable things and their abominations, I will recompense their way upon their own heads, saith the Lord GOD.

In some places we are commanded not to pray for them:

Numbers 16:22,26

And they fell upon their faces, and said, O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and wilt thou be wroth with all the congregation?... And he spake unto the congregation, saying, Depart, I pray you, from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, lest ye be consumed in all their sins.

Jeremiah 7:16

Therefore pray not thou for this people, neither lift up cry nor prayer for them, neither make intercession to me: for I will not hear thee.

Jeremiah 11:14

Therefore pray not thou for this people, neither lift up a cry or prayer for them: for I will not bear them in the time that they cry unto me for their trouble.

Jeremiah 14:11

Then said the LORD unto me, Pray not for this people for their good.

But are we not commanded to “*love our enemies*”? Of course we should. There are three reasons for this:

(1.) We don’t know who amongst our enemies are elect, God does. The *fact* that there are in existence elect and non-elect is a revealed truth:

Romans 9:22,23

What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory.

Who they are is one of the secret things of God that we are not told. So we are commanded to “*love our enemies*.” This involves outward acts. It does not involve being like them, thinking like them etc. That would not be “*love*” at all. We must see to their outward welfare, just as Jesus did while on earth, healing and feeding many more people than were elect, and also just as God does when He gives all men, elect and reprobate alike, rain and sunshine, health and all things for life on this earth:

Matthew 5:44,45

But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.

But this “*love*” is completely different from any kind of “*love*” that wants them to be saved. God can’t possibly think that way towards

the non-elect without desiring something that He does not will to come to pass. This would result in a frustrated God, which cannot be. Here we have two definitions of “love,” one is a general compassion for all men, and the other, that love which God has for His elect only.

The “love” with which we are to “love our enemies,” is in an outward expression of care for the outward estate of others. The Bible tends to call this “compassion.” This is not to be confused with true electing “love.” “Compassion” is a caring for the outward estate of others, which we are all called to do in the eighth commandment (Exodus 20:15):

Westminster Shorter Catechism

Q. 74. What is required in the eighth commandment?

A. The eighth commandment requireth the lawful procuring and furthering the wealth and outward estate of ourselves and others.

Q. 75. What is forbidden in the eighth commandment?

A. The eighth commandment forbiddeth whatsoever doth or may unjustly hinder our own or our neighbour’s wealth or outward estate.

Christ did this in the feeding of the five thousand for example. This doesn’t mean He wanted them all to be saved, but He had “compassion” on them in that He looked after their outward estate. The fact He did this miraculously was a sign that He was the Messiah, a fact that most of the people did not care about – all they cared about was being fed:

John 6:26

Jesus answered them and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled.

We are called to follow Christ in showing this sort of “compassion” to all men. To “love our enemies,” we are called to be good to them, show compassion, looking after their outward estate as best we can. We trust in God to either save them if they are one of His elect, or damn them if they are not, but we should be glad whatever God does with them, not miserable if, for example, God should send them to hell. We ought to know from our own hearts what “total depravity” really is, and we should be content that those that are damned to hell have been punished justly. Indeed we should fear God and be ever thankful that

we will not suffer such an end as they because God has chosen us from the foundation of the world.

(2.) So really when Christ tells us to “*love our enemies*,” He is not telling us to never hate anyone. It is right to hate someone who is justly hateful. When we are called to “*love our enemies*,” it means we must never do any harm to anyone. In other words, we should leave vengeance to God:

Romans 12:19-21

Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.

So this showing “*compassion*” is the opposite of being nasty or doing harm, not the opposite of hatred. We should still rightly hate them because their deeds are evil:

John 7:7

The world cannot hate you; but me it hateth, because I testify of it, that the works thereof are evil.

If we started trying to take vengeance on anyone ourselves, we would either be unjust or end up hating the wrong object. God knows everyone’s hearts, we do not. So God should be the only one to take vengeance because He alone can judge justly, we can’t.

Matthew 5:22

But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.

Note here that we are only in danger of the judgment if we are angry with our brother “*without a cause.*” Therefore if we are angry with him *with* a cause then that is just and good and right and true.

(3.) Another reason we are told to “*love our enemies*” is because the gospel is a “hard” message in the world’s eyes, and we are never to let it

seem that we ourselves are hard or not compassionate in our practice of the truth. The only offence we give should be the offence of the cross:

Galatians 5:11

And I, brethren, if I yet preach circumcision, why do I yet suffer persecution? then is the offence of the cross ceased.

Our offence should never be our hardness or unfeeling attitude towards anyone:

2 Corinthians 6:3

Giving no offence in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed.

To summarise, we must do good to all:

- (1.) because we do not know who the elect are,
- (2.) because we trust in God to have vengeance on our enemies and we are never to take vengeance into our own hands, and
- (3.) so that the only offence is that of the gospel, not of ourselves.

God does good to all in the sense of giving all men useful and pleasant things in this life such as rain and sunshine, knowing that these things, whilst helping the elect, will merely harden the non-elect because they will be unthankful for them, not seeing the hand of God in them at all. We should rejoice in this, just as we should rejoice in everything God does. Christ “rejoiced in spirit” that God had hidden truth from the wise and prudent and only revealed it to babes:

Luke 10:21

In that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit, and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight.

Therefore, when, in Proverbs 10:12 for example, Scripture seems to condemn all hatred, it much be seen in context with those passages which positively condone it:

Proverbs 10:12

Hatred stirreth up strifes: but love covereth all sins.

This verse is only talking of *unjust* hatred, i.e. where the object of the hatred is hated unjustly. Just as “*love*” in this verse means a *just* love – the verse indicates this when it speaks of the covering of sins. Loving the wicked in their wickedness does not cover their sins, on the contrary it displays them, as though heaping coals of fire on their head:

Romans 12:20

Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.

We will have the honour of executing God’s judgment at the appropriate time:

Psalm 149:8,9

To bind their kings with chains, and their nobles with fetters of iron; To execute upon them the judgment written: this honour have all his saints. Praise ye the LORD.

Finally, note:

Psalm 92:11

Mine eye also shall see my desire on mine enemies, and mine ears shall hear my desire of the wicked that rise up against me.

Psalm 112:8

His heart is established, he shall not be afraid, until he see his desire upon his enemies.

Psalm 118:7

The LORD taketh my part with them that help me: therefore shall I see my desire upon them that hate me.

We should desire the defeat and destruction of all our enemies, if they are God’s enemies too. Any other attitude of heart towards them is unbiblical and therefore un-Christian.

Psalm 58:10

The righteous shall rejoice when he seeth the vengeance: he shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked.

Revelation 18:20

Rejoice over her, thou heaven, and ye holy apostles and prophets; for God hath avenged you on her.

Praise the LORD!!

Christmas: Satan's Greatest Festival?

The Incarnation is the most wonderful thing this world has ever experienced:

John 1:14

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

1 Timothy 3:16

And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.

Luke 1:35

And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.

God becoming man. How can this be? Why did the Lord of glory ever see fit to bother with us, sinful men? But He did:

1 Timothy 1:15

This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.

God is altogether worthy of all our worship for coming into this world and saving sinners such as we are. So let's honour the incarnation. Let's speak about it and think upon it.

But Christmas is altogether different.

In the church we are continually being told that Christmas is the biggest Christian festival of the year, and one of the best opportunities for evangelism, because it's the only time of year that many people who would not normally come to church enter its doors. So, we are told to embrace it and make it as joyous a festival as possible. I'm sorry but I don't agree.

Firstly, Christmas is a mass, “Christ’s mass.” It was invented by the Roman Catholic church and has no place in Protestantism.

Secondly, we don’t know the date of Christ’s birth. The winter solstice seemed like a good date to hang this festival on, so that’s what they did. It is very unlikely to be the middle of winter, because we are told the sheep were in the fields at night:

Luke 2:8

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

I’ve heard autumn mentioned as a possible time for Christ’s birth, but my favourite possibility is early spring, because Christ is the Lamb of God:

John 1:29

The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.

We don’t really know the time of His birth, and even if we did, we’re not told anywhere in the Bible to have a special day to celebrate it. On the other hand, we do have instructions to celebrate the Lord’s death, in the Lord’s Supper:

1 Corinthians 11:26

For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come.

We are not to set up unbiblical festivals out of our own heads like King Jeroboam did:

1 Kings 12:32-33

And Jeroboam ordained a feast in the eighth month, on the fifteenth day of the month, like unto the feast that is in Judah, and he offered upon the altar. So did he in Bethel, sacrificing unto the calves that he had made: and he placed in Bethel the priests of the high places which he had made. So he offered upon the altar which he had made in Bethel the fifteenth day of the eighth month, even in the month which he had devised of his own heart; and ordained a feast unto the children of Israel: and he offered upon the altar, and burnt incense.

These are the basic Scriptural reasons for not celebrating Christmas. But there are many more practical ones:

There are so many people out there who absolutely hate Christmas. The suicide rate increases fivefold at this time of year. The pressure gets to some poor souls so much that they at least attempt to end their lives.

So many are desperately lonely, especially around this time. Not because they particularly want to be invited to a party full of people, but because either they have no family at all to go home to, or they have problems with the one they've got. They're just looking for one or two real friends.

I knew someone once who was thrown out of his lodgings over Christmas, because the supposedly "Christian" family he was lodging with needed his room to put up visiting family members. He ended up on Christmas Day sitting on a bench in the local bus station reading his Bible. Of course God will not forsake us like that.

Psalm 27:10

When my father and my mother forsake me, then the LORD will take me up.

Many years ago, I remember hearing the actress Thora Hird on the radio programme "Desert Island Discs," saying that she was saddened that she got so many letters from people who didn't even have, as she said, a "second cousin three times removed." Hers was the only friendly face they ever saw (on their television sets), so they wrote to her.

That's the reality of Christmas. But what do we do about it? Well, the world piles the pressure on, and makes things even worse. Happy smiling faces, happy families celebrating Christmas parties is all we see on our television screens. And if we're not as happy as they are, the problem must be with us, not them. That's all the world can say to us. The world hasn't got the answer, it's the cause of the problem.

So what do the churches do instead? Sadly, too many of them join in with all the frivolity, and have Christmas parties themselves.

Most churches, in Christmas week, would either shorten their sermons, dispense with them altogether, or even dispense with whole services. Prayer meetings and Bible studies are cancelled. The preaching of the gospel, sermons and all the usual church activities are stopped for a week so that the regular church-goers can go and worship their families instead. Surely, Satan is so very happy with all this. It's just what he wants.

And inviting lonely people to huge social events at the church is not the answer. The best thing we could do is to tell them that they don't have to do all this, the pressure's off.

Yes, you can live with a clear conscience by not joining in with what everyone else is doing at this time of year. The burden is removed. We can then go on to tell these poor souls that the far greater burden of their sins can also be removed in Christ. That's the true message we should be proclaiming, not trying to force people to celebrate a worldly festival in the name of Christ, but telling people about the freedom from our sins that can be found in Him. This is true freedom and true joy.

John 8:36

If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.

The churches themselves are under pressure to conform to the world's festival of Christmas, because, after all, isn't it a "Christian" festival? But whether we hold Christmas events or not, our greatest concern should be to make sure that we too are not burdened by pressure to conform, but rather that we should be a beacon of hope at a particularly dark time of year for many people. Then the churches could become a real light to the nations around them:

Acts 13:47

For so hath the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldst be for salvation unto the ends of the earth.

What A Christian Can Know For Sure

If I say that I know *for sure* that my sins have been forgiven and that I'm going to be in eternal glory with Christ rather than being punished for any of my sins past, present or future, then to most people, that would sound very arrogant. To say that we can know *for sure* anything about God or about spiritual things is usually thought of as the attitude of somebody who fancies themselves too highly and doesn't really know anything. How dare I be so confident about my eternal destiny. Who do I think I am?

But it's true. I know *for sure* my sins have been forgiven. And everybody reading this can know *for sure* their sins are forgiven too, if only they repent and turn to Christ for their salvation, rather than trusting in themselves. Pray to Him, and He will answer:

John 6:37

....him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.

Matthew 7:7-8

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

Jeremiah 29:13

And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.

The reason why most people think this attitude is arrogance, is because they convince themselves that their standing with God must surely depend on what they do here on this earth, and we can never know that fully until the end of our lives. Funny that, isn't it? They're so sure that's true, without any evidence at all. I'm just as sure they're totally wrong, but I have solid evidence – the Bible.

Romans 3:20

Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight....

The fact is that we can never do enough to please God. Whatever we do isn't going to be good enough. That's why God has provided a Saviour in our Lord Jesus Christ. My standing with God thankfully doesn't depend on what I do, but on what the Lord Jesus has already done on the cross for me. He's taken my sin away for good.

Psalm 103:12

As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us.

If we think acceptance with God depends on how good we are, we can never know if we've done enough. What an awful thought! Never knowing whether God really loves us or is going to cast us into hell at the end. That's the way most people live their lives. But, actually, God hasn't put anybody in that situation. In actual fact, all men at all times do know God *for sure*, whether they acknowledge it or not.

Unbelievers without Christ are in a dreadful situation:

Ephesians 2:12

...having no hope, and without God in the world....

But, whether they accept it or not, they still know *for sure* just enough about God's eternal power and Godhead to be without excuse for their sin:

Romans 1:20-21

For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.

Believers, on the other hand, not only know so much more *for sure* about God, but they also know *for sure* that they themselves have been saved from their sins:

Romans 8:1

There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

1 John 4:13

Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit.

If we come to Christ, He puts a new heart within us, and makes us new creatures. The Holy Spirit comes to dwell in our hearts and leads us into knowing these truths *for sure*:

1 John 2:27

But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him.

Unbelievers will find that impossible to accept, because unless we've experienced this fundamental inward change for ourselves, we'll never understand it. But when we've been changed by Him internally in this way, believe me, we'll know Him *for sure* as our Saviour, and be confident of our eternal destiny. He'll be alive in our hearts. We'll have a living relationship with Him.

We may waver in our faith, especially if we're new Christians or our faith is weak, but we'll never lose it. In fact, if we're worried we've lost our faith, it's a sure sign that it's still there. If it wasn't there at all, we'd never be worried about it.

Philippians 1:6

Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.

But there are many in other religions too who convince themselves that they are God's chosen people, what makes the Christian so different? There's a huge difference. Take the Orthodox Jew for example. He is so proud of the position he's been born into. That makes him so arrogant, feeling far superior, looking down on everybody else who hasn't received the same privileges he has. His religion feeds on pride and arrogance. That's not the way God wants us to live.

The true Christian would never think that way. If we've truly been saved by Christ, we'll never think that we deserve what God has given us. We're born no different from unbelievers, we're exactly the same as

them. We too were born as unbelieving, self-centred creatures just like they are:

Ephesians 2:3

Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.

By nature, we're children of wrath, just like everybody else. But we've been changed, we've been quickened. And our change has all come from the Lord. We can never be proud and arrogant like the Orthodox Jew. We haven't deserved this change in any way. God has done the changing, all the glory goes to Him. We now believe *for sure* we're one of God's children, but we'll never be able to boast about it:

Ephesians 2:8-9

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.

Romans 3:27-28

Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay; but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.

After realising what God has done for us we can only humble ourselves and say, "Why me, and not my neighbour?"

1 Samuel 2:3

Talk no more so exceeding proudly; let not arrogance come out of your mouth: for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed.

Isaiah 57:15

For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.

1 Peter 5:5-6

...be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time.

Humility is all we can have before the Lord. But that doesn't exclude coming to know many things *for sure* that the world can never know, including our eternal salvation. We shouldn't let what the world claims it knows for sure to persuade us that they're right all the time, because they're not. The world doesn't know what it's talking about. God does.

God gives the Christian so much knowledge, all of which is in the Bible:

John 17:17

Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

But it's not just academic knowledge the Christian has. Anybody can find out the truth if they study their Bibles hard enough. The Holy Spirit now lives inside the believer, and gives him a confidence to know spiritual things *for sure*. An unbeliever might be able to work out what the Bible teaches, but he can never have that confidence. And not only that, but the Holy Spirit also applies this knowledge to the Christian, so that we can know *for sure*, that the things God wants us to know, are applicable to us, personally.

There are many hundreds of "*we know's*" or "*I know's*" in the Bible, which gives us an indication of how much we can become truly sure about. I'll just list a few here. See if you can come across others, they're not difficult to find.

The best place to start is the first letter of John, which was written for the very purpose of confirming our faith:

1 John 5:13

These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God.

Here's my list. Firstly, a selection from 1 John:

1 John 2:18

*Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby **we know that it is the last time.***

1 John 3:2

*Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but **we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him;** for we shall see him as he is.*

1 John 3:14

We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren.

1 John 3:18-19

*My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. And hereby **we know that we are of the truth,** and shall assure our hearts before him.*

1 John 3:24

*And he that keepeth his commandments dwelleth in him, and he in him. And hereby **we know that he abideth in us,** by the Spirit which he hath given us.*

1 John 4:6

*We are of God: he that knoweth God beareth us; he that is not of God beareth not us. Hereby **know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error.***

1 John 5:2

*By this **we know that we love the children of God,** when we love God, and keep his commandments.*

1 John 5:14-15

*And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he beareth us: And if **we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.***

1 John 5:18-20

We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not. And **we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness. And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may 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.***

[*What do we think of this statement? Can a Christian be sinless? No, that's not what it's saying. Earlier in the letter John said:

1 John 1:8

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

John explains what he means more clearly in chapter 3:

1 John 3:6

Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him.

In other words, to the extent we “*abide in Christ*,” we cannot sin, but to the extent we don’t abide in Him but let self get the upper hand, we sin all the time, and behave as though we’ve never known Him.]

More “*we know*” passages from the rest of Scripture:

Romans 7:14,18

For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin.... For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not.

Romans 8:22

For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.

Romans 8:28

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

Romans 14:14

I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean.

1 Corinthians 8:4

*As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, **we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one.***

2 Corinthians 5:1

*For **we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.***

Philippians 3:10

That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death;

Philippians 4:12

I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.

1 Timothy 1:8

But we know that the law is good, if a man use it lawfully;

2 Timothy 1:12

*For the **which cause I also suffer these things: nevertheless I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day.***

Hebrews 10:30

*For **we know him that hath said, Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord. And again, The Lord shall judge his people.***

Hebrews 11:3

*Through **faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.***

Job 19:25-26

*For **I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God:***

Job 42:2

I know that thou canst do every thing, and that no thought can be withholden from thee.

Psalm 39:4

Lord, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail I am.

Psalm 41:11

By this I know that thou favourest me, because mine enemy doth not triumph over me.

Psalm 73:16-17

When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me; Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end.

Psalm 135:5

For I know that the Lord is great, and that our Lord is above all gods.

Psalm 140:12

I know that the Lord will maintain the cause of the afflicted, and the right of the poor.

Ecclesiastes 3:12-14

I know that there is no good in them, but for a man to rejoice, and to do good in his life. And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labour, it is the gift of God. I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him.

Jeremiah 9:24

But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the Lord which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the Lord.

We can know many things for sure, but there are also plenty of other things that we'll never know on this earth. Here's a few things we don't know:

Acts 1:7

*And he said unto them, **It is not for you to know the times or the seasons,** which the Father hath put in his own power.*

Romans 8:26

*Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for **we know not what we should pray for as we ought:** but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.*

1 Corinthians 4:4

*For **I know nothing by myself;** yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord.*

1 Corinthians 13:9,12

*For **we know in part,** and we prophesy in part.... For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now **I know in part;** but then shall I know even as also I am known.*

2 Corinthians 5:16

*Wherefore **henceforth know we no man after the flesh:** yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now **henceforth know we him no more.***

Psalms 71:15

*My mouth shall shew forth thy righteousness and thy salvation all the day; for **I know not the numbers thereof.***

Dust Thou Art

We are but dust. The only thing that sets us apart from a piece of dirt on the ground is the fact that God breathed into us the breath of life:

Genesis 2:7

And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.

And after this life is over, we return to the ground again:

Genesis 3:19

In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

Ecclesiastes 3:20

All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.

And, what's more, our time here as dust is so short:

1 Corinthians 7:29

But this I say, brethren, the time is short....

Job 8:9

For we are but of yesterday, and know nothing, because our days upon earth are a shadow.

Job 14:1,2

Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not.

Psalms 39:4-6

Lord, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail I am. Behold, thou hast made my days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before thee: verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity. Selah. Surely every man walketh in a vain shew: surely they are disquieted in vain: he heapeth up riches, and knoweth not who shall gather them.

Psalm 39:11

When thou with rebukes dost correct man for iniquity, thou makest his beauty to consume away like a moth: surely every man is vanity. Selah.

Psalm 78:39

For he remembered that they were but flesh; a wind that passeth away, and cometh not again.

Psalm 89:47,48

Remember how short my time is: wherefore hast thou made all men in vain? What man is he that liveth, and shall not see death? shall he deliver his soul from the hand of the grave? Selah.

Psalm 90:9,10

For all our days are passed away in thy wrath: we spend our years as a tale that is told. The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.

Psalm 144:4

Man is like to vanity: his days are as a shadow that passeth away.

James 4:14

Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.

So, why on earth has God put us all in this position, made of mere dust, and for such a short space of time? What's the point of it all?

Psalm 103:14-16

For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust. As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more.

Surely, Solomon was absolutely right about everything under the sun, because if this is all there is, there really is no point in any of it:

Ecclesiastes 1:14

I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

But there is a purpose behind everything the Lord ordains. Nothing is for no reason:

Ecclesiastes 3:1

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

These bodies will indeed return to the earth from whence they came soon enough. But that's not the end of us. These bodies are just temporary dwelling places. That "living soul" that God breathed into us will last forever:

Ecclesiastes 12:7

Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

We do have something that will outlive the death of this body – an immortal soul. That's the real us. And, eventually, our soul will inhabit another body, which will be eternal:

1 Corinthians 15:44

It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.

Our current body of dust is likened to seed or grain, compared to the full-grown plant. That means two things: Firstly, our eternal welfare – the growth of the plant – is so much more important than our temporal welfare as mere seed here:

Matthew 10:28

And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

Secondly, for this body of dust to become fruitful, the seed must needs die – and that means both physically die, and die to its selfish desires:

1 Corinthians 15:36,37

....that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die: And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain....

John 12:24

Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.

We must look after the seed, we shouldn't abuse it. But our only real objective in doing that isn't the comfort of the seed, but to make sure we produce a healthy plant in the next life.

Yet, despite all of this – the brevity of this life, the frailty of our nature, and the fact we're mere seed and not the full-grown plant yet – we still insist on filling ourselves with this world – things here and now – and we tend to ignore eternal things altogether.

Indeed, there's plenty to learn about here. In fact there's so much, we could spend all our days:

2 Timothy 3:7

Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.

There's nothing wrong with learning a skill to earn a living while we're here. That's a good thing. God has given us natural laws to learn about:

Isaiah 28:24-29

Doth the plowman plow all day to sow? doth he open and break the clods of his ground? When he hath made plain the face thereof, doth he not cast abroad the fitches, and scatter the cummin, and cast in the principal wheat and the appointed barley and the rie in their place? For his God doth instruct him to discretion, and doth teach him. For the fitches are not threshed with a threshing instrument, neither is a cart wheel turned about upon the cummin; but the fitches are beaten out with a staff, and the cummin with a rod. Bread corn is bruised; because he will not ever be threshing it, nor break it with the wheel of his cart, nor bruise it with his horsemen. This also cometh forth from the Lord of hosts, which is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in working.

But the point is that we're not going to be here for very long. We're going to be in the next world for far longer than we were ever here. Surely, surely there is only one thing needful for us to concentrate our lives on here, and that's the things of eternity:

2 Corinthians 4:17,18

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.

All we have here and now is going to pass away from our sight and grasp so soon. In the next world, what's going to be the point of having learned anything we were taught at school? Or how to ride a bike, or swim, or drive a car? None of it is going to be helpful at all. None of it. Only knowing Jesus Christ is:

Luke 10:41-42

And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.

Colossians 3:1,2

If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.

And to keep us from loving this world too much, the Lord has also ordained this to be a world in which mankind fell into sin. The world is full of evil. And it's not just we that are fallen creatures, but the whole of Creation is fallen as well. It also groans, in a perpetual cycle of life and death:

Romans 8:19-22

For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath 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 groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.

And a fallen world is, by definition, a vale of tears. It's full of suffering. There's nothing here to cherish or cling on to:

Psalm 56:8

Thou tellest my wanderings: put thou my tears into thy bottle: are they not in thy book?

This is quite an unpleasant thought, and many people hate God because of it. “How can a loving God deliberately create a world full of suffering?” they would ask. And they try to shut God out of their minds by desperately chasing after all sorts of things to live for here, even inventing their own philosophies and religions to stop them thinking about reality. They’ve forgotten, or rather they don’t realise, they’re just seed. They’re just dirt. This is not where we’re meant to spend eternity. It’s a temporary place.

The Lord has put us all into this condition:

Romans 3:23

For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God...

But He’s also shown us the way out:

Romans 6:23

For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

So, we have a choice. We can either love this world of sin we’ve been born into, and for the short time we’re here try to make the most of it by living for ourselves, our own gratification and our own pleasures, only then to face judgment for it all. Or we can hate this world and everything in it, and trust in the Lord’s only way of salvation to get us out of it and bring us into a far better place:

John 12:25

He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.

The truth is that, in this world, without Christ, there’s absolutely nothing to live for. If people refuse to accept the Christian message, much as I would love to help them, I can’t. There’s no alternative.

What can we take with us from here into the next world anyway?
Nothing. So why cling on to it?

Mark 8:36

For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?

Job 1:21

Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.

1 Timothy 6:7

For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.

We should be so, so happy that we're not in this present, evil world for very long. It's good to know that all this trouble and sorrow is here but for a moment, before we fly away to be with Christ which is far better:

Isaiah 26:20

Come, my people, enter thou into thy chambers, and shut thy doors about thee: hide thyself as it were for a little moment, until the indignation be overpast.

Philippians 1:23

For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better....

So, in the short time we have left, let's not concern ourselves with what type of dust we are, whether we're sandy, or clay, or irritate easily or make good pottery. None of that matters. Let's rather make sure we become good ground, ready for Christ to receive us:

Luke 8:15

But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience.

Luke 21:34-36

And take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unawares. For as a snare shall it come on all them that dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy

to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man.

2 Peter 3:11-13

Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.

Even a Vapour

James 4:14

For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.

Since time began, men have always pondered the big questions of life, thinking, for reasons I can't understand, that they can come up with all the answers. This has led them to inventing many fanciful theories. How did the universe begin? Well, we're told in all the best educational establishments, by a big bang billions of years ago. How did man come to live on the earth? We're reliably told, we all evolved from fish. Isn't it wonderful how scientists know all these things!

These ridiculous, laughable answers are taken quite seriously in our major institutions. University professors mock anyone who doesn't believe this. And our media listens to such people of influence, and so these ideas become mainstream in the general population. Who dare not believe David Attenborough?

Well, for what it's worth, I don't. All these influencers have been looking for answers to these big questions in the wrong place. They think they can work everything out by observation. But it is simply not possible to know such answers, except our Creator God reveals them to us. And, praise Him, He has condescended to do exactly that:

2 Peter 1:3

*According as his divine power hath given unto us **all things that pertain unto life and godliness**, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue....*

He hasn't revealed absolutely everything about the universe to us, because, for a start, we wouldn't understand it, and in any case we don't need to know it all. But everything we do need to know has not only been revealed, but has always been clearly available. Firstly, through oral tradition. Adam was contemporary with Methuselah, who knew Shem, who knew Isaac, who knew his grandson Levi, who knew his grandson

Amram, who was the father of Moses, through whom the Bible started to be written down. Seven generations of oral transmission was all it took (people lived longer in the early days than we do now) before the truth began to be more permanently recorded for the many future generations scattered throughout the world.

Since the time of Moses we have had a clear, written record of the truth. Truth has been staring us in the face ever since. Yet science, falsely so-called, still thinks it knows better:

1 Timothy 6:20

O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called: which some professing have erred concerning the faith.

James, here, asks one of these big questions: “*What is your life?*” What a question! I’ve heard many sermons that begin at that point. The preacher would say something like this: “Well, I’m sure at some time in our lives we’ve all asked ourselves: ‘What am I here for?’ ‘What is the meaning of life?’...,” then he would go on to tell us that Jesus Christ is the answer. Which He is, I’m not criticising that approach at all. But I’m not sure if many people today are actually asking those kind of questions. They’re more interested in the football results or what’s on the television tonight or their next holiday, or when the next party is going to be.

James questions this whole attitude. He sees far too many people busy, busy, busying themselves with their life here, in this world:

James 4:13

Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain....

Football seasons, television series, holidays, birthday parties, buying and selling, all come and go, yet they consume our mind. And we really think our life is going to carry on like this for ever:

2 Peter 3:4

And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation.

God Himself, in His mercy, occasionally tries to wake us out of this mindset, by upsetting the status quo. He sometimes allows wars, “natural disasters,” and pandemics to occur, in order to focus our minds more on the brevity of life. When people are dropping dead all around us, surely then we’ll begin to take these things seriously, won’t we?

Mark 13:7,8

And when ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars, be ye not troubled: for such things must needs be; but the end shall not be yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be earthquakes in divers places, and there shall be famines and troubles: these are the beginnings of sorrows.

James then asks this one great question that in their busyness, nobody seems to be asking: “*What is your life?*” And he immediately provides us with the answer: “*It is even a vapour.*”

Yes, that’s all life is, a vapour. That should bring us down to earth and make us think. And James emphasises the specific quality of a vapour he has in mind. A vapour “*appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.*” Its transience, its evanescence, its brevity, is the quality of our life that we are to be particularly concerned with.

Our life is soon over. And surely we ought to know this. But we never think about it. In fact, we’re probably too scared of stopping our activity even for a moment and reflecting on this fact, because we assume the only alternative is despair. If life is so fleeting, what’s the point of anything? We may as well give up on everything and indulge ourselves, because we’ll be dead soon enough:

1 Corinthians 15:32

What advantageth it me, if the dead rise not? let us eat and drink; for to morrow we die.

If we think this life is all there is, and can’t see beyond our death, It becomes so easy to fill our lives here either with activity or debauchery. Which is exactly what the majority of people around us are doing. But, whether we like it or not, there is one thing that we all must face. Death is not the end. All of us are going to live forever. We have immortal souls:

Ecclesiastes 12:7

Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

We personally continue on into eternity. We don't reincarnate as somebody or something else with no connection to our previous lives in an endless cycle of life. How ridiculous a theory is that, yet millions believe it. We, ourselves, continue on past death. This means that our time here, albeit brief, suddenly becomes far from pointless. Our time here now has meaning. We come to realise that this short life is merely a preparation for the next. So we should be living accordingly.

The wisest man that ever lived (except Christ) tried everything the world had to offer, and concluded:

Ecclesiastes 2:17

Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

But he didn't go off the rails. He saw things from an eternal perspective. And that necessarily brings our Creator God into the equation:

Ecclesiastes 12:13

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.

If we are here today and gone tomorrow, then we can live how we like, it doesn't matter, there would be no eternal consequences to pay for our actions. But if we have immortal souls that live forever, we are responsible to the God who made us. No longer ought we to be busying ourselves with our own pathetic, inconsequential little matters. Our only motivation for living now, must be to live our lives to the glory of God:

1 Corinthians 10:31

Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.

We don't know how long we've got in this world. Our soul may be required of us tonight:

Luke 12:20

But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?

So, in the very short time we still have left here, we need to prepare ourselves for eternity. We must make absolutely sure we are right with God before we die. If we ignore God and carry on living for ourselves regardless, we will end up in the next world having to take the consequences. Those who....

2 Thessalonians 1:8,9

....know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ....shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power....

That's not where we should want to be. Once in eternity, it's permanent. Once there, we will never be able to get out of the situation we've been placed in. There'll be no second chance after death:

Luke 16:26

And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence.

So we need to make sure we have our sins dealt with before we die, otherwise we'll be sent for ever to a place where we'd never be able to pay off our debt. Thankfully, God is a merciful God, and He has provided an escape route – which He didn't have to do – by sending His only begotten Son into the world:

John 3:16

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

If we repent of our sins against God and embrace the Lord Jesus Christ to save us from them, if we pray to Him, trust in Him, and acknowledge Him as our Saviour, we can be saved from the eternal consequences of where our sins would otherwise inevitably lead us.

Everything else we do in this world is absolutely pointless in comparison to making sure we have Christ as our Saviour:

John 3:36

He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.

Those who come to Christ and trust in Him, by the Lord's grace alone, will be saved from the wrath to come. But we must come now. Waiting for some kind of redemption in the next life is waiting in vain, because there won't be any:

2 Corinthians 6:2

...behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

And we shouldn't tempt God by thinking that we can wait until the last possible moment in this life either, because most of us won't become Christians on our death bed. We may not have a death bed, and even if we do, we may not be in a fit state to do anything by then. We don't even know what tomorrow may bring:

James 4:14

Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow....

After the Lord brings us to Himself, the rest of our lives in this world will no longer be spent drifting along. They now have purpose. We'll now be spending our time obeying the Lord's individual guidance to us, whatever that may be. Always keeping our eyes firmly on eternity.

We may no longer be bothered about the football results, but new concerns will come along which we never had before. We'll suddenly find ourselves surrounded by an unbelieving family, and we'll need to be a good witness to them. We'll all go to imperfect churches, and we'll need to learn how to stop getting worked up by this-worldly church politics. We'll all be persecuted by the world, so we need to trust in the Lord, and realise He is in complete control of all things. All this and more we are going to have to manage. But the wonderful thing is that we will have the Lord's help, and we always have the knowledge that it will only be for a very short time.

So, what will eternity be like? We're not told all that much about it actually. Our life here is compared to a seed as opposed to the full grown plant:

1 Corinthians 15:35-38

But some man will say, How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come? Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die: And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain: But God giveth it a body as it hath pleased him, and to every seed his own body.

How can a seed understand what it is like being the full grown plant? It can't, and neither can we begin to understand what eternity will be like. We are given some details about it. We know it will be a good place:

Revelation 21:4

And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

We know it will be a place of eternal rest from our labours:

Revelation 14:13

And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them.

We know that God alone will be the focus:

Revelation 4:2-8

And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne. And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald. And round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold. And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices: and there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal: and in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne, were four beasts full of eyes before and behind. And the first beast was like

a lion, and the second beast like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast was like a flying eagle. And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.

Many people think Christians have just invented heaven as a coping mechanism for their miserable lives here. A perfect place after death, a “pie in the sky when you die.” But what we believe isn’t fantasy. It’s real. We’re told just enough about it to whet our appetite, but not too much, to stop us trying to make any grand plans for when we get there, because it will be totally different from anything we know here.

Other religions are very detailed about telling us what the next world will be like. Muslims, for example, believe that we’ll be lying on couches surrounded by virgins and being fed grapes. But wouldn’t we get bored with that after a while? Is that all there is in heaven? It’s such ideas that are the ones that are fantasy. They assume God is altogether too much like we are down here:

Psalm 50:21

These things hast thou done, and I kept silence; thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself: but I will reprove thee, and set them in order before thine eyes.

We’re told that the sins of all the Lord’s people will be remembered by God no more:

Psalm 103:12

As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us.

Hebrews 8:12

For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.

Hebrews 10:16,17

This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them; And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more.

But just because God is said to no longer remember our sins, that doesn't mean that in heaven we are going to forget this brief life altogether. If that were the case, what would be the point of it? In heaven we'll see Christ, and He will be bearing the marks of His crucifixion, which will always remind us of what we have been saved from:

Revelation 5:6

And I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain....

We'll always be mindful of the short lives we lived on this earth. We'll remember the sinful condition we were in, what an utter mess we made, and be eternally thankful for having been saved from it:

Revelation 7:9,10

After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; And cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb.

And the most wonderful thing of all that we're told about heaven, is not only that we'll be with Christ, but also we'll be like Him:

Philippians 1:22-24

But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour: yet what I shall choose I wot not. For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you.

1 John 3:2

Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.

So, let us not become bogged down with the various problems and situations that come along in this life. They will soon fly away. Our time here is so short, and we'll be in eternity soon enough:

1 Corinthians 7:29

....the time is short....

How should we then live?

1 Corinthians 15:58

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.

2 Corinthians 4:17,18

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.

We Have Sinned

Jeremiah 3:25

We lie down in our shame, and our confusion covereth us: for we have sinned against the LORD our God, we and our fathers, from our youth even unto this day, and have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God.

1 John 1:10

If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

"We have sinned." How many times do we hear that or a similar expression these days? Do we hear the Prime Minister use it? No. What about other important national figures? No. They think they can deal with any situation that comes along, even when they are completely out of their depth. Such is the pride of man. Yet, in the Bible, it's just this kind of expression that God is looking for. We are sinners before a holy God. A simple acknowledgment of that fact would be the first step towards being helped by Him.

But our pride prevents us from acknowledging that. We think we're so good, and that we are more than capable of coping without God. So we try to bumble along without Him. It takes a major national disaster to come along, before it becomes possible for any of us to see how much we really are in need of Him.

Jeremiah 29:13

And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.

During the Second World War, our King called for days of prayer and humiliation. We didn't win the war because we were better than our German neighbours, but because God answers national prayer. Would that our leaders today would call the nation to prayer. To acknowledge God. To humble ourselves before Him. That has always been the way out of a difficult situation throughout history. And God ordained it to be that way:

2 Chronicles 6:28-31

If there be dearth in the land, if there be pestilence, if there be blasting, or mildew, locusts, or caterpillars; if their enemies besiege them in the cities of their land; whatsoever sore or whatsoever sickness there be: Then what prayer or what supplication soever shall be made of any man, or of all thy people Israel, when every one shall know his own sore and his own grief, and shall spread forth his hands in this house: Then hear thou from heaven thy dwelling place, and forgive, and render unto every man according unto all his ways, whose heart thou knowest; (for thou only knowest the hearts of the children of men:;) That they may fear thee, to walk in thy ways, so long as they live in the land which thou gavest unto our fathers.

And the church should be leading the way in this. Surely the role of the church is to get people to recognise their sin before God and to show them the remedy. Not only to call nations to repent, but also to call each one of us, as individuals, personally to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ to save us from our sins. After all, that's what Christ came into the world to do. He is a Saviour to all those who call upon Him. Our national church used to be a lot better at calling men to do these things than it is now.

Whatever we think of the Church of England's "*Book of Common Prayer*," it's a lot better than anything we get in most churches today. Part of every service calls specifically for a confession of sin:

"ALMIGHTY and most merciful Father, We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep: We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts: We have offended against thy holy laws: We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders: Spare thou them, O God, which confess their fault: Restore thou them that are penitent; According to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesu our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, That we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, To the glory of thy holy Name. Amen."

The Communion service prayer of confession goes further:

"ALMIGHTY God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Maker of all things, Judge of all men; We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, which

we, from time to time, most grievously have committed, by thought, word, and deed, against thy Divine Majesty, provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us. We do earnestly repent, and are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; the remembrance of them is grievous unto us; the burden of them is intolerable. Have mercy upon us, Have mercy upon us, most merciful Father; For thy Son our Lord Jesus Christ's sake, forgive us all that is past; And grant that we may ever hereafter serve and please thee in newness of life, To the honour and glory of thy Name; Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen."

Where do we find such material in most churches today? Even the Church of England has watered it all down in their modern service books, and in any case, many of their ministers think it's quite all right to skip over that part of the service altogether.

When was the last time you heard the Archbishop of Canterbury, or any leading clergyman, talk about sin? They'll talk about climate change, gender reassignment, and any other topic of the day, but our own personal sins? It's not a subject we are encouraged to talk about. Because modern society doesn't want to talk about it. Yet it's exactly such that the Lord wants us to acknowledge.

Most religious leaders, just like those in Christ's day, don't understand the truth about God. They're more interested in their church, their organisation, and their status in it, rather than the truth. It has always been left to God to raise up prophets, outside of the main religious establishment, to speak for Him. We should be listening to the prophets of the Bible, not great church leaders who know nothing:

Isaiah 64:5

Thou meetest him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness, those that remember thee in thy ways: behold, thou art wroth; for we have sinned: in those is continuance, and we shall be saved.

Jeremiah 14:7

O LORD, though our iniquities testify against us, do thou it for thy name's sake: for our backslidings are many; we have sinned against thee.

Daniel 9:8

O Lord, to us belongeth confusion of face, to our kings, to our princes, and to our fathers, because we have sinned against thee.

But, alas, even if we do listen to the prophets and confess our sin as we ought, our repentance so often turns out to be such a light thing. I'm not sure whether that's because we just don't realise how sinful we really are, or if it's because we don't *want* to realise how sinful we really are. Probably a mixture of both.

As we get older and look back at our fleeting life, we ought to become more and more aware of our sins as the years go by. Surely we should be able to see what a terrible mess we've made. What good have we actually achieved? What good haven't we achieved and should have done? Who have we let down? Have we truly loved our neighbour as ourselves? If we ask ourselves questions such as these, surely there is only one conclusion to come to – that we're rotten to the core. And we're all like this. All of us desperately need to be saved from our sins. If we really can't see any of that, we're blind, and we're just going to carry on in the same self-centred way:

Ephesians 2:12

...having no hope, and without God in the world....

We must come to see our past for what it truly is:

2 Samuel 14:14

For we must needs die, and are as water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again....

Genesis 47:9

And Jacob said unto Pharaoh, The days of the years of my pilgrimage are an hundred and thirty years: few and evil have the days of the years of my life been....

But we needn't dwell on the past, because there is a Saviour. We can look to Him to take all our sins away. The only thing we should be looking back on, is how the Lord has led us through the wilderness of this world, despite ourselves. We must now make sure we keep our eyes focussed ahead on what's to come, because the Lord has so much more in store for His people. It can only get better:

Philippians 3:13,14

Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

Let's look at a few characters from the Bible, and see how they saw their own sin:

Firstly, take a look at this bunch of likely lads: Pharaoh, Balaam, Achan, King Saul, Shimei and Judas. What have they all got in common? All of them mouthed the words "*I have sinned*" when they found themselves in a sticky situation, yet none of them truly meant it. They only said those words to get out of the mess they were in at the time. There was no true heartfelt repentance in any of them. They knew jolly well they'd go back to their old ways again as soon as they were free from their temporary difficulty.

And then there's king Ahab. He was the most wicked king the northern kingdom of Israel ever had:

1 Kings 21:25

But there was none like unto Ahab, which did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the LORD, whom Jezebel his wife stirred up.

But after the prophet Elijah prophesied against him and his wife, he changed his behaviour, and it was quite impressive:

1 Kings 21:27-29

And it came to pass, when Ahab heard those words [Elijah's prophecy], that he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly. And the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, Seest thou how Ahab humbleth himself before me? because he humbleth himself before me, I will not bring the evil in his days: but in his son's days will I bring the evil upon his house.

There's no record of him acknowledging his sin in words, but in his actions, he humbled himself, and at least outwardly showed some kind of repentance. And what's more, the Lord saw it and recognised him for what he'd done. He didn't actually commend Ahab personally, but

through Elijah, He gave a promise that the evil to come wouldn't be in Ahab's lifetime, but in that of his son.

This was a temporary respite. The evil would come, Ahab's sin was too great to avoid it altogether, but because he walked softly and humbled himself outwardly, the Lord was good to him. Was he saved to eternal life? We're not told. But it becomes clear he wasn't, for two reasons: Firstly, if he had been one of the Lord's people, the Lord would surely have given the promise directly to him, rather than indirectly to Elijah. And secondly, if it was true repentance, we would have seen him trying to undo all the evil things he had done in the land. But there's no record of that. Instead, three years later, we find he persuaded Jehoshaphat to go to war, followed his own false prophets, ignored the one true prophet of the Lord Micaiah, and tricked Jehoshaphat to put on his kingly robes in battle while he went in disguise. He was killed anyway as it happens, but we see from this that he hadn't really changed in his heart at all.

It was just an outward display of humility. A very good one, and one that the Lord commended. And here's an example of how the Lord is so good to us. Even if our repentance is only external, not internal, the Lord can still take note of it and give us temporal blessings, in order to encourage us to go that one step further and make our repentance internal, from the heart, and therefore real. This Ahab never did.

And then there's Manasseh. He was the most wicked king the southern kingdom of Judah ever had:

2 Chronicles 33:9,10

So Manasseh made Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to err, and to do worse than the heathen, whom the LORD had destroyed before the children of Israel. And the LORD spake to Manasseh, and to his people: but they would not hearken.

The evil things he encouraged Judah to do, were the tipping point that caused the Lord to judge the whole nation by sending them into exile:

Jeremiah 15:4

And I will cause them to be removed into all kingdoms of the earth, because of Manasseh the son of Hezekiah king of Judah, for that which he did in Jerusalem.

But, after fifty terrible years of his reign, he was taken in chains to Babylon, and there he humbled himself and truly repented:

2 Chronicles 33:11-13

Wherefore the LORD brought upon them the captains of the host of the king of Assyria, which took Manasseh among the thorns, and bound him with fetters, and carried him to Babylon. And when he was in affliction, he besought the LORD his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, And prayed unto him: and he was intreated of him, and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD he was God.

But how do we know that his humility wasn't just outward and superficial, like Ahab's? We know it was true repentance for three reasons: Firstly, we're told he "*knew that the Lord, he was God.*" In other words, he came to know the Lord personally for himself. Secondly, just as in Saul's conversion, he became a man of prayer:

Acts 9:11

Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth.

Thirdly, we're also told that during the last five years of his reign, he desperately tried to reverse all the evil things he had done in Judah. It didn't work, because the nation didn't go along with him. The land of Judah was so seared in heart by now, that not even the reign of good king Josiah, Manasseh's grandson, could turn them back to the Lord again, and they had to reap their judgment. But Manasseh saved his own soul by humbling himself and crying to the Lord. That's always the way.

And then there's king David. He mouthed the words "*I have sinned*" more than once in Scripture, and we find that every time he meant it from the heart:

2 Samuel 12:13

And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the LORD. And Nathan said unto David, The LORD also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die.

2 Samuel 24:10

And David's heart smote him after that he had numbered the people. And David said unto the LORD, I have sinned greatly in that I have done: and now, I beseech thee, O LORD, take away the iniquity of thy servant; for I have done very foolishly.

We have many psalms written by him to prove beyond doubt that his repentance was real:

Psalm 51:1-6

Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest. Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me. Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom.

He, just like Manasseh, was given a true view of himself by the Lord. And that's what we need to have – a true view of the sinful, self-centred state of our own soul. A true view of ourselves can only humble us to the dust. After the Lord comes into our lives, there should be no more room for pride in our hearts ever again:

1 Samuel 2:3

Talk no more so exceeding proudly; let not arrogancy come out of your mouth: for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed.

Only the Lord can change such hardened creatures as we are, and break our pride altogether. Then our attitude will be totally changed for good, and for ever.

Many people feign repentance, and it may bring tears, but it's only in order to try to avoid some kind of judgment. True repentance, on the other hand, would never attempt to avoid any judgment for sin, it

would accept it as just and right. And that in turn would cast us solely upon God's mercy. Here are some examples of true repentance in the Bible:

Joseph's brothers:

Genesis 42:21

And they said one to another, We are verily guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the anguish of his soul, when he besought us, and we would not hear; therefore is this distress come upon us.

David:

2 Samuel 24:17

And David spake unto the LORD when he saw the angel that smote the people, and said, Lo, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly: but these sheep, what have they done? let thine hand, I pray thee, be against me, and against my father's house.

Job:

Job 40:4,5

Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth. Once have I spoken; but I will not answer: yea, twice; but I will proceed no further.

Job 42:5,6

I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.

Jonah:

Jonah 1:12

And he said unto them, Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you: for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you.

May we all recognise our sinful, selfish nature, and the judgment we personally deserve for it. But may we also come to the Lord, and truly repent in our hearts:

Luke 18:13

And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.

Repentance Unto Life

Acts 11:18

When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.

I'm sure we're all agreed that there is room for improvement in our lives. We all need to be kinder to people, more generous, more willing to help others, more loving to our neighbour and so on. And whatever church door we enter, we'll more than likely hear sermons and homilies encouraging us to do these things. After all, Jesus Christ Himself taught us exactly the way we should live:

Luke 6:27-31

But I say unto you which hear, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you, Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you. And unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek offer also the other; and him that taketh away thy cloke forbid not to take thy coat also. Give to every man that asketh of thee; and of him that taketh away thy goods ask them not again. And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.

This is all very good. We need teaching like this. And we should all be making more of an effort in this regard. But none of this is exclusive to Christianity. The imam, the rabbi, the living buddha and the atheist politician will all give fairly similar advice. Be kind to your neighbour. Give to the poor. Do good to everybody, even to those with whom you find it difficult. So, the question we may ask ourselves is: Why should we have to embrace Christianity to understand that this is the way we should live? And here is where we must realise that Christianity is far more than just moral teaching.

Simply trying to pull our socks up doesn't work, because we can't. Christianity is all about salvation. Being saved from the consequences of where, if left unchecked, our sins would inevitably lead us. It's not about anything else. It's this that sets Christianity apart from all other faiths and belief systems. They all teach self-help. We teach the absolute necessity of believing in and putting our trust in one glorious

Saviour, who specifically came into this world to save His people from their sins. And that is Jesus Christ:

Matthew 1:21

And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.

Acts 10:43

To him [Jesus Christ] give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins.

Jesus Christ is certainly a moral teacher:

Matthew 23:8

But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren.

But He's far more than that. He's a prophet:

Deuteronomy 18:18

I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him.

He's a King:

John 18:36

Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence.

He's our great High Priest:

Hebrews 9:11,12

But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us.

And, as He said Himself, He is the Son of God:

John 9:35-37

Jesus heard that they had cast him out; and when he had found him, he said unto him, Dost thou believe on the Son of God? He answered and said, Who is he, Lord, that I might believe on him? And Jesus said unto him, Thou hast both seen him, and it is he that talketh with thee.

So, the fundamental principle of Christianity is that we shouldn't trust in ourselves, thinking ourselves good enough to be able to get to heaven. Rather, we are to trust and believe in Jesus Christ as our Saviour to get us there. There are many calls in Scripture to do this:

John 8:24

...if ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins.

Acts 2:21

And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Acts 13:38,39

Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: And by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses.

Acts 16:31

And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.

1 John 3:23

And this is his commandment, That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment.

Sadly, there are many churches out there that really don't teach this gospel message of the absolute necessity of believing in Jesus Christ for salvation at all. They stop at a self-improvement religion. Thankfully, however, there are still many churches that do preach this. And that's good, as far as it goes. However, it has to be said that in most of these, there's still something missing from their message. The gospel call is not just to "believe in Jesus." The gospel call is to "**repent** and believe in Jesus." We only have to look through the Bible to see the importance of repentance:

Matthew 4:17

*From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, **Repent:** for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*

Matthew 9:13

*...I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to **repentance.***

Acts 2:38,39

*Then Peter said unto them, **Repent,** and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.*

Acts 3:19

***Repent** ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord.*

Acts 17:30,31

*And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to **repent:** Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.*

Acts 20:21

*Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, **repentance** toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Acts 26:18

*To open their eyes, and to **turn** them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.*

Acts 26:20

*But shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judaea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should **repent and turn** to God, and do works meet for **repentance.***

2 Peter 3:9

*The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to **repentance**.*

A church which does not call its hearers to both repent **and** believe, is only preaching half a gospel.

And there is something further we need to understand too. It's very easy to misunderstand the gospel call altogether. The gospel calls all men everywhere to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. But we may mistakenly think that implies we have the ability to do these things in our own strength. That doesn't follow, but we can easily think it does. So it is possible to end up outwardly professing Christianity as our faith, but, I have to say this solemnly, it's not real, it's not in our heart, because we're still trusting in ourselves. The whole concept of the Christian life is to be finished with self altogether, and trust in the Lord alone.

The faith and repentance we need can't be worked up from within ourselves. Too great a change is needed. It must not be just "faith," but "*faith unto salvation*":

1 Peter 1:5

*Who are kept by the power of God through **faith unto salvation** ready to be revealed in the last time.*

Hebrews 10:38,39

*Now the just shall live by faith.... But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that **believe to the saving of the soul**.*

Similarly, our repentance should not be merely trying to make an effort to change, but a "*repentance unto life*":

Acts 11:18

*When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles **granted repentance unto life**.*

And this can only be granted by God:

Acts 5:31

*Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to **give repentance** to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.*

2 Timothy 2:25

*In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God **peradventure will give them repentance** to the acknowledging of the truth;*

The only way to receive “*faith unto salvation*” and “*repentance unto life,*” is to come to an end of self. We must recognise our utter inability to whip these things up from within ourselves, and call upon the Lord to grant them to us. Only then can the Lord work in us. And He promises to do so to all who call upon Him:

Psalm 145:18

The LORD is nigh unto all them that call upon him, to all that call upon him in truth.

Isaiah 55:6,7

Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

Matthew 7:7

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you....

The Bible speaks of a world of difference between the sorrow of the world, which leads to a false repentance, a repentance in our own strength which is no good to us, and “*godly sorrow,*” which is the only kind that leads to true repentance:

2 Corinthians 7:9,10

*Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing. For **godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation** not to be repented of: but **the sorrow of the world worketh death.***

In order to shew this difference more clearly, take a look at these Biblical characters:

Pharaoh:

Exodus 10:16,17

Then Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron in haste; and he said, I have sinned against the LORD your God, and against you. Now therefore forgive, I pray thee, my sin only this once, and intreat the LORD your God, that he may take away from me this death only.

Balaam:

Numbers 22:34

And Balaam said unto the angel of the LORD, I have sinned; for I knew not that thou stoodest in the way against me: now therefore, if it displease thee, I will get me back again.

King Saul:

1 Samuel 15:24

And Saul said unto Samuel, I have sinned: for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD, and thy words: because I feared the people, and obeyed their voice.

1 Samuel 15:30

Then he said, I have sinned: yet honour me now, I pray thee, before the elders of my people, and before Israel, and turn again with me, that I may worship the LORD thy God.

Judas:

Matthew 27:3-5

Then Judas, which had betrayed him, when he saw that he was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood. And they said, What is that to us? see thou to that. And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself.

Esau:

Genesis 27:38,41

And Esau said unto his father, Hast thou but one blessing, my father? bless me, even me also, O my father. And Esau lifted up his voice, and wept.... And Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing wherewith his father blessed him: and Esau said in his heart, The days of mourning for my father are at hand; then will I slay my brother Jacob.

Hebrews 12:16,17

Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.

What have all these examples got in common? None of these characters obtained “*repentance unto life*.” But why not? Why did the Lord not grant repentance to these folk? They repented. They were clearly remorseful. It even brought tears to Esau, and caused Judas to kill himself. Surely the Lord ought to have had compassion on such heartfelt repentance? But all these people mentioned here made one big mistake. They only sought repentance in order to try to avoid some kind of punishment or consequences. It’s not genuine. As soon as the situation eased, they would have been off again following their evil ways just like before. It’s not real. And no repentance we think we can muster up from within ourselves is ever going to be real.

On the other hand, the “*repentance unto life*” that only God can give is altogether different. We see our sin for what it really is before God. We cry to God alone:

Psalm 51:4

Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.

Jeremiah 31:18

...turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for thou art the LORD my God.

Only then can the Lord work and grant us the “*repentance unto life*” that we so desperately need. And once we have it, it completely changes our

attitude toward ourselves, particularly in two ways: Firstly, it brings self-loathing:

Jeremiah 31:19

*Surely after that I was turned, I repented; and after that I was instructed, I smote upon my thigh: **I was ashamed, yea, even confounded**, because I did bear the reproach of my youth.*

Ezekiel 6:9

*...and they shall **lothe themselves** for the evils which they have committed in all their abominations.*

Ezekiel 7:16

*But they that escape of them shall escape, and shall be on the mountains like doves of the valleys, all of them **mourning, every one for his iniquity**.*

Ezekiel 20:43

*And there shall ye remember your ways, and all your doings, wherein ye have been defiled; and ye shall **lothe yourselves** in your own sight for all your evils that ye have committed.*

Ezekiel 36:31

*Then shall ye remember your own evil ways, and your doings that were not good, and shall **lothe yourselves** in your own sight for your iniquities and for your abominations.*

Secondly, it brings us to accept our punishment. We're no longer attempting to escape anything. Maybe we do deserve some kind of punishment from this world. We accept it. We certainly deserve eternal punishment from God. We accept that too. If God wishes to throw us into hell-fire forever, so be it. Blessed be the name of the Lord if He should do so. Such an attitude toward ourselves can only make us all the more thankful for Jesus Christ and His salvation, who came for the very purpose of saving all those who come to Him from their just deserts.

Here are some examples of true repentance in the Bible:

Genesis 42:21

And they said one to another, We are verily guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the anguish of his soul, when he besought us, and we would not hear; therefore is this distress come upon us.

2 Samuel 24:17

And David spake unto the LORD when he saw the angel that smote the people, and said, Lo, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly: but these sheep, what have they done? let thine hand, I pray thee, be against me, and against my father's house.

Job 33:27

He looketh upon men, and if any say, I have sinned, and perverted that which was right, and it profited me not; he will deliver his soul from going into the pit, and his life shall see the light.

Jonah 1:12

And he said unto them, Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you: for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you.

This is where we should be. Finished with trying to change ourselves, we call upon on the Lord to do it for us. This is the true repentance which leads to eternal life.

1 John 5:11-13

And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life. These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God.

The Bondage of the Will

We seem to be able to make many free choices in our lives. For example, we can freely choose what colour socks to put on. But, thinking about it, is that really a “free” choice? We “decide” which colour clothes to wear out of pure vanity, which is sin. That’s not a “free” choice at all. There are always reasons for every “choice” we make, most of which are purely self-centred.

And there’s one thing for sure that none of us can choose. Man has not, and never has had, a free will with regards being pleasing to God. Man has only ever been in one of two states: either a slave to sin or a slave to righteousness.

1. Before Adam and Eve fell, they were given the command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This implies that, before they ate of it, they would not have had this knowledge of good and evil within themselves. They could only do good. They didn’t know what evil was. The idea of stealing or lying or being in any way displeasing to God never entered their thoughts. And they would not have had a conscience either, because it would have been unnecessary. The law was written on their hearts. Their will was only ever to do good. They were slaves to righteousness, as it were.

But God gave them one external law, the command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This external law was not part of the moral law, so God can never be accused of being the author of sin by giving them such an extra, external law:

Genesis 2:16,17

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

This is the only time God has ever given to man a law and some kind of freedom of choice as to whether he kept it or not. But even then, was it really a “free” choice? God knew all along that man wouldn’t

keep it. God giving just one external law and any kind of “free will choice” to man, in itself introduces the possibility of sin entering into the world, because the possibility of disobedience is always present:

Westminster Larger Catechism

Q. 24. What is sin?

A. Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, any law of God, given as a rule to the reasonable creature.

God knew full well that, given any kind of choice at all, it was inevitable that Adam and Eve would disobey. And we know this because God had already prepared a plan of salvation from sin from before the foundation of the world:

Matthew 25:34

Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world....

Luke 11:50

That the blood of all the prophets, which was shed from the foundation of the world, may be required of this generation....

John 17:24

Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world.

Ephesians 1:4

According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love....

Hebrews 4:3

For we which have believed do enter into rest, as he said, As I have sworn in my wrath, if they shall enter into my rest: although the works were finished from the foundation of the world.

1 Peter 1:20

Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you....

Revelation 13:8

And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.

Revelation 17:8

The beast that thou sawest was, and is not; and shall ascend out of the bottomless pit, and go into perdition: and they that dwell on the earth shall wonder, whose names were not written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, when they behold the beast that was, and is not, and yet is.

2. After Adam fell, we are all now as little gods, knowing good and evil:

Genesis 3:5

For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.

Genesis 3:22

And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil....

The law is no longer written on our hearts. God has now instead given us a conscience:

Genesis 3:7,8

And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons. And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden.

Our conscience can be pricked to know the law, and be condemned by it, but has no power to make us keep it:

Psalms 73:21

Thus my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins.

Acts 2:37

Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?

Acts 9:5

And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.

Our conscience can be seared:

1 Timothy 4:2

Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron....

Our conscience can be hardened or even taken away by God as a punishment for our sins:

Exodus 7:13,14

And he hardened Pharaoh's heart, that he hearkened not unto them; as the LORD had said. And the LORD said unto Moses, Pharaoh's heart is hardened, he refuseth to let the people go.

Exodus 7:22

And the magicians of Egypt did so with their enchantments: and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, neither did he hearken unto them; as the LORD had said.

Exodus 8:19

Then the magicians said unto Pharaoh, This is the finger of God: and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he hearkened not unto them; as the LORD had said.

Exodus 10:20

But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, so that he would not let the children of Israel go.

Exodus 10:27

But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let them go.

Exodus 11:10

And Moses and Aaron did all these wonders before Pharaoh: and the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, so that he would not let the children of Israel go out of his land.

Romans 1:24

Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves....

Romans 1:26

For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature....

Romans 1:28

And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient....

Romans 9:17,18

For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth.

Since Adam fell, we now only have God's moral law externally. It is no longer written on the heart. So none of us can now please God by nature, we are all born into this world slaves to sin:

Psalms 14:2,3

The LORD looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God. They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

Psalms 51:5

Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.

Ecclesiastes 7:29

Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions.

Romans 8:7,8

Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.

1 Corinthians 2:14

But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

Hebrews 11:6

But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

If, however, we are born again by the Spirit of God, we can be freed from this bondage and become slaves to righteousness again. That is the good news of the gospel. In the following passage the word “servant” in all cases is “*doulos*” which means “*slave*”:

Romans 6:16-23

Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness? But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness. I speak after the manner of men because of the infirmity of your flesh: for as ye have yielded your members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity; even so now yield your members servants to righteousness unto holiness. For when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness. What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed? for the end of those things is death. But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

God’s moral law is now given to us externally, not to see whether we would keep it or not, but as a schoolmaster to show us our inability to keep it and to bring us to Christ:

Galatians 3:24,25

Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.

When we are born again by the Spirit of God, our hearts are completely changed:

2 Corinthians 5:17

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

Galatians 6:15

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.

We now love God's law:

Psalm 119:97

O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day.

John 8:34-36

Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. And the servant abideth not in the house for ever: but the Son abideth ever. If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.

Romans 8:5

For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit.

Romans 8:14,15

For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.

And we now have God's moral law written on our hearts again, just as Adam and Eve had before they fell:

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD: But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

But the Christian still sins. Despite the fact that the law is now written on our hearts, we still remain as little gods, knowing good and evil. We are still in possession of our fallen nature, and we can never get rid of that in this life. But the law written on our hearts now makes us hate the evil. That's the difference:

Psalm 97:10

Ye that love the LORD, hate evil: he preserveth the souls of his saints; he delivereth them out of the hand of the wicked.

Proverbs 8:13

The fear of the LORD is to hate evil: pride, and arrogancy, and the evil way, and the froward mouth, do I hate.

Amos 5:15

Hate the evil, and love the good, and establish judgment in the gate: it may be that the LORD God of hosts will be gracious unto the remnant of Joseph.

There is now a battle going on within the Christian which wasn't there before. We are slaves to sin in our sinful bodies, and can't help sinning; but this battles against our minds which are slaves to righteousness, which makes us hate being like this:

Romans 7:14-25

For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.

2 Peter 2:8

For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds....

3. When Christ came into this world, He was sinless. He was like Adam before he fell. He had the law written on His heart, and could not sin, or even think about sinning:

Psalm 40:7,8

Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart.

Christ had a separate will from the Father, which proves that He went to the cross voluntarily:

John 10:17,18

Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father.

Matthew 26:39,42

And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.... He went away again the second time, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done.

But He never thought for a moment about disobeying, even when tempted by the devil:

Matthew 4:3-10

And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God. Again, the

devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.

4. Christians have the law written on their hearts, and also have a conscience to guide them:

Romans 2:14,15

*For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience **also** bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another....*

This verse is not speaking about all Gentiles, but only those who “do by nature the things contained in the law”, i.e. believers. This is confirmed by the word “also.” Believers have the law written on their hearts and *also* a conscience. Adam, before he fell, only had the law written on his heart, a conscience wasn’t necessary for him. Unbelievers only have a conscience and not the law written on their hearts.

5. When Christians get to heaven they shall finally be free from their sinful natures, and will not be able to sin any more:

1 John 3:2

Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.

Even those in hell will not be able to sin any more:

Philippians 2:10,11

That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

But, unlike Christians, they’ll be hating every minute of it:

Luke 16:23,24

And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.

Everlasting Burnings

Isaiah 33:14

The sinners in Zion are afraid; fearfulness hath surprised the hypocrites. Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?

Probably the most unpalatable doctrine we ever have to come to terms with in the Christian life is the doctrine of hell-fire. The usual question that everybody asks – Christians and non-Christians alike – is this: How can a God of love send anyone to eternal conscious torment in body and soul in hell fire for ever and ever? The two don't seem to be compatible.

Well, we can explain that not only is God a God of love, but He is also a God of justice, and He hates sin with a perfect hatred:

Psalms 11:5-7

The LORD trieth the righteous: but the wicked and him that loveth violence his soul hateth. Upon the wicked he shall rain snares, fire and brimstone, and an horrible tempest: this shall be the portion of their cup. For the righteous LORD loveth righteousness; his countenance doth behold the upright.

Psalms 5:4-6

For thou art not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness: neither shall evil dwell with thee. The foolish shall not stand in thy sight: thou hatest all workers of iniquity. Thou shalt destroy them that speak leasing: the LORD will abhor the bloody and deceitful man.

In fact, sometimes it's God's mercy we have a problem with, and not His justice:

Habakkuk 1:13

Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?

Jonah 3:10 - 4:1

And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry.

So, how can we bring these two aspects of God's character together?
Only in Jesus Christ:

Romans 3:26

To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.

Christians have experienced at first hand the love of God. He has revealed Himself to them personally in their hearts as the Saviour who has saved them from what their sins deserve. So, it's understandable that the concept of God being anything other than loving can appear at first glance to be a problem.

Men have made up many extra-biblical ideas as to what happens after death. Some have invented a place called purgatory. Like hell, it's a place of torment as a punishment for sin, but it doesn't last for ever, and we'll all get out eventually. That's not right. We have to face the fact that the Bible describes hell-fire as eternal:

2 Thessalonians 1:9

*Who shall be punished with **everlasting** destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power...*

Matthew 18:8

*Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into **everlasting** fire.*

Matthew 25:41

*Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into **everlasting** fire, prepared for the devil and his angels...*

Mark 9:44 (also v.46, v.48)

*Where their worm **dieth not**, and the fire is **not quenched**.*

Revelation 14:11

*And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up **for ever and ever**: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name.*

Many try to argue that this idea of everlasting torment was never in the Old Testament. But it is:

Deuteronomy 32:22

For a fire is kindled in mine anger, and shall burn unto the lowest hell, and shall consume the earth with her increase, and set on fire the foundations of the mountains.

Psalms 21:9

Thou shalt make them as a fiery oven in the time of thine anger: the LORD shall swallow them up in his wrath, and the fire shall devour them.

Isaiah 1:31

*And the strong shall be as tow, and the maker of it as a spark, and they shall both burn together, and **none shall quench them.***

Isaiah 33:14

*The sinners in Zion are afraid; fearfulness hath surprised the hypocrites. Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with **everlasting burnings?***

Isaiah 66:24

*And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcases of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm **shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched**; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh.*

Jeremiah 4:4

*Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, and take away the foreskins of your heart, ye men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem: lest my fury come forth like fire, and **burn that none can quench it**, because of the evil of your doings.*

Daniel 12:2

*And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and **everlasting contempt.***

Malachi 4:1

For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch.

Another way of trying to deal with this seeming problem is to say that those who don't embrace Jesus Christ as their Saviour are simply annihilated, snuffed out. They quote verses, such as:

John 3:16

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

There you are, they say. They "perish," in other words, they just cease to exist. But in order for this idea to work, they have to explain away all the references to eternal fire, which Christ quite clearly taught. They would argue that He was referring to the valley of Hinnom, just outside Jerusalem, which was the rubbish tip and continually burns. But His references have absolutely nothing to do with the city of Jerusalem:

Luke 16:23,24

And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.

In any case, the Bible tells us that the wicked are not simply destroyed after death. All of us have eternal souls which will continue on for ever, whether we're Christians or not. There is going to be a resurrection of the unjust as well as the just:

John 5:28,29

...the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.

Acts 24:15

And have hope toward God, which they themselves also allow, that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust.

What is the point of preaching the gospel, if the alternative to being in heaven with Christ, is simply annihilation? Sinners would be quite happy with nothing after death. That's what most of them try to convince themselves of anyway, so they can carry on in their sin:

1 Corinthians 15:32

If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not? let us eat and drink; for to morrow we die.

Thinking they'll never be punished in any way after death means that they can do what they like. If they get caught for doing something wrong in this world, they can always evade men's punishment by committing suicide. And by doing so, they think they'll be escaping punishment altogether. Except they won't escape, because there most surely is a judgment after death, and it will be a righteous judgment with a just punishment:

Genesis 18:25

....Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?

The main problem we have here is the idea of a God of love tormenting people for ever. We can't fathom that. So we need to ascertain where this torment actually originates.

Is it from the devil? No. The medieval church has given us a very distorted caricature of hell-fire. They depicted it as a place of flames with the devil in charge, demons running riot and sinners being poked back into the fire with pitchforks if they ever attempted to escape. The devil isn't in charge of hell, God is. The devil and his minions are it's most notorious inmates:

Matthew 25:41

Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels....

Revelation 20:10

And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

So, is it God that deliberately stokes the fire and fans the flames? No. I don't think hell-fire is an external flame at all.

Many people think that they'd quite like to go to hell, because they don't like the idea of heaven. They think that in hell they'll see all their mates again and be able to carry on sinning with them for ever. But it's not like that. Do we really think God has created a place in eternity where people can sin forever? That's just what they want. They'd look forward to going to a place like that. God has created this temporary world, where He allows people to sin for a short time. And even then, He allows sin in a very limited way by only bringing to pass what He purposes to turn to His own glory in the end. In eternity, it can't be anything like this. Nowhere in eternity will men be able to carry on sinning. That surely cannot be. Eternity is altogether clean and holy:

Isaiah 57:15

For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.

This might sound odd, but I suggest that hell is actually quite a nice environment. It's a place where nobody will be able to sin. And it's a place where everybody will be bowing the knee to Jesus Christ:

Philippians 2:9-11

*Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and **things under the earth**; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Zephaniah 2:11

The LORD will be terrible unto them: for he will famish all the gods of the earth; and men shall worship him, every one from his place, even all the isles of the heathen.

The only thing that will ruin hell are the people that God populates it with.

Christians will be going to an identical place after death. We too won't be able to sin any more and will also be bowing the knee to Christ. But

Christians are going to love it there, whereas those in hell will be hating every minute of it.

So, where does the torment come from? Within themselves. After death, God merely puts them in the same kind of environment as the Christian. So He does nothing wrong. He's not stoking any fire. But they'll hate it and we'll love it. And those in hell will know it's their own fault that they're in that predicament. They won't be shaking their fist in God's face saying, "I hate you God. It's your fault I'm here." No. They'll know exactly whose fault it is. They'll only have themselves to blame.

There are other passages in Scripture which have nothing to do with hell-fire, but which describe a burning as coming from within:

The Word of God in a believer's heart is likened to a burning:

Luke 24:32

And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?

Jeremiah 20:9

Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay.

Unfulfilled desires before marriage are likened to a burning:

1 Corinthians 7:9

But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn.

So, burning is a familiar term to describe something emanating from within ourselves. It doesn't necessarily depict anything external, such as a flame or punishment inflicted from the outside. The burning, fire-like quality, in hell doesn't come from God lighting a fire to deliberately torment anybody. It originates entirely from within those who go there.

Although the environments of heaven and hell are identical, they are also very separate. A great gulf has been fixed between the two:

Luke 16:26

And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence.

The wicked, who persecuted the Christians in this world, will never be able to reach them in the next. Believers will be eternally blissful in heaven:

Revelation 21:27

And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Revelation 21:4

And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

So, God isn't tormenting anyone in hell, those there are tormenting themselves. That's the just punishment they have brought upon themselves. Yet still some people think this a bit too harsh. And that's caused many to believe that there will be a "second chance" to hear the gospel in the next world, especially for those who didn't have the "chance" to hear it here. And they use verses like these:

1 Peter 3:18-20

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water.

1 Peter 4:6

For for this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.

They claim that, in these verses, Christ is preaching to those in hell to give them a "second chance" to be saved. But that's not so. In any case, if that was what these verses were teaching, it undermines all

missionary work. If Christ is going to be preaching the gospel in the next world anyway, I'm not going to preach to anybody at all here. He'll do a far better job than I ever could. I'll just leave it to Him. No. These verses teach that when Noah, and others throughout history, preached – to those who are now long since dead – it was Christ they were preaching. Before Christ actually came to earth, the gospel was exactly the same as it is now. The call, then, was to put their trust in a Saviour that was to come. Now, the call is to put our trust in a Saviour that has been, and we know exactly who He is:

1 Corinthians 10:1-4

Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; And did all eat the same spiritual meat; And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ.

Hebrews 4:2

For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.

So there is only one “chance” to hear the gospel, and that is while we’re in this world:

2 Corinthians 6:2

For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

Hebrews 9:27

it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment

Those to whom the gospel never comes, God knows that they would never have believed anyway. God sends His missionaries where He sends them. He makes the best use of His resources:

Acts 16:6,7

Now when they had gone throughout Phrygia and the region of Galatia, and were forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia, After they were come to Mysia, they assayed to go into Bithynia: but the Spirit suffered them not.

Wherever we are sent, it most likely means that there will be some of His people to gather in. Our job is simply to make sure we are where God wants us to be.

Those in hell are there because they chose the lifestyle they chose while they were in this world. It's their own fault. But we who get to heaven, will only be there by the sheer grace of God. Because, we have to admit, if left to ourselves, we'd also have chosen the lifestyle of the wicked.

But when God comes into our lives, He changes our hearts so we no longer desire that evil way we were born into and naturally grew up in. We are given a new heart and a new spirit, so instead of loving sin and hating God, we now hate sin and love God. A complete change. And that fits us perfectly for the next world, which we will then enjoy to all eternity.

That does mean we'll now have trials and tribulations in this world, because we'll realise how full of sin it really is. But that'll only be for a short time, and it will be all worthwhile in the end:

John 12:25

He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.

2 Corinthians 4:17,18

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.

It is therefore imperative that every one of us has our heart changed by the Lord, here in this world, so that after we die, we'd fit into and love the beautiful place the Lord has prepared for all of us in eternity. Once there, change will no longer be possible.

Ezekiel 18:31

Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel?

More Than Conquerors

We, as Christians, have been given the most wonderful news anyone could possibly imagine. Our sins have been forgiven by God, and we'll no longer be punished for them:

Romans 8:1

There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

If we don't think that's good news, just think of all those sins we've committed in the past. Those selfish decisions we've made. Those selfish actions. Things we can't undo. They've happened. We can't do anything about the consequences now, it's too late. Yet:

John 3:17

God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

If we come to Jesus Christ, put our trust in Him for our salvation personally, stop trusting in ourselves for anything, then we too can know for sure in our hearts the forgiveness of sins for ourselves. That's good news. And before we think that means that now we've been forgiven we can sin all we like and still get to heaven, the Lord changes our hearts so we just wouldn't think that way any more.

But no matter how many times we're told that this good news really is true for us, we still find it difficult to believe. In Romans 8:31-39 we've got a remarkable list of every possible objection we could ever think of, that might get in the way of us being assured of our salvation and of the love of Christ for us:

[31] What shall we then say to these things?

The "*things*" here, refer to everything previously mentioned in chapter 8. And the first "thing" we must acknowledge is the reality that, by nature, no matter how hard we try, we simply cannot please God:

Romans 8:7-8

Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.

That's the state we're all born into, and we need to accept that. We shouldn't hide from it. But all is not lost. If we've come to the Saviour God has sent into the world, our Lord Jesus Christ, we've been given the Holy Spirit to dwell in us, to change us, and to help us begin to live a life that will be pleasing to God:

Romans 8:9,10

But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his. And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

And the Holy Spirit even prays for us when we don't know what to pray for ourselves:

Romans 8:26,27

Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God.

Prayer can only work because God is in control of all things. If that wasn't true, we could argue God might want to help us, but He couldn't do anything about it. That's not God:

Romans 8:28

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

Because of these things, we can be confident every aspect of our salvation is assured:

Romans 8:30

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.

So, what shall we say to these things? What is there that could possibly still concern us?

If God be for us, who can be against us?

If God is in control of all things, and He has set His love upon us, then nothing and nobody can be against us. But what about when things, in our mind, “go wrong”? Earthquakes, famines, illnesses, pandemics, the loss of loved ones. These things occur, but it doesn’t mean God has lost control. Joseph was sold by his brethren. He was imprisoned unjustly for 3 years. But he became a leader in Egypt, and saved Israel and Egypt from famine. He said to his brethren afterwards:

Genesis 50:20

But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.

God works through our difficulties, and works them all together for our good. And what was the greatest thing the Lord has ever done in the history of the world?

[32] 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?

God’s own Son was put to death by wicked men. But it was all in God’s plan:

Acts 2:23

Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain....

Men hated Christ so much, they put Him to death. That was a wicked act, and those who were responsible will be punished eternally for it, unless they repented before they died. They had absolutely no idea that

their wicked actions were going to be used by God to redound to His glory. Without Christ's death on the cross, there would be no salvation for any of His people:

John 3:16

God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

If the most wicked act to have ever occurred on earth was turned around for good by the Lord, how much more shall He not freely give us all things? Paul is arguing from the greater to the lesser. If He gave such a precious gift as His only Son to such undeserving creatures as we are, all other things are so much smaller. Of course He'll give them to us. The "*all things*" being, not everything we want, but everything we need:

2 Peter 1:3

*According as his divine power hath given unto us **all things that pertain unto life and godliness**, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue....*

[33] Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth.

Even though we know we've now passed from death to life, we still sin, and our continued sinning can be a genuine concern to us. We read verses in Scripture such as:

1 John 3:6

Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him.

And this can make us wonder if we're one of the Lord's people at all, because we do sin. But the writer, John, also said this, earlier in the same letter:

1 John 1:8,9

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

So, John can't be saying Christians don't sin any more. What he is saying is that **if we abide in Him**, we won't sin. To the extent we abide in Him, we don't sin, but to the extent we rather follow our old selfish desires, yes, we do certainly sin. But we have an advocate with the Father:

1 John 2:1,2

....these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins....

So, because we continue to sin, we might think the Father can still bring charges against us. And Satan, the accuser of the brethren, knows this and tries to take full advantage of it. But, "*it is God that justifieth.*" Nobody, not even Satan, can lay any more charges against us because we've been freely forgiven by the One who matters, the Lord of Glory.

[34] Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.

There are three things here: Christ's death, His resurrection and His intercession.

We've been reconciled to God by Christ's death, so nobody can condemn us any more:

Romans 8:1

There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

His resurrection is proof of this. Without the resurrection, we wouldn't know whether God the Father had accepted Christ's atoning sacrifice or not. We'd still be in the dark.

And He “*maketh intercession for us.*”

We’ve already seen that the Spirit makes intercession to the Father for us:

Romans 8:26

Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities; for we know not what we should pray for as we ought; but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.

We’re told here that Christ also makes intercession to the Father for us:

Hebrews 7:25

Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.

So, we’ve got the whole Trinity involved in our upkeep. That’s remarkable. Why should a holy God, Creator of the universe, Lord of heaven and earth, be bothered with you and me? Jesus Christ the Son and the Holy Spirit both know what we need more than we do ourselves, and both pray to the Father on our behalf. What more could we want? But what we must do is accept the Father’s will, rather than seeking our own will all the time.

[35] Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

This is another rhetorical question, the answer is nobody. Christ died for His people. If only one person was going to be saved, He’d still have gone to the cross for them.

1 John 3:1

Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not.

And then we’ve got a list of other things which we may think could separate us from Him:

....shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

And the answer again is that neither can any of these separate us from the love of Christ to us. Some of these refer to what we call “natural disasters,” such as famine. Others are more sinister – cruelties man would inflict on his fellow man. And we are called to be patient in tribulation, whether “natural” or not.

Most people won't understand why anyone would be patient in any of these unpleasant situations, when they certainly wouldn't be. They'll try to explain Christians away using their own ideas. They'll think we've just got some psychological problem, or we've been educated badly or brainwashed. And we've got to put up, not only with the persecutions, but also with these false accusations against us. The apostle Paul was told that he was mad by the Roman governor Festus. But Paul replied gently:

Acts 26:25

But he said, I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness.

Often, when people come across something they don't understand, they will react violently against it. Maybe we'll end up in prison unjustly, like Joseph, Paul, Silas and many others. Maybe we'll be killed, like Stephen, or our Saviour Himself. Whatever anyone does to us, our duty is to glorify God. We don't look for persecution, but if the Lord sees fit to send it, He'll also send grace to endure it:

1 Corinthians 10:13

There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.

[36] As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.

This is a quote from Psalm 44:22. It is inevitable that we are going to be treated unfairly. Welcome to the Christian life. We don't look for it,

but the Lord often takes His people through the valley of the shadow of death, as the way He wants us to glorify Him.

We know we ought to glorify God in our good works:

Matthew 5:16

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

But we should also be prepared to glorify God in our sufferings too:

1 Peter 4:16

Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.

[37] Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.

Whatever happens to us, whether pleasant or not, nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. Still difficult to believe?

In the seven letters to the churches in Asia, to every one of them, God's promises were given to the individuals within each church who overcome:

Revelation 2:7

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh....

That doesn't mean we must make an effort ourselves to overcome all obstacles. Because we can't do it. We can't even forsake one sin, let alone anything else. No, but through Jesus Christ, we are more than conquerors. The only way we can overcome any obstacle, including the biggest one of all, our own sin, is by asking Jesus Christ to do it for us. We can't trust in self, that would be a disaster. But Christ alone can conquer all things.

And then, if that wasn't enough, we've got another list of possible objections:

[38] For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, [39] 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.

Can you spot the difference between this list and the previous list in v.35? The previous list contained things that could happen to us in this world. But here, this list goes beyond this world:

“Death” can’t separate us from the love of God in Christ. We’re told not to fear the death of the body:

Matthew 10:28

And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

“angels, nor principalities, nor powers.” Supernatural beings can’t separate us from the love of Christ. Not even Satan.

We’re not told much about spiritual beings in the Bible, and that’s a good thing, otherwise we might start worshipping them or taking an unhealthy interest in them. But we are told about their existence. We’re told that angels serve God’s people, although some fell:

Hebrews 1:14

Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?

But those who fell are reserved in chains for judgment:

Jude 1:6

And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, be hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day.

And we’re told about the **“principalities and powers”** that are mustered against us:

Ephesians 6:12-13

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

But we're also told that Christ has already defeated these on the cross:

Colossians 2:15

And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it.

“nor things present, nor things to come.” If we're worried about anything now or in future, we can never be separated from Christ. We can't lose our salvation. It's secure forever:

Philippians 1:6

Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ....

John 10:27,28

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.

“Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature.” “Any other creature” includes our own worst enemy, ourselves.

What's missed out in this list? Either in this physical world or in the spiritual realm? Nothing, anywhere “*shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”

The only objection I can think of now is that we might say, “Maybe I'm not one of the Lord's people after all.” If that was the case, yes, I agree, none of these promises would apply to us. These promises are only for Christians. So we need to examine ourselves:

2 Corinthians 13:5

Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?

Philippians 2:12,13

....work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.

2 Peter 1:10

Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall....

Have we been changed in the heart? Do we no longer chase after the things we used to? Do we love God? Do we hate sin, especially our own continued sinning? That didn't bother us before. Do we love the Lord Jesus Christ more than anything for what He has done for us? When we look back at our lives, can we see the countless occasions when the Lord has truly helped us? Only each one of us as individuals can answer these questions. If the answer is "No," or "I'm not sure," call on Him in prayer. He will make everything clear. He is the only One we have who is able to give us true assurance. And He is willing to save all who come to Him:

John 6:37

All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.

And if we know that we are His, then all these promises are ours. Why do we still think they're not? Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

II

The Christian Life

My Soul is Exceeding Sorrowful, Even Unto Death

The longer I live the Christian life, the more I am utterly convinced that not one of us is anywhere near truly understanding what it's really all about.

We Christians love Christ, and we want in our hearts to follow Him more than anything else. With the Lord's help, we try our best to do His will in everything He gives us to do. And that's good. But in reality, we're still so far short of what we ought to be. And that's because we don't fully understand about the Christian life being one of complete sacrifice:

Romans 12:1

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

The life of Christ is at least our example in this. He spent His entire life as one of complete sacrifice. At the age of twelve, he's not playing with all the other children of His age. He's in the Temple hearing the doctors and asking them questions. And in His adult life, while He did go to parties – weddings and other feasts – He's not the usual party animal. He wasn't (God forbid) laughing, eating and drinking, like everybody else. He always had a far more serious message to give to the people.

And towards the end of His life, He had His most solemn, and difficult, time of all. In Gethsemane, He said:

Matthew 26:38

My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death.

Luke tells us that He even sweat great drops of blood there:

Luke 22:44

And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.

And we are told that, in His human nature at least, the Lord of Glory even needed an angel to strengthen Him:

Luke 22:43

And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him.

None of this was sin. He was sinless. But the fact that God manifest in the flesh suffered and therefore – dare I say it – found these things so difficult, proves to us how different the Christian life is to the natural desires and instincts that we all have. The Christian life involves serving God and serving others. We are no longer to serve ourselves any more. Self-abasement is not a popular doctrine today, but it's the Christian way.

The Bible tells us that Christ was made perfect through sufferings:

Hebrews 2:10

For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.

Of course, He was always perfect. What is meant here is that in His human nature He had to undergo a whole life of suffering, simply in order to live the perfect life that He lived. He had to continually deny Himself. And that culminated in Him eventually going to the cross, and laying down His life for His friends.

And we're called to live such a life ourselves. In fact, we've got it a lot easier. We're not called to suffer anything like as much as He did. He took upon Himself the sins of all His people on the cross. We will never be able to enter into that. And thankfully we don't have to. But we all do have our own little crosses to carry, whatever the Lord gives us. And they will never be more than we can bear:

1 Corinthians 10:13

There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.

So, once we begin to follow Christ, our life becomes a life of difficulty, and therefore suffering. We are no longer living for ourselves, our own comforts, any more. Instead, we are called to follow Him, which by definition means suffering for His sake:

Philippians 1:29

For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake.

1 Peter 2:21-23

For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously.

And we're not to think it strange that we are called to a life of suffering either. We're called to it and must, with the Lord's help of course, endure it:

1 Peter 4:12,13

Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.

And if even our sinless Saviour needed the help of an angel to strengthen Him, how much more do we sinful creatures need the Lord to strengthen us as we pass through this great tribulation:

John 16:33

In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.

At the same time as we are called to present our bodies a living sacrifice, we're also called to count the cost:

Luke 14:27,28,31-33

Whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? Lest haply, after he hath laid the

foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish.... Or what king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is yet a great way off, he sendeth an ambassage, and desireth conditions of peace. So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple.

But I don't think we can count the cost. If we really knew how much we would have to suffer for Christ in the Christian life, none of us would ever begin to choose to follow Him at all. I don't think this parable is about counting the cost in order to make a decision whether to follow Christ or not. It's about realising that it is too much for us, we really can't do it, and so sending "an ambassage" and desiring "conditions of peace" (v.32). In other words, of coming to an end of loving our own lives, realising living for ourselves is vain and empty, and crying to God for mercy. Crying to Him to take over our lives so we can use them for His purposes, and not ours any more.

And then we find that, even when we've sacrificed everything, we are told we don't even get a reward for it. We've only done our reasonable service:

Luke 17:10

When ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.

So the Christian life is a life of absolute sacrifice, constantly crying to God for help because we can't live it ourselves. And that inevitably means suffering. Why would anyone want that?

But once we see the emptiness of living for ourselves, our own pleasures, our own glory, who would want anything else?

Ground to Powder

Matthew 21:44, Luke 20:18

And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.

This statement of Christ's is mentioned twice in the Bible, in parallel passages in Matthew and Luke's gospels. In both accounts it comes straight after the parable of the householder who plants a vineyard then goes away for a long time. Occasionally he would send a servant to check on the vineyard, but the husbandmen would always beat them and send them away. Finally he sends his son whom they put to death. This is a parable, of course, about the Jews' dealings with all the prophets throughout their history and then finally with Christ. After telling this parable, Christ quoted from Psalm 118:22,23:

Matthew 21:42,43

Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes? Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.

The Jews had so many privileges. They were miraculously saved from slavery in Egypt by Moses, taken through a parted Red Sea, and kept for forty years in the wilderness before being taken by Joshua into a fertile land on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea. On the way they were given the Law of God written on tables of stone. They were given the Scriptures. They were sent the prophets. And finally, the greatest privilege of all, through them the Saviour of the world was to be born in due time.

But they didn't recognise Him. And they despised the prophets and all the other means of God's intervention. Not only that, but throughout their history, they neglected to keep the very Law that God had given them. The Bible chronicles all of this.

All along they thought that their pedigree would be enough to save them. How proud!

John 8:39

They answered and said unto him, Abraham is our father. Jesus saith unto them, If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham.

I am not getting at the Jews for this. If God had chosen any other nation to bestow upon them His special privileges, they would have done exactly the same thing. It is the pride of man that is the problem.

1 John 2:16

For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.

And actually, the more we look into this subject, the more dominant a theme pride is found to be in Scripture.

Genesis 6:4

There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown.

In the very beginning of history, after the fall of Adam, and Cain murdering Abel, we come across this brief mention of believers marrying unbelievers. The children they produced became “*men of renown.*” i.e. men full of themselves and their own status in the world. God calls this “*wickedness*”:

Genesis 6:5

And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

Later on, Job wanted to dispute with God as to why many unpleasant and painful things had come upon him, for what he thought was no reason. But when God finally answered, He challenged Job:

Job 40:11-14

Cast abroad the rage of thy wrath: and behold every one that is proud, and abase him. Look on every one that is proud, and bring him low; and tread down the wicked in their place. Hide them in the dust together; and bind their faces in secret. Then will I also confess unto thee that thine own right hand can save thee.

And even King Nebuchadnezzar came to discover how the Lord was working:

Daniel 4:37

Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment: and those that walk in pride he is able to abase.

God's primary work in the world is to abase all those that walk in pride. Only God can do this. Man is so proud, he is totally incapable of bringing himself down. Yet that is exactly what the Lord requires of him:

1 Samuel 2:3

Talk no more so exceeding proudly; let not arrogancy come out of your mouth: for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed.

We don't know much about the fall of Satan, but we do know that he must have fallen before man fell, because it was an already fallen serpent that met Eve in the Garden of Eden to tempt her. There are two passages in Scripture that seem to give us some understanding of Satan's fall. The first is in Isaiah, and is primarily about the fall of the king of Babylon. The second is in Ezekiel, and is primarily about the fall of the king of Tyre:

Isaiah 14:13-15

For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit.

Ezekiel 28:13-15

Thou hast been in Eden the garden of God; every precious stone was thy covering, the sardius, topaz, and the diamond, the beryl, the onyx, and the jasper, the sapphire, the emerald, and the carbuncle, and gold: the workmanship of thy tabrets and of thy pipes was prepared in thee in the day that thou wast created. Thou art the anointed cherub that covereth; and I have set thee so: thou wast upon the holy mountain of God; thou hast walked up and down in the midst of the stones of fire. Thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created, till iniquity was found in thee.

If we apply these passages to the fall of Satan, we see that pride was the first sin. Satan wanted to be greater than God. If we apply these passages to the fall of the relevant kings, we see that pride is the predominant sin in man, the sin from which all other sins proceed.

Given this fundamental problem with fallen human nature, we begin to see something of God's plan for the human race. It is to completely break the pride of man in all its shapes and forms.

Isaiah 2:11,12

The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the LORD alone shall be exalted in that day. For the day of the LORD of hosts shall be upon every one that is proud and lofty, and upon every one that is lifted up; and he shall be brought low.

This is what the Lord is doing with every one of us. His ultimate aim is to completely destroy our pride and to make sure that, in the end, God alone is exalted:

1 Corinthians 1:29

That no flesh should glory in his presence.

And how does He do this? God has provided a “stone.” It's mentioned in Psalm 118:

Psalm 118:22

The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner.

Notice here that the “stone” that is going to be rejected by some, is the very same “stone” that will be embraced by others as their head corner stone. Of course this refers to Jesus Christ, who is at the same time a saviour of life to those who are going to be saved, and a saviour of death to those who reject Him:

2 Corinthians 2:15,16

For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life.

Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation:

Acts 4:12

Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.

To those who will be saved, He is precious, but to those who will reject Him, He is a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence:

1 Peter 2:7,8

Unto you therefore which believe he is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner, and a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed.

Let's look at our text again:

Matthew 21:44, Luke 20:18

And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.

When I first came across this statement, I thought that the ones who fall on the stone were true believers, because it is good for us to be broken. In contrast, the ones ground to powder are the unbelievers, because they will be destroyed. But I've now completely changed my mind. I now realise that exactly the opposite is the case.

I would suggest that when it says "*whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken,*" it is talking about all those who stumble at the "*rock of offence,*" the disobedient, those who do not come to the Saviour. They will live their lives full of their own importance, full of their own pride in themselves, but in the end they will fall on the stumbling stone of Christ and be broken by the Lord.

On the other hand, those who will have the stone fall on them, to be ground to powder, these are true believers. We should want Christ to fall on us. All right, put it another way – we should want the Holy Spirit to fall on us. Does that sound better? We should want an end of ourselves, our selfish desires and lusts. We, as true believers, should want our pride to be ground to powder. And that is exactly what Christ does in our sanctification.

When we come to the Lord, the rock of our pride is dealt a fatal blow. It has been cracked. No longer will it reign supreme. But there is still so much pride within us that needs to be dealt with. For the rest of our lives, we need to take the fragments of remaining pride and have them ground and ground and ground by Christ, until all that is left is powder.

Moses ground the golden calf to powder:

Exodus 32:20

And he took the calf which they had made, and burnt it in the fire, and ground it to powder, and straved it upon the water, and made the children of Israel drink of it.

This is what we should do with all false idols and delusions of grandeur in our life.

King Josiah was the only king of Judah who actually managed to get rid of the idols in the land, and he ground them to powder so that absolutely nothing remained:

2 Kings 23:6

And he brought out the grove from the house of the LORD, without Jerusalem, unto the brook Kidron, and burned it at the brook Kidron, and stamped it small to powder, and cast the powder thereof upon the graves of the children of the people.

2 Kings 23:15

Moreover the altar that was at Betbel, and the high place which Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin, had made, both that altar and the high place he brake down, and burned the high place, and stamped it small to powder, and burned the grove.

2 Chronicles 34:7

And when he had broken down the altars and the groves, and had beaten the graven images into powder, and cut down all the idols throughout all the land of Israel, he returned to Jerusalem.

And Isaiah compared the iniquity of Judah to chalkstones, not granite. Stones that can be beaten down and crushed until there is only powder left:

Isaiah 27:9

By this therefore shall the iniquity of Jacob be purged; and this is all the fruit to take away his sin; when he maketh all the stones of the altar as chalkstones that are beaten in sunder, the groves and images shall not stand up.

The Christian's calling is to renounce self, abase self, and be finished with self. Self must be ground to powder, so that eventually God alone will be glorified in our lives:

Matthew 23:12

And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.

1 Peter 5:6

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time.

Isaiah 40:4,5

Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: and the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.

Luke 9:23,24

And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it.

This is the Christian life. It is totally the opposite from the "it's all about me" philosophy of the world. And God will not finish dealing with us until the last vestiges of pride have been completely exterminated.

That's why we receive trials in our lives. That's why God has put us all in decaying bodies that eventually die. Only on a death-bed are we weak and humbled enough for God. Let us therefore live our lives as though we were always on our death-beds.

2 Corinthians 1:9

But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God.

2 Corinthians 4:7-11

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh.

Romans 6:6,7,11

Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin.... reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

We are finished with self. Living for God alone is the Christian's calling.

2 Corinthians 12:9,10

My strength is made perfect in weakness.... For when I am weak, then am I strong.

Only Evil Continually

Genesis 6:5

And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

When we're young, we think far too highly of the human race and just can't see how wicked and evil human beings really are. Even if we've experienced their true nature in some way, for example, by being bullied at school, or taken advantage of, or sexually assaulted, or cheated, or been let down so many times by them, we still have this ridiculous idea that, underneath everything, the human heart is essentially good.

And even when we become a Christian, we still don't fully understand the truth about human nature straight away either. Nearly all newly converted Christians have a problem with believing the Biblical doctrine of hell-fire for eternity. This, the Bible tells us, is the place where we all deserve to go:

Mark 9:43

And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched.

Matthew 25:41,46

Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.... And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.

An unbeliever can never believe the truth that he deserves eternal conscious torment in hell-fire for ever. He just laughs at the concept. He is too proud in himself to ever be able to acknowledge that he, personally, deserves to go to a place like that.

And new Christians can also have a similar problem. Many would rather it not be mentioned in the church. They just want to talk about the love of God. Any suggestion that hell is real, they find uncomfortable.

So, not surprisingly, there's a whole false gospel out there in the churches today, that Satan has invented especially to cater for these people. This false gospel is built around, not only avoiding the mention of such a place altogether, but not even mentioning anything about our sinful nature, and the fact that without Christ we're utterly lost. And it's very attractive to many people. It doesn't involve thinking about our sin and having a need for any kind of repentance. We're just told to accept Christ as our Saviour. That's it. Now we're a believer. We must now realise Jesus Christ dealt with sin a long time ago, so we're not to let sin bother us any more. Just think good thoughts about ourselves. We are somebody. We're worth something. This is nothing more than modern secular humanistic psychology with a religious veneer. It's not Christianity at all. It's nonsense. We're sinners. We need salvation, or we justly perish everlastingly. And even after we've come to Christ, there is a need to continually repent of our sin:

Matthew 6:12

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

It's only as we mature in the faith and get closer to Christ, that we see more and more of the filthiness we have inside ourselves. The Holy Spirit is holy, like a shining light picking out all the dirt we never saw before. Growing in the faith involves recognising more and more how sinful we really are, and coming to the realisation that the doctrine of hell-fire is actually true, because it begins to dawn on us that that's exactly the place where I, myself, personally, deserve to go.

We can only really come to an understanding of the true nature of man, by coming to an understanding of the true nature of ourselves. Once we see ourselves for what we really are, we can see others for what they really are. And if everybody else is as bad as we are, then we must be extremely careful whenever we deal with people. Christ tells us:

Matthew 10:16

Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.

John 2:24-25

But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men, And needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man.

We ourselves should be kind, harmless and genuine in everything we do, and by the Lord's grace alone we can do that. But we should always be aware that hardly anyone will treat us in the same way. If we try to be genuinely kind to a vast majority of people, we will always be taken advantage of. Oh yes, they may put on an outward show of kindness themselves, and we can so easily be fooled by that. But underneath everything, they are only ever after what they can get out of us for themselves:

Psalm 146:3

Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help.

Micah 7:5

Trust ye not in a friend, put ye not confidence in a guide: keep the doors of thy mouth from her that lieth in thy bosom.

We should know this already, because we used to be just like that ourselves before we became a Christian.

And not only that, but so many of these wretched creatures have the uncanny ability to attract others and get them to do exactly what they want. Whether it's a forceful politician who can persuade people to vote for him because he's (supposedly) got all the right answers, or a big name evangelist who can fill churches with his (or her) smooth-talking charismatic personality (rather than filling them because of Christ), or an abusive partner, where the one abused will never leave and keep on going back for more punishment time after time.

How is it that other people can have such a hold on us? It is so, so important that we tear ourselves away from anything of that nature. We ought never to get taken in by the deceit of others – by their persuasive abilities, by their dominating personalities, by their controlling methods. Many people become salesmen, because they know jolly well that they have this frightening ability to persuade others to buy something they don't really need or want. And they will abuse us, trick us, deceive us,

and pester us, until they have closed the sale. Then we'll never see them again.

Many, many lives have been utterly ruined by the persuasive abilities of others.

Look at Herod:

Acts 12:21,22

And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them. And the people gave a shout, saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man.

We may ask, Who would be taken in by a despot like Herod? And the answer is, just as many as were fooled by Adolf Hitler and so many other dominating people throughout history. We think we'd never get taken in by that sort of person, but week after week, we hear about so many people, ordinary people like ourselves, who actually are.

But Herod got his come-uppance in the end:

Acts 12:23

And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost.

And that's exactly why we ought to understand and believe in the doctrine of hell-fire for ever. Because, except we repent and genuinely, really, and unfeignedly, turn to the Lord, all of us will eventually get exactly what we deserve. We should never ask God for what we deserve. We should be so thankful to our Lord God that He will judge all men justly at the end of time. And as a result, we have no need to fear or worry about anything or anybody else, no matter how forceful they are.

But, at the same time, we also have to admit that we ourselves are children of wrath, and deserving of such a judgment too. By nature we can do no good thing:

Ephesians 2:2,3

Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.

Romans 7:18

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not.

And God knows exactly how evil we all are by nature:

Jeremiah 17:9,10

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? I the Lord search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.

That's why every single one of us so desperately needs a Saviour. A Saviour to save us from ourselves. Not just from a list of sins (albeit a long list), but from our very sinful natures that we can never get away from by ourselves, even if we had the desire to do so, which naturally we don't.

We must seek reality, and stop pretending that we're not so bad. All of us are:

Revelation 3:17

.... wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.

The sooner we realise this, and call upon the Saviour that God has provided, the better. He is our only hope.

I'm Saved, But I'm Not Getting Any Better!

Here's a question: What's the minimum amount of doctrine we need to know in order to be saved to eternal life?

Do we need to believe the Trinity, perhaps?

To join the unbiblical, ecumenical World Council of Churches, we do. Unitarians are excluded. Every other theological position under the sun is accepted, but to not believe in the Trinity isn't.

Do we need to believe a creed, perhaps?

Many churches think so. In fact one of the orthodox creeds, the Athanasian Creed, states precisely that:

*"1 Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith; 2 Which faith **except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.** 3 And the catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity.... [then follows a lengthy definition of the Trinity]....*

*28 He therefore that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity. 29 Furthermore **it is necessary to everlasting salvation** that he also believe rightly the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. 30 For the right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man.... [then follows a lengthy definition of the orthodox view on the being of Christ]....*

*44 This is the catholic faith, **which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved.**"*

But the thief on the cross never believed any of this. I didn't believe any of this when I was saved. I only came to an understanding on these things later.

The film "*The DaVinci Code*" opened my eyes to this issue. (It didn't open my eyes to anything else. Don't watch it, it's rubbish). At one point it is complained that, one day Christ was not God, and the next

day (after the Nicene Creed had been passed by the Ecumenical Council) Christ was God – so we’re now free to persecute those who don’t believe this. The passing of a creed in some ecumenical council somewhere, does not define the truth. Christ always was God, whether anybody believed it or dogmatized it in a creed or not.

Assertion of a creed does not determine who is saved to eternal life and who isn’t. In Islam, it does. All you have to say is, “Allah is the one true God and Mohammed is his messenger,” and you’re a Muslim. That’s their creed. It’s not like that at all in Christianity.

Do we need to believe the gospel, then?

Surely we do. Surely Paul’s answer to the Philippian jailor is our minimum requirement:

Acts 16:31

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.

Well, that’s the gospel message that we are called to send to the ends of the earth. Let’s tell people that message. But how much of it do we actually need to know, in order to be saved?

Do we need to know:

- that Christ died on the cross as a substitutionary atonement to take away sin?
- that Christ died for me personally?
- that I must repent and exercise faith in Christ in order to be saved?
- that we must believe that Christ atoning sacrifice on the cross is the alone and sufficient sacrifice for our sin, without anything of our own, either in whole or in part being at all added to it?

All of the above are true statements, but do we need to know all of them, or some of them, in order to be saved? How much do we actually need to know?

The answer to that question is actually.... nothing!

But, surely we at least need to know about Christ, his atoning work, and put our trust in Him for our salvation? Well, hang on a minute, let me explain.

To be saved to eternal life, we must be born again:

John 3:3

Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

We need the Lord to give us a new heart:

2 Corinthians 5:17

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

Ezekiel 36:26

A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.

The Bible is quite clear in that we are saved by grace alone:

Ephesians 2:8,9

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.

2 Timothy 1:9

Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.

Titus 3:4-7

But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour; That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Jonah 2:9

Salvation is of the Lord.

John 6:44

No man can come to me [Christ], except the Father which hath sent me draw him.

The gospel call is a call to repent and believe in Christ. So, in order to respond to it, we need repentance and faith. But the Bible tells us these are gifts of God:

Ephesians 2:8

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.

Acts 11:18

Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.

We can't whip these attributes up from within ourselves. We need to be born again by the Holy Spirit first, before we can receive and exercise faith and repentance at all. Only then can we respond to the gospel call.

So, does this mean that we can all just sit back in our armchairs and do nothing, thinking that if God wants to save us, He will do so in His own good time, but if not, that's just the way it is? Of course not. God forbid that we should think that way! People use that idea as an excuse not to bother with the things of God at all.

We can at least realise our inability to respond, be bothered by it, and cry to God to grant us these gifts, even though we don't deserve them. Even if God won't hear us and we end up in hell-fire for ever, that's just what we deserve anyway, so God won't have done anything wrong to ignore our cry. But the Bible tells us that He is a merciful God and that He does save sinners. That's a marvellous thing, and it's our only hope.

Am I saying then, that it is possible to come to salvation without even knowing about the Lord Jesus Christ? What about people who practice other religions? Can they be saved even though they never come into contact with the Bible, a church or anything else that proclaims the truth? Again, I say, God forbid!

The preaching of the gospel (which is the spreading of the truth of the Bible throughout the world), and the responding to it (which can only be done if God regenerates the heart), is the ordinary means of salvation. Ordinarily, God uses means. So, it is always the church's job to proclaim the gospel, and to bring people into contact with and to a knowledge of the truth of the Bible.

Ordinarily the Lord works by causing all those that are going to be saved to come into contact with the truth somehow. Whether it be into contact with the Bible itself, or a tract or a gospel meeting or a church. God will make sure that all the elect will come into contact with the truth, through which He can then work by giving them a new heart, repentance and faith.

But God is always free to work without, above and against means if he so wishes. This is the case, for example, for all elect persons who are incapable of being called by the Word, such as elect infants and elect imbeciles (to quote the Westminster Confession of Faith). But we should never presume on this. Ordinarily, the job of the church is to bring people into contact with the truth, tell them about Christ, and leave the rest to the Lord as to whether He saves them or not.

What I am trying to get across is that it is not what we *know* that saves us, neither is it even what we *believe*, but salvation is only of the Lord. Many people go to church for years, and know their Bibles backwards, but they're not saved. Only when the Lord regenerates their heart does the truth of the Scriptures, that they may have known for many years, come alive for them. This is the new birth, and we can do nothing to attain it for ourselves. Neither our faith, nor our understanding, can help get us to heaven, otherwise we could boast that we did something our neighbour didn't do, namely have faith, or understand the Scriptures better. No, no, no. Salvation is of the Lord alone. We learn everything else later.

The Word of God is living and powerful:

Hebrews 4:12

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

The Word of God has power to regenerate hearts. But it's only after we've been born again in the heart that the Scriptures really come into their own.

Christ prayed to the Father (with regards his disciples):

John 17:17

Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

This is the main role of the Scriptures, and the reason we need to stay close to the Word of God for as long as we're in this world. We're justified by grace through faith alone, but we're sanctified through the truth, the Scriptures.

It's here that we learn of the doctrine of the Trinity, and all the other doctrines of truth. And not only do we learn of them with our minds, but if we're born-again we also know them for sure in our hearts, and they begin to change us from the inside.

It is possible to know correct doctrine, without a new heart, simply through reading the Bible. But just knowing the truth can't change anybody. You can say you believe in all the orthodox Creeds, all the orthodox doctrines, and mean it, and still go to hell in the end. It's only after we've been born again that the Scriptures come alive to us. They affect our hearts and change our way of life altogether.

But many Christians make a mistake by thinking that sanctification is me "every day in every way getting better and better." They think that as we mature in the faith, and we learn more and more of how we should behave from the Scriptures, then we really become better people as a result. I'm a lot better than I was, say, ten years ago.

But I find in myself that this is just not true. Try as much as I can, even with the Lord's help, I'm still not getting better and better. Well, I'm in good company. The apostle Paul said:

Romans 7:14-26

I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that

dwelleth in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.

This is not a description of a person before conversion to Christ, because there was no battle going on at all in his soul, then. Neither can we say it was something else not relevant to the Christian today, such as Paul, a Jew, telling us of his experience in relation to the Jewish law. No. It's a description of the truly converted Christian, with the spiritual battle against the flesh continually going on within him until he dies.

Our proper understanding of this, leads us to realise that we're not getting better and better at all, but rather we're coming to see our sins more and more. Our very need of Christ then becomes clearer and clearer as we grow in the faith.

I'm just as much a totally depraved sinner in need of Christ the second before I die as I was the second after I was conceived, even though, in between, I've been born-again and had a new heart put within me. If for one moment I was getting better and better, it would mean that the more mature I got in the faith, the less I'm in need of Christ, which can't possible be.

Christ said of Himself:

John 17:19

And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth.

Sanctification cannot possibly mean our getting better and better, because Christ said that He sanctified Himself, who was altogether perfect and could not possibly get better.

Rather, what is meant here is that Christ was setting Himself more and more apart from the world, as He got Himself ready to perform the task He was about to endure on the cross.

To us, sanctification is not becoming better and better, it is a becoming more and more set apart from the ways of the world and from all false doctrine, in order to live for Christ. And this is directly proportional to our knowledge of the Scriptures. Only as the Holy Spirit opens the Scriptures to us, can we become more and more set apart unto the Christian life. The Scriptures are therefore vital for our Christian walk in this world, which is the practical outworking of our faith. The nearer we are to Christ and the truth, the more we can be Christ-like in our daily lives.

Only after death, is sin got rid of completely from our lives (what a glorious thing to look forward to!). But while we are in this world, we are given new hearts and the Holy Spirit within us, to understand the Scriptures, in order for us to mortify the old nature, and nurture the fruit of the Spirit. This is how the Christian should spend his life. As we do this, we become more and more sanctified – i.e. set apart from the world's ways of doing things, and conformed to the Scriptural way of living. But all the time, we're still the vile sinners that we always were by nature.

Upon having a new heart put within us, our slavery to sin is immediately broken, so anyone with an addiction has hope! It can be broken, if you come to Christ! However, sin itself will still be there. We have our slavery to sin broken, but we still need victory over individual temptations as they present themselves to us. The drunkard can have his habit broken if he comes to Christ, but it would still be a good idea for him to avoid the pub.

Christ tells His disciples that they need to pray daily:

Luke 11:4

Forgive us our sins.... and lead us not into temptation.

Job was a true believer throughout the book named after him. But only after his experiences, does he come to the mature spiritual conclusion of a well-exercised believer:

Job 40:4

Behold, I am vile....

Job 42:6

....I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.

Our sanctification gives us victory over sin, as we need it. It doesn't make us better and better people, because then, resisting temptation would become easier and easier. We should never think of sin as easy to conquer:

Galatians 6:1

Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.

In the Christian life, we grow in two things as we mature in the faith. We:

2 Peter 3:18

....grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

The more Scripture we know, as we mature in the faith, the more weapons we have in our armoury, as we fight the world, the flesh and the devil. Overcoming sin does not become easier, but we have more weapons at our disposal in the constant battle that we have against our spiritual enemies – a war which won't end, nor become easier, until we rest and go to be with Christ, which is far better.

One day, in heaven, there'll be no more need for the Bible. Sin will have gone from our lives completely. There will be no more need of setting ourselves apart; we will be apart from our enemies for ever, as they all get thrown into hell-fire and we don't. But while we are here on this earth now, we need the Word of God, for our sanctification:

Romans 12:2

And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

Being Taken Advantage Of

As a new believer begins to live the Christian life, it won't be long before he finds out one of the most common problems Christians will face from unbelievers. Unbelievers will try to take advantage of them.

The Christian is called to love his enemies:

Matthew 5:38-44

Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.

Not only that, but the Christian is also called to be genuine and honest in everything he says:

Matthew 5:37

But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.

2 Corinthians 1:12

For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world, and more abundantly to you-ward.

The unbeliever knows all this very well, so he takes advantage of it. I was on a bus once and two old ladies asked me, "Do you go to church?" I had to be honest, so I told them I did. As soon as they knew that was the case for sure, they were asking for money.

Go to any big church, and invariably there will be beggars outside asking for money. If you invite them into the service, they won't want to know.

The unbeliever will ask the Christian to do all sorts of things for him, with the idea in his mind that, "You've got to do this because you're a Christian. If you refuse to do everything I want, you're not showing love." Of course, that doesn't follow.

Unbelievers know how to use their tongues, through lying and deceit, to get all sorts of things out of people. It doesn't bother them to do this, they have no conscience about it. But it ought to bother us. They know Christians won't act with deceit, so they take advantage of our simplicity. They know we'll never lie to them. They know if they ask for something, Christians are duty bound to give it to them if we can. They play on the Christian's conscience all the time.

And the charities do this as well. There was a Christian lady in Bristol a few years ago who ended up committing suicide because she got so many requests for money in the post from charities, and she became so overwhelmed with them all.

Unbelievers think that if we refuse to go along with them, our conscience will smite us and we'll worry we're not being a good witness for Jesus Christ. So they believe we're easily taken advantage of. So what can we do about this?

The first thing we can do is make sure we never put our trust in men. Christ didn't:

John 2:24,25

But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men, And needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man.

We know jolly well people will try to take advantage of us, because we were like them at one time:

Titus 3:3

For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another.

Ephesians 5:6-8

Let no man deceive you with vain words: for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience. Be not ye therefore partakers with them. For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light.

We should be wise, but harmless:

Matthew 10:16

Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.

Secondly, we should realise that whatever we do or don't do for them, they hate us anyway:

John 15:18,19

If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.

They'll always think in their minds that we're stupid, no matter how good (or bad) we are to them. They just want a good laugh at our expense. They couldn't care less about us really, they just want something for nothing out of us. So we shouldn't worry about what they think, or whether we're being a good witness to them or not. We're not answerable to them. It is God to whom we are answerable, not men. We shouldn't allow them to control the situation. We must keep a clear conscience before God. If we think anyone is trying to take advantage of us rather than being in genuine need, we shouldn't feel in any way guilty for walking away.

On the one hand, the Christian, if he can, should:

1 Thessalonians 5:22

Abstain from all appearance of evil.

But on the other hand, our appearance before men doesn't really matter, it's our hearts before God that really counts:

2 Corinthians 13:7

Now I pray to God that ye do no evil; not that we should appear approved, but that ye should do that which is honest, though we be as reprobates.

What God wants us to do is the most important thing. We should not pander to men, regardless of what they might say about us to other people. Even if we have a terrible reputation in the sight of other men (which we should avoid if we can), it doesn't matter as long as our hearts are right with God and that bad reputation is not actually true.

Unbelievers will not understand us, so they will try to make us feel terrible and try to give us a bad reputation. But as long as we don't actually do anything wrong, God will vindicate us. This is how we should behave:

Romans 12:17-21

Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.

Eventually, once we know we are being taken advantage of, and can see through their silver tongue trying to persuade us otherwise, we just have to walk away. And not feel guilty about it. They aren't really in need, so don't worry about it.

It is they who are sinning against us in the first place by trying to take advantage of us. It's not we who sin against them for not giving them what they want all the time. So we should stop feeling guilty. If someone sins against us, this is how we should behave:

Luke 17:3,4

Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.

First of all we must take heed to ourselves. It's not wrong to do that. Secondly we should rebuke them. Tell them straight that they're trying

to take advantage of us. Tell them we can see straight through their deceit. Of course, that will probably make them angry because we've spotted their deceitfulness. But that's what we're told to do, rebuke them. And if they still don't then say "I'm sorry," or "I repent," we can't forgive them anything. That's what this text in Luke 17 is telling us.

There is also a text in Matthew 18 that seems at first glance to teach unconditional forgiveness:

Matthew 18:21,22

Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.

But this doesn't teach unconditional forgiveness at all, because it is followed immediately by a parable that deals with someone who repents:

Matthew 18:23-27

Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents. But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt.

We can't forgive everybody unconditionally all the time, because God doesn't. He only forgives people if they repent. All men are called to repent:

Acts 17:30,31

And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.

In God's case, He grants His people the repentance they need:

Acts 11:18

When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.

But surely, we may say, we should help everyone that we come across who is in need. Yes, that's right:

1 John 3:17,18

But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.

Actually, this passage is dealing with a “brother” in need, i.e. a fellow believer. But even if it was talking about our dealings with all men, it only speaks about someone in need, in genuine need. Men trying to take advantage of us are not in genuine need. Today there is an army of professional scroungers on our streets, who make a very good living by begging. These people are not in need at all. I heard of one case where the beggar had an Audi parked around the corner. When he'd finished his begging for the day, he just hopped in and drove home. We should always be open hearted to all those in genuine need, but not to those who aren't. The ones who aren't will do a very good job of trying to convince us that they are. But our hearts shouldn't condemn us for walking away from them. They're just trying to take advantage of us.

All this becomes particularly difficult when it comes to dealing with our own unbelieving family members. In the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32, the son asked his father for his inheritance. This was rightly his, although he should only have received it on the death of his father, but his father was generous and gave it to him in advance. He left home for a far country and wasted it all on riotous living. The father didn't follow him, just to see how he was getting on, to find him somewhere nice to stay, and to give him extra cash when he needed it. No! He stayed at home. I'm sure he prayed for his son every day. But only when his son returned in repentance did he forgive him, and then of course he did it willingly, running to meet him. But while the son was still unrepentant for what he'd done, much as the father longed for him, he didn't go to see him, but prayed to God and waited for repentance to appear in his heart.

It is possible that our own families could end up as our greatest enemies. Jeremiah found this out:

Jeremiah 12:6

For even thy brethren, and the house of thy father, even they have dealt treacherously with thee; yea, they have called a multitude after thee: believe them not, though they speak fair words unto thee.

If they never say, “I repent,” or “I’m sorry” but keep on demanding of us, there comes a point when we must just leave them to themselves. We can’t help them. Of course we should pray for their repentance every day, but until they do repent, we shouldn’t, for example, keep throwing money at them, or keep going back to an abusive situation. They’ll get used to it and expect us to do this, and all that will do is condone their sinful lifestyle. And when we don’t give them what they want any more, they’ll complain, “You’re not a Christian!” But they hate us anyway. The Bible tells us that:

Matthew 10:34-37

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man’s foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

On the one hand, we’re called to look after our families if at all possible:

1 Timothy 5:3,4

Honour widows that are widows indeed. But if any widow have children or nephews, let them learn first to shew piety at home, and to requite their parents: for that is good and acceptable before God.

1 Timothy 5:7,8

And these things give in charge, that they may be blameless. But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.

But we're also at the same time called to leave them. They are no longer our real family anyway, the people of God are:

Luke 9:57-62

And it came to pass, that, as they went in the way, a certain man said unto him, Lord, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest. And Jesus said unto him, Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head. And he said unto another, Follow me. But he said, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. Jesus said unto him, Let the dead bury their dead: but go thou and preach the kingdom of God. And another also said, Lord, I will follow thee; but let me first go bid them farewell, which are at home at my house. And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.

We shouldn't have many dealings with our families at all, if they're not prepared to say they are sorry in any way for their sinful lifestyle. They'll probably get fed up with us rebuking them anyway.

Luke 21:16,17

And ye shall be betrayed both by parents, and brethren, and kinsfolks, and friends; and some of you shall they cause to be put to death. And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake.

Trying Too Hard

After we have come into a real, saving relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, one thing we are given is a tremendous zeal for the Lord:

2 Corinthians 7:11

For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge! In all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter.

And this is good. We want to tell everybody about what has happened to us, because we want them all to come into the same state of salvation that we have received.

Yes, it is possible to know absolutely that we have had every one of our sins completely forgiven, and will for certain escape the judgment to come. But there is one thing we must realise. We must repent of our sinful way of life and turn completely away from it to God through Jesus Christ our Saviour, or we can't possibly receive this salvation and will instead perish eternally. All men:

Acts 26:20

....should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance.

If anyone truly repents of his sin and turns to Christ for salvation, he shall be born-again, he shall have a new heart put within him, he shall have the gift of the Holy Ghost placed within him and become a new creature:

Acts 2:38

Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

We will know when this has happened to us. It will be a real change in our heart. We will no longer want to sin, we will now hate sin and desire only to flee from it. We must cry to God for mercy until we

know this change has occurred in us and that we have truly been granted forgiveness of sin and repentance unto life:

Acts 11:16-18

Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost. Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God? When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.

Anyone to whom this real internal change has happened must consequently have a desire in his heart for that same change to take place in other people. Paul certainly had this:

Romans 10:1

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved.

Acts 26:28,29

Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian. And Paul said, I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds.

But, being pretty stupid creatures, when we are witnessing for the Lord, we so often put our foot in it and ruin our witness by maybe an unwise word or an unwise action. I am sure all of us have done this many times in our Christian walk. I think that most of the time the problem really is that in our zeal for the Lord, we try too hard.

Jehu was zealous for the Lord, and in his zeal he destroyed all the Lord's enemies round about him:

2 Kings 10:16

Come with me, and see my zeal for the LORD.

This God commended, and rewarded Jehu for it:

2 Kings 10:30

And the LORD said unto Jehu, Because thou hast done well in executing that which is right in mine eyes, and hast done unto the house of Ahab according to all

that was in mine heart, thy children of the fourth generation shall sit on the throne of Israel.

Now, we should not go around committing genocide like that today, but the Old Testament pattern of Israel destroying its enemies is a picture of the true believer's spiritual battle in destroying spiritual enemies in his life:

Ephesians 6:12

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

But the warning to us here is that, after all his zeal for the Lord, we find that Jehu was not a true believer after all:

2 Kings 10:31

But Jehu took no heed to walk in the law of the LORD God of Israel with all his heart: for he departed not from the sins of Jeroboam, which made Israel to sin.

So remember that zeal in itself doesn't necessarily mean that we've been truly changed in our heart. Let's make sure that the change that has happened to us is real, and our consequent zeal for the Lord is out of a true love for Him and gratitude for what He's done for us.

Now let's look at a believer – the man in the land of the Gadarenes in whom dwelt many devils. Christ cast them all out, and he was changed immediately:

Luke 8:35

Then they went out to see what was done; and came to Jesus, and found the man, out of whom the devils were departed, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed, and in his right mind.

What a change had instantly taken place! No longer was the man unruly, naked and uncontrollable, but he was now "*clothed, and in his right mind.*"

The major part of our witness to the world is not necessarily our words, but our lifestyle. Have we changed like this man had? Can

people see the change? Have we started producing the fruit of the Spirit, which no man can produce without having had this real, internal change from the Lord?

Galatians 5:22,23

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.

This is our major witness. Many times it would be far better to keep quiet and just let our actions speak louder than any words.

Luke 8:38,39

Now the man out of whom the devils were departed besought him that he might be with him: but Jesus sent him away, saying, Return to thine own house, and shew how great things God hath done unto thee. And he went his way, and published throughout the whole city how great things Jesus had done unto him.

Christ told this man to “**shew** how great things God has done” unto him, in other words display his new life, and how he had changed from what he had been. But at the same time, he was so joyful, that he couldn’t help but speak to everyone he met of the things that had happened to him.

And of course, we ourselves often get so excited about what God has done for us, that we also want to share it with everyone around. Which, at times, may overwhelm people a little, and cause them to reject us. That’s one of the problems with trying too hard. We should just try to be sensible:

Isaiah 50:4

The Lord GOD hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary: he wakeneth morning by morning, he wakeneth mine ear to hear as the learned.

But we should also be ready at all times to give an answer:

1 Peter 3:15

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.

Even then, we still fail. A question comes up out of the blue, and we aren't ready to answer it. We mumble some kind of answer, the conversation moves on, then five minutes later we think of what we should have said, and the opportunity has gone. How much better could we have done things! Trying too hard again!

And then sometimes, when we're in a stressful situation, we can so easily lose our temper, or say something unnecessary, or at least not becoming of our status as saints. Every time that happens, we run the risk of our witness to the world being completely ruined.

Just imagine someone who knows we are a Christian, sees our new life, our meekness, our temperance, our gentleness, all of which could not have possibly been produced by ourselves, it has to have come from the Lord. That's good. What a witness! Even without our words, they have seen something different about us. We're not like anyone else they have ever met, all of whom just live for themselves. But then one day, we get stressed and lose our temper. The first thing they will think is: "Aha! They're not different after all, they're just like the rest of us! They're just good at putting on a show of false humility." And consequently, they'll completely dismiss our religion, and the God whom we serve, and believe it's not real. What do we do then? We need to know the answer to this, because it will happen.

Well, firstly, the experience should make us far more careful in future. Yes, none of us will ever be perfect on this earth as long as we live. It is our sure hope for the future that one day we will be given new bodies which will not sin any more. But secondly, we should apologise for our behaviour and try to explain truly the situation to any offended party, if they will listen. If they still ridicule us, we can't do anything about that.

In the end, in every circumstance, we have to leave it to the Lord to deal with others. We find it so difficult to change ourselves – in fact it's impossible, we need the Lord to do it for us. How much more difficult therefore will we find trying to change other people?

Only the Lord can change hearts and get people to understand anything of a spiritual nature, we can do nothing. We have to leave everything to Him. Preachers can't change one soul, no matter how

hard they try to persuade others into the kingdom. More of them ought to realise that, rather than shouting the way they do.

However, that doesn't mean that we should just sit back and do nothing. The Lord normally uses means, and so He could well be using us as an instrument for bringing the people that we know around us under His influence.

In Queen Esther's day, there had been a decree sent forth to destroy the Jews. Ordinarily, this decree could not be reversed. But Mordecai, Esther's uncle, told her about this, in her privileged position:

Esther 4:14

For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

So Queen Esther, at the possible risk of her life being lost, approached the king, and the Jews were eventually, as a result, saved from slaughter. If she had done nothing, God would have produced deliverance from somewhere else, but at the expense of her father's house. Inaction on our part will never thwart God's plans, but may have consequences for ourselves.

And so we should recognise our nothingness and absolute inability, and that we need the Lord for everything:

2 Corinthians 4:7

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.

2 Corinthians 12:5

Of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities.

2 Corinthians 12:9,10

My strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

This may be especially significant in the case of a chronic situation. Maybe we have a son or husband who is a drunkard or a drug addict. We have been praying for years and years, yet nothing seems to change. Every so often he would come home in a terrible state and interrupt the peace of the household in some, maybe violent, way. We have tried everything to bring him to the Lord, yet nothing has worked. In the end, we have to stop trying at all, recognise our total inability to change him and just place him in the Lord's hands completely.

I've known several people who have been converted from such a life of sin, after the mother or wife has been praying for years and years, so we should never give up prayer. But I have also known some who have never changed, and died an early death instead. Whatever happens, we must trust in the Lord to deal in the way He sees fit, and acknowledge that the Lord is good.

But one thing we do need to do is to stop trying too hard. Rather, we need to spend more of our time in prayer. That's the only way to get results. We need to trust in the Lord, and begin to let the Lord work through us, as instruments to fulfil His purposes. So, in whatever circumstance the Lord puts us in, we need to make sure we stay close to Him, pursue godliness, love Christ, and be different from the world.

All this is so that no man may glory, but all the glory goes to the Lord:

1 Corinthians 1:27-29

But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: that no flesh should glory in his presence.

Skeletons in the Cupboard

A very common question against the truth of God is “How can a God of love send anyone to eternal torment in hell-fire forever?” The strange thing is that these very same people also ask the question “How can a God of love create a world with so much evil in it?” So on the one hand, they accept that the world is full of evil, yet they refuse to believe in the just punishment for that evil.

We plainly see that justice is not done by God in this world. So there must be another world beyond death where justice IS done. There must be a place, colloquially known as hell-fire, where all those who practise evil will be punished. Otherwise God ceases to be just.

The real problem people have is not merely in the belief of a place of eternal torment, but in the belief that they personally deserve to go to such a place for ever because of their own sins. No-one thinks that they are that bad by nature. But we are.

The fact of personal sin against a holy God is hidden from us by the world around us. The media, the government and the education system – whatever country we are living in – are feeding us the propaganda that people are generally good at heart. They would say that only a few spoil this theory – the ones that get the headlines in the newspapers. But there seems to be so many of them these days! People we wouldn't even have thought of. Rolf Harris was always that nice man who came into my living room every Friday evening on my television set.

And so the world goes on in its own sweet way, thinking (or at least wanting to think) that most families are “normal.” No problems, all smiles, everything going along quite smoothly. Yes, we have illnesses and death to cope with, but other than that, most people are living a reasonably happy and fulfilled life, so we are told. But I put it to you that everybody, yes everybody, including YOU, has a skeleton in their cupboard somewhere in their family.

We don't like to talk about it of course. When we live our lives, we never speak of that sister who tried to commit suicide last week, or that

son who has become an alcoholic, or that drug addict brother who stole money from his grandmother to feed his habit, or that uncle being on the sex offenders register. Oh no, we don't talk about things like that.

And that's how the churches behave as well. They also feel that they've got to put on a show of "normality," a show of what Christian families ought to be like. But that's not reality. When we have a real problem – My uncle is sexually abusing me – I've got this addiction I can't control – my husband wants a divorce – I think my son is a homosexual – the Christians run a mile away. They don't want to know. Unless we are showing the "normal" Christian life, and come to church every week with our cheesy smile, happy attitude and idyllic family life, they will distance themselves from you. They don't want to get involved.

This is not exaggeration. Here are a few examples I personally know about:

A friend of mine used to go to a conservative evangelical church. One Sunday morning, she arrived a bit early. She saw one lady already sitting in the meeting hall at the side on her own, quietly praying. This lady was going through a divorce and had already worked up enormous strength just to be there. But an elder of the church turned up, saw her, and called across the hall in a loud voice, "Hello Mrs *****, We've just come back from our holidays in Switzerland. We had a wonderful time!" That was an elder. He had absolutely no idea how to care about the poor lady at all.

Or what about some people I know who thought that their son had become a drug addict. It wasn't true actually, but they really had concerns about him. They opened up about it to an elder who they thought seemed approachable, but ever since then, that elder and his wife have kept their distance from them.

Or how about the two stalwart families in an Evangelical church who were absolutely delighted when one family's son announced that he wanted to marry the other family's daughter. Wonderful! A real joining together of two of the main families in the church. So they got a well-known figure from the denomination to perform the ceremony, and it was a huge event in the denomination at large. The marriage lasted

three weeks. They are now divorced, but the point is that the church can't cope when things happen that they think shouldn't. Reality is an embarrassment to them. It can cope with the big, happy events, but not with things they think shouldn't be happening in the church.

I could go on and on with examples. Yes, individuals in the church will care. But the churches as a whole are totally insensitive to any of us having real problems. Yet we all have them. They think that Christians just shouldn't have that sort of mess in their families.

So we have two major applications here, one for true Christians and the other for non-Christians:

True Christians will always be upset by churches having this attitude, and find themselves on the periphery of church life. True Christians would be honest with themselves. They know the problems that exist in their family. But then they see the "perfect" families outwardly displayed by the minister, elders and church stalwarts, and they feel so far from how they are told they ought to be.

But at least true believers have the Lord to lean back on when the church lets them down. What about unbelievers? They also see the "perfect" families put forward by the stalwarts of the churches. And they will run a mile. Such an outward witness has absolutely nothing to do with their real-life situation at all. So they simply walk away. The church has nothing for them.

What a terrible witness the churches are to believers and unbelievers alike.

Let us all be genuine with one another. All of us have some skeleton in the cupboard. Let's all be real. Only then can believers help one another properly, and only then can we all be a true witness to outsiders.

Embracing Self-Hatred

Millions of people in the world today are depressed. The medical profession, with all their knowledge, can't help. All they do is spend lots of money on counselling services, mental health units and putting the patients.... er.... sorry, clients.... on antidepressant tablets, probably for the rest of their lives.

I read an article on depression in a newspaper once, and the writer who had experienced it, said, quite rightly, "Depression is a bout of absolute sanity." And that's true. If all we have is this world in it's continual state of decay, and we're only here for a very short time anyway, there's no real point to anything. This is a miserable place. Of course it's depressing.

Solomon, the wisest man in all the earth found this out:

Ecclesiastes 1:14

I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

Everything in this fallen world is vanity. It's pointless. These things are just fact. It's no good hiding from it all by filling our lives with things of no consequence and pretending it's not true. All of us should get real, and accept truth.

What surprises me is that there are so many people in the world who aren't depressed. So many who think that this world is wonderful, that they can achieve such a lot in it, that there is so much excitement here, so much to do to keep them occupied. Yet they're all going to die soon enough.

Modern psychology hasn't got the answer. All we're told is that we should have a sense of self-worth, self-acceptance, self-esteem and self-confidence. We're told that to conquer depression, we must love ourselves, have pride in our achievements and have a good feeling about ourselves.

Because of this philosophy dominating our education system, our television networks, and, sadly, also our churches, there's an army of people out there in the world who have come to think that there's something seriously wrong with them because, for whatever reason, they don't feel that confident about themselves all the time.

So, for example, people have cosmetic surgery, people go on confidence building courses, and many, many people fill our psychiatric hospitals, all because none of them feel as confident about themselves as the modern psychologists are telling them they ought to be.

Well, the modern psychologists are all wrong. Do we feel bad about ourselves? Do we lack confidence? Do we have a low self-esteem? Well, look up! We shouldn't be persuaded by the world around us that that's a bad thing. It's a good thing, because it's the truth. We really are such weak, sinful creatures by nature. To lack confidence or self-esteem is an acknowledgment of reality. Underneath everything, we know it's true anyway, but we're too scared to admit it to anyone else in case they think we need psychiatric help. All we are doing by acknowledging our weaknesses is being honest with ourselves.

Modern psychologists think that the only alternative to a sense of self-esteem is despair. But it's far better to have a sense of reality about ourselves, because only then can we begin to do something about it. Whipping ourselves up into a false sense of self-confidence is not the answer, but, instead, it's living a lie. The longer we live a lie, the worse we'll become when we find out it was all a sham.

The one thing all depressed people have in common is that they turn inward on themselves. By doing this, they make themselves utterly useless to everyone around them. Not only do they waste their own time, but they waste the time of everybody else who tries to help them. The helpers could be doing something useful themselves instead. I'm sorry to be so harsh, but that's the way it is.

In fact, the problem with depressed people is too much self-esteem, not too little. Me, me, me, my problem, my problems. That's all they can think about. They really think the world revolves around themselves. By nature we are all so selfish.

It was said of Jesus Christ that He:

Acts 10:38

....went about doing good....

A depressed person should be told, “Do something useful. Help a little old lady across the road.” Of course, they won’t. They might say something like, “Nobody cares about me, so why should I care about anybody else?” Which is a fair comment. But it’s still a selfish one.

When I was in the cub scouts, they had a motto that we should try to do one good deed every day. But how many of us actually did a good deed every day, or indeed a good deed at all? None of us. It sounded good, but nobody actually did it.

So, if we find such difficulty by nature to do even one good deed a day when we’re well, how much more will we find it difficult to do something useful for somebody else when we’re depressed. There is only one hope for any of us. It doesn’t matter whether we’re depressed or not. We all need a Saviour to save us from this wretched condition, from our own sinful, self-centred nature. If we don’t recognise this as our fundamental problem, we may as well give up all hope now. Everybody by nature is in this condition, whether we recognise it or not. We’re all in the same boat.

We must seek the truth about ourselves. Only then can we find a real solution.

The Bible tells us the truth about human nature:

Genesis 6:5

And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

Jeremiah 17:9

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?

Psalm 14:2,3

The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God. They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

Romans 3:23

For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.

Nothing we can do is good enough. We're all failures. The psychologists are all wrong. Does that mean we should despair and try to end our lives? No! God has provided an answer, if only we accept it. There's a Saviour to be found in Jesus Christ. But we need to acknowledge that we need Him. We need to acknowledge our real condition. We need to call on God for mercy to save us from our sins. And if we do all that, He will.

Jeremiah 29:11-13

For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end. Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.

Zephaniah 2:3

Seek ye the Lord, all ye meek of the earth, which have wrought his judgment; seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the Lord's anger.

Isaiah 45:21,22

There is no God else beside me; a just God and a Saviour; there is none beside me. Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else.

1 Timothy 2:5

For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.

1 Peter 3:18

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God.

The Christian religion is not irrelevant, as we're constantly being told. Rather, it gives us exactly the perfect remedy for our human condition.

At this point we need to separate in our minds depressed people from those with what the Bible calls "*evil spirits*." Both would be treated by a hospital's psychiatric department, so to this world they are considered very similar. But really they are completely different.

Christ and the apostles came across many people with "*evil spirits*."

Acts 16:16-18

And it came to pass, as we went to prayer, a certain damsel possessed with a spirit of divination met us, which brought her masters much gain by soothsaying: The same followed Paul and us, and cried, saying, These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation. And this did she many days. But Paul, being grieved, turned and said to the spirit, I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And he came out the same hour.

This lady spoke the truth. The men she was talking about were indeed the servants of the most high God shewing the way of salvation. In most church circles that would be called good witnessing. But she had an evil spirit, which Paul cast out. If he had not done that, people would begin to equate having an evil spirit with true religion, which of course it isn't.

A person with an "*evil spirit*" can never be a true believer. We should never think that they ever could be, even if they are in our churches (which many are). True believers will always be in their right mind:

Luke 8:35

Then they went out to see what was done: and came to Jesus, and found the man, out of whom the devils were departed, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed, and in his right mind: and they were afraid.

True believers will know the truth and the truth will set them free.

But not only do people with "*evil spirits*" come to church regularly, many depressed people do too. And many true believers can be depressed.

At one point in his life, it is said of Elijah:

1 Kings 19:4

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers.

David said at one point:

Psalm 88:3

For my soul is full of troubles: and my life draweth nigh unto the grave.

Jeremiah said:

Jeremiah 20:14

Cursed be the day wherein I was born: let not the day wherein my mother bare me be blessed.

Even Job fell into this trap. When everything was taken away from him, he was initially fine, and said:

Job 1:21

Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.

We are told that up to this point,

Job 2:10

In all this did not Job sin with his lips.

But then when his friends came along to try to help him, Job got depressed, and said:

Job 3:3

Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived.

The key to the book of Job is found in chapter 32. Job's problem was that:

Job 32:1,2

He was righteous in his own eyes.... he justified himself rather than God.

Until he acknowledged that the Lord was righteous and he just a sinful creature by nature, he couldn't be restored.

In all these Biblical cases, the person concerned, got depressed because he took his eyes off the Lord and eternal things, and just focused on this world. That's the big mistake. And that's the case every time a true believer gets depressed. This world is not all there is. We need to keep ourselves focused on things above, not on things on the earth.

Colossians 3:1-3

If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.

2 Corinthians 4:17-18

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.

People criticise Christianity for being narrow and exclusive. But no other religion can save us from our own sinful selves. Every other religion in the world is a glorified self-help group. They all tell us there's something we can do to impress God. Let's not flatter ourselves. The truth is that there's absolutely nothing we can do at all.

The Lord Jesus Christ was sent into the world specifically to save us from our sins:

John 3:36

He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.

John 5:22,23

For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son: that all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent him.

So, let's all acknowledge our inadequacy, failure and sinful nature. Let's not be scared of doing that. Only once we recognise the problem can we truly repent of our sins, and pray to God for salvation in Jesus Christ. And we know that's a sure hope, because the Lord has promised that He will not let anyone down who truly turns to Him:

John 6:40

And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day.

John 6:37

All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.

John 12:25

He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.

Coming to the Son will make us free indeed:

John 8:34-36

Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. And the servant abideth not in the house for ever: but the Son abideth ever. If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.

The Last Shall Be First

Matthew 18:3-6

Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me. But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.

The more I look around the current church scene, the more I realise how few professing Christians there are who take the above words of Christ seriously. The greatest need in the visible church today is for people to be truly converted and become as little children in their whole attitude to God as well as to everyone around them.

We are all born in sin, so I am not saying by any means that little children are sinless. As any mother would tell you, they're not. But they are simple and trusting in their relationship with their earthly parents, in the same manner that we should be with our heavenly Father.

As children grow older, however, they leave such trusting simplicity behind and mature into the drunkards, prostitutes and unclean, selfish, self-confident people we see all around us.

Psalms 49:20

Man that is in honour, and understandeth not, is like the beasts that perish.

When the Lord calls people to Himself, He is calling them to renounce such a self-centred, self-confident lifestyle and become simple and trusting again, but this time not towards their earthly parents (who were not worthy of such trust being placed in them anyway) but towards our Heavenly Father. In fact, here is another forgotten saying of our Lord:

Matthew 10:34-39

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter

against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.

We are to love God even more than our own earthly families.

Of course we are to honour our parents:

Exodus 20:12

Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.

And we are to look after our blood relatives:

1 Timothy 5:8

But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.

But our new, real family is now all those who belong to Christ, not blood ties any more. We can't really trust anyone who is not one of the Lord's people. And we sometimes can't trust them either.

Matthew 12:47-50

Then one said unto him, Behold, thy mother and thy brethren stand without, desiring to speak with thee. But he answered and said unto him that told him, Who is my mother? and who are my brethren? And he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.

This reminds me of someone I met once who was a murderer. While he was in prison, he became a Christian. After he was set free (murderers don't stay in prison for long these days) he went back to his parents and told them that he was now a Christian, and they consequently threw him out of the house. It is quite remarkable that they would rather have a murderer living with them than a Christian.

Anyway, childlikeness, in this simple, trusting way, is missing in the church. So many church members want to be seen doing something in the church. So they become ministers, elders, missionaries, or other “full time Christian workers,” and there are recruitment web sites out there specialising in such stuff. But try speaking to any one of these people, and all I can say is that I find it very difficult to relate to them. We are supposed to follow them, be impressed by their activity for Jesus, and no doubt throw money at them, but they don’t want to know me as a person. I’m obviously not good enough for them.

Compare this with one man I knew in a church I was in once. He had a mild learning difficulty. He had to go to a special school (which he hated) and grew into adulthood with no qualifications whatsoever and had to live his life claiming benefits. He hung around with his friends who had a “Christian” worship band (I am not going into the rights and wrongs of such, that’s another article altogether!). The pastor of the church, always wanting to see some talent in all the members of his congregation, told everyone that he was very good at setting up the band’s equipment, and that obviously this was his “gift” in life. However, one of the band members told me privately afterwards that that wasn’t the case at all, as he was once nearly electrocuted by him! So to all intents and purposes, my friend with learning disabilities was utterly and completely useless at everything. He was no church leader, missionary, full-time Christian worker, or anything of the kind, he couldn’t even put a plug in properly, he was practically useless.

However, after I left the church to go to another church (like one has to do occasionally), he was the only one from the whole church who still continued to visit me. No-one else from my previous church bothered with me any more, it was the usual case of “out of sight, out of mind.” I ended up having a really good friendship with him, and although I have moved away now and lost contact with him, I will always remember his friendship and, more to the point, the fact that he wanted to take time to know me, which none of the missionaries or “full time Christian workers” ever did.

I remember going around to a pastor’s house once and he boasted that he had had over 120 Christmas cards (and there they were all hung around the living room to prove it). I didn’t tell him I only had two.

These people live in a different world from the ordinary people in the pew.

All this reminds me of the several occasions when our Lord talked about the last being first. Let us take a look at them:

Matthew 19:30-20:16

But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first. For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the labourers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, And said unto them; Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way. Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive. So when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the labourers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first. And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny. But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny. And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house, Saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day. But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.

This is not about rewards in heaven. The parable of the pounds teaches that in Luke 19:12-27. In this parable everybody gets the same. But the ones who only worked one hour get the same as those who worked all day. Now, does this parable encourage laziness? Of course not. The whole parable was given to illustrate one point, and one point only, stated at the beginning and end, namely that “*the last shall be first, and the first last.*” Those who are seen outwardly to work full time for the Lord and bear the burden and heat of the day in the visible church,

only receive the same reward as those who are not really seen, and certainly not appreciated at all.

The parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30 is similar. That shows that we are all given differing amounts of useful ability in this life to start with, the one given five talents to start with has to make five more (a 100% increase) to get the same reward as the one given two talents to start with, who only has to make two talents more. This may again sound unfair, but there's a limit to each's capability to start with. If you aspire to be a great pastor, or missionary, then fine, but expect to have to do a lot more work and have a lot more trouble to get the same reward as the man with learning difficulties who never leaves his home town and is practically useless.

Mark 9:33-37

And he came to Capernaum: and being in the house he asked them, What was it that ye disputed among yourselves by the way? But they held their peace: for by the way they had disputed among themselves, who should be the greatest. And he sat down, and called the twelve, and saith unto them, If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all. And he took a child, and set him in the midst of them: and when he had taken him in his arms, he said unto them, Whosoever shall receive one of such children in my name, receiveth me: and whosoever shall receive me, receiveth not me, but him that sent me.

The disciples knew in their hearts it was wrong to dispute over who should be greatest, because when Christ asked them what they were disputing about, they “held their peace.” Christ taught them that if we desire to be first in the kingdom of God, we should try to be last of all, like a little child in fact. Where in the church today are there people striving to be last of all? No, they want their television ministries, deliverance ministries, healing ministries, and leadership responsibilities in their tinpot little churches. No thanks. Let's renounce all such things and desire more than anything to be “last of all, and servant of all.”

Mark 10:28-31

Then Peter began to say unto him, Lo, we have left all, and have followed thee. And Jesus answered and said, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, but he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with

persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life. But many that are first shall be last; and the last first.

Peter thinks, understandably, that because they've left all to follow Christ, they deserve a reward. And indeed Christ tells them that if they're true believers they will indeed get a reward, both in this life (together with persecutions) and in that which is to come. But He also has to remind them that many who seem to be first in the church in this world will actually turn out to be last in the kingdom. There's nothing wrong in theory with becoming a church leader, but watch out! They'll be a lot more responsible for their actions and words:

James 3:1

My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.

And then we've got the most solemn warning of all:

Luke 13:24-30

Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able. When once the master of the house is risen up, and hath shut to the door, and ye begin to stand without, and to knock at the door, saying, Lord, Lord, open unto us; and he shall answer and say unto you, I know you not whence ye are: Then shall ye begin to say, We have eaten and drunk in thy presence, and thou hast taught in our streets. But he shall say, I tell you, I know you not whence ye are; depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out. And they shall come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God. And, behold, there are last which shall be first, and there are first which shall be last.

Here we see that the phrase about the last being first and the first last is tagged on to the end of a passage about many seeking to enter in to the kingdom of heaven but not being able. Christ is clearly showing that those who always put themselves first in the church in this world, and are seen to be first in the church in this world, may not just simply find themselves last in the next world, but may not even find themselves in glory at all. Let's remember that pride is always lurking at the door:

3 John 9

I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not.

1 Timothy 3:6

Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil.

Let's make sure that we're amongst the childlike, servant-like lowest people in the visible church, and we can then be sure that Christ will exalt us in due time.

1 Peter 5:5-6

Be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time.

Growing Old

A few years ago, a friend of mine was telling me about his father who was over 90 years old. He had just had a minor stroke, and was recovering, but, being full of this world, he kept on saying, "I'm looking forward to driving again." Of course, that was now highly unlikely at his age, but what do you say to someone like that? Do you say, "Yes, yes, yes," which would be a lie, or do you say, "Look, get real, it's not going to happen," which would probably be the truth, but upsetting to him?

When I was working in a hospital, I got to know an old lady who kept on coming into the hospital chapel to sit in the quiet for a while. She always said that she was in hospital to visit a friend, but was very economical with any details about this "friend." I actually gave her a lift home once, and she lived over twenty miles away on her own in a little cottage, and did the trip to hospital nearly every day on the bus. She became friendly with another old lady who did the same thing, but lived closer to the hospital. Both ladies had children, but they all lived a long way away in the south-east of England and were more concerned with their successful jobs than looking after their parents. On the rare occasion that they visited, they would maybe stay for a day or so, take mother out for a nice meal, tell her they loved her, then go away again for another year. Anyway, these ladies continued to visit the hospital for many months, far longer than people usually stay in an acute hospital; then it dawned on me that these "friends" that they were supposedly visiting didn't exist. That was their life. Going out nearly every day to visit an imaginary "friend."

These two examples are typical of many people. All they have in their old age is a fantasy. Millions of people live every day:

Ephesians 2:12

Having no hope, and without God in the world.

The older people get, the more difficult it becomes to encourage them to carry on living in this world, because there really is nothing much for them to look forward to here any more. They are so close to eternity,

and yet even then, they still refuse to think about their impending, inevitable death and life beyond it. They want to hang on to this vain, empty place for ever.

We're all programmed today to believe that there's nothing after death at all. The logical fallacy that brings people to this conclusion is the same logical fallacy that makes them think there's no God. Just because we can't see, hear, feel, smell, taste or detect God with scientific instruments, therefore, they conclude, He doesn't exist. Similarly, they would say, we can't sense anything after death (apart from a few strange people who think they can), therefore, they conclude, there's nothing. This logic is totally false. There was a time when we couldn't "detect" nuclear reactions, but that doesn't mean to say that they didn't exist.

But there is life after death. The fact that so many religions teach it, is just proof that:

Romans 1:20

For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.

I was asked once, by a young person in China, what the phrase "eternal life" in the Bible meant. I assumed that they thought there was nothing after death, so I explained as best I could, that death is not the end and we need to prepare ourselves for the next life. But I thought afterwards, what a stupid thing to say to someone from a Buddhist background. They wouldn't have a problem with life after death. To them, after death, we just come back again as something else. In fact Buddhism is an incredibly evil religion. The aim of it, after many reincarnations, is to dissolve away into nothingness. Great. And, if our life here gets so bad we can't stand it any more, that's all right, we can just kill ourselves and even if we come back as a rat, it's better than what we've got now. There's no concept at all of one's own personal sin, and responsibility for it. It's very much like atheism, which also sees suicide as a viable option, because after death they think there's nothing. Come to think of it, it's like the alcoholic too, who just wants to forget reality and drink himself to oblivion. In fact, even true Christians can fall into this trap. Many believe that if we don't embrace Jesus Christ as our Saviour, after we die we just get annihilated, rather than going into eternal

punishment as the Bible teaches. Their idea is that if we come to Christ we get eternal life, but if we don't we just cease to exist. It's all the same basic idea. No!

Hebrews 9:27

It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.

We must make our peace with God in this one life that we've got here, because there isn't going to be another one.

Christianity teaches proper, real, sincere respect and care for old people:

1 Timothy 5:8

If any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.

James 1:27

Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

All of us, whoever we are, whatever background we've come from, really, truly need to prepare properly for our old age, and indeed our death, because such is the inevitable consequences of sin:

Romans 6:23

For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

When we're young, we're physically strong and can do all sorts of things. But as we grow old, we find we can't do as many things physically as we did before. To the unbeliever, this is the worst thing that can happen, and many of them want to be able to "die with dignity," as they call it, at a time they choose. But to the believer, who is maturing in the faith, it's a whole new opportunity. Maybe we can no longer gad about this present, evil world as we used to do, but we can spend far more time in prayer and in preparation for the next world.

Psalm 71:17,18

O God, thou hast taught me from my youth: and hitherto have I declared thy wondrous works. Now also when I am old and grayheaded, O God, forsake me not; until I have shewed thy strength unto this generation, and thy power to every one that is to come.

2 Corinthians 4:16-5:4

....though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal. For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven: If so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked. For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life.

While we're here, we must all make sure we've made our peace with God by repenting of sin and putting our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ:

Romans 5:1

Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 John 4:10

Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Assuming we've done this, and have truly been made a new creature in Christ, Christians then need, not to talk about the weather with each other, but to encourage one another in the faith; not speaking of the things of this world, still clinging on to memories and good feelings here, but speaking of heavenly things:

Hebrews 10:25

....exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

After all, this world is not our home. The next one will be:

John 14:2,3

In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.

Colossians 3:1-3

If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.

Hebrews 11:13-16

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

Hebrews 13:14

For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.

A few years ago in the city where I was living, there were two Christian men from two different churches, one in his eighties and another in what we call “the prime of life” in his thirties with a young family. Both had contracted terminal cancer at the same time, and both found themselves lying next to each other in hospital beds. What a providence! They spent their last few days on this earth looking forward to eternity. “I wonder what heaven is going to be like!” “Just think, no more sin!” What a joyful time they must have had! And this is how we should be when it is our turn to go.

Are we really ready?

Luke 18:8

When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?

Walk Worthy

Look at these passages of Scripture:

Psalm 62:12

Also unto thee, O Lord, belongeth mercy: for thou renderest to every man according to his work.

Proverbs 24:12

If thou sayest, Behold, we knew it not; doth not he that pondereth the heart consider it? and he that keepeth thy soul, doth not he know it? and shall not he render to every man according to his works?

Ecclesiastes 12:14

For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.

Jeremiah 17:10

I the LORD search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.

Jeremiah 32:19

Great in counsel, and mighty in work: for thine eyes are open upon all the ways of the sons of men: to give every one according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.

Matthew 16:27

For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works.

John 5:28,29

Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.

Romans 2:6

Who will render to every man according to his deeds.

2 Corinthians 5:10

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.

1 Peter 1:17

And if ye call on the Father, who without respect of persons judgeth according to every man's work, pass the time of your sojourning here in fear.

Revelation 2:3

And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works.

Revelation 20:12,13

And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works.

Revelation 22:12

And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be.

The Bible is absolutely clear that we will be judged according to our works.

We Protestants are so keen on promoting the truth that justification is by grace through faith alone, that we don't seem to realise that these passages are in the Bible. Protestants are right when they say that we can't possibly keep God's law, so if we are going to be saved at all, it must be by grace. But then many conclude from this, wrongly, that we therefore don't need to bother doing good works at all. But that's a terrible thing to conclude.

We are saved by grace, absolutely. Because we can't save ourselves. But we are saved **for a purpose**, namely, in order to do good works:

Ephesians 2:8-10

*For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus **unto** good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.*

But how can we do any good works at all, when we have a fallen nature? Does not the Bible say that:

Psalm 14:3

There is none that doeth good, no, not one.

The only way it is possible for us to do good works, is if the Lord gives us a new heart. There is no other way:

John 3:3

Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

And this is what true religion is all about. Yes, we are saved by grace alone, because we cannot be saved otherwise. But God saving us to eternal life must at the same time involve our receiving a new heart from Him. These two things are inseparable.

But, even though we now have a new heart, we still have a battle going on within us. The old heart is still there, dragging us back all the time. The Christian is called to put this old heart to death, and live by the Spirit, i.e. by the new heart that has been put within us:

Romans 8:11-14

But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you. Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.

To the extent that we no longer live according to the old nature but live according to the new heart put within us, we cannot sin:

1 John 3:9

Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.

But, of course, who of us actually lives like that? Nobody. Even the best of Christians is always failing. All of us always fall short. We daily have to cry to God:

Matthew 6:12

Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

And that is why we ought to readily forgive others:

Matthew 6:14,15

For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

The Bible calls us to walk worthy of our calling in Christ:

Ephesians 4:1

I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called.

Colossians 1:10

That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God.

1 Thessalonians 2:12

That ye would walk worthy of God, who hath called you unto his kingdom and glory.

But how do we do this? The only way is to come to an end of ourselves. We must trust in the Lord to work through us. There is no other way.

We must stop trusting in anything in ourselves. We must bring ourselves down to the dust where we belong. We must allow the Lord to work in the new heart He has given us, and stop trying to help Him in any way ourselves. We can't improve what He wants to do in us, so

we should stop trying. Only then, when we have completely surrendered to God's will, can we be said to walk worthy of our calling.

Witnessing

Evangelical churches are very keen on encouraging their members to “witness” for the Lord. Indeed, in many of these churches, as soon as we have “made our decision” for Christ, we are immediately told, “Now go and tell someone.” Members of such churches are continually made to feel guilty if they are not overtly, aggressively evangelising and getting fully involved in the church’s outreach programme. Such “witnessing,” apparently, is the Great Commission to the church:

Matthew 28:18-20

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

Mark 16:16

And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.

Apart from the fact that these two verses are often mistakenly confused with each other when quoted, and apart from the fact that they were actually instructions only given to the eleven disciples and not necessarily for us today, “witnessing” and outreach do play a very major part in the work of Evangelical Christians.

In fact it is the only work most of them do, all their activity being geared towards bringing people into their particular church, so that it may grow numerically. I heard the minister of an Evangelical church once say, “If the church doesn’t evangelise it will die,” conveniently forgetting that Christ Himself said:

Matthew 16:18

I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

In these churches, we are told that we must take every opportunity we can get to tell people about Jesus. So, when we are at work, and our workmates are all talking of something worldly, we should try our best to get the conversation around to religion as often as possible. Or, if we have a day off, we should spend it usefully by going out doing door-to-door work, or distributing tracts in the High Street, or something similar. But is this really what “witnessing” is all about?

Now, of course, please don’t misunderstand me. All of Christ’s people should evangelise. After all, we have good news to proclaim! All the elect need to be gathered in, and the ordinary means God uses for this is the spreading of the gospel throughout the world by His followers:

Romans 10:14,15

How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things.

Matthew 24:14

And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.

However, let me take you to Henan province in China. Henan has been described as “The Galilee of China,” because of the number of churches (legal and illegal) there are in that province, particularly in the rural areas. A church in every village. What a wonderful place it must be! Christians everywhere! Wouldn’t we all like to live in a place like that?

The “Christians” in Henan are very good at doing their bit of “witnessing” to everyone around them, inviting them to come to church and telling them about Jesus. As far as Evangelical churches are concerned, these are exemplary in their witnessing, and prime examples that we should all follow.

My wife recently started talking to an unbeliever from Henan about Christianity. Her response was, “Don’t talk to me about Christianity. There are so many people in Henan and they all say, “I love the Lord,”

“I’m born-again,” or “I love Jesus,” and they all try their utmost to get people to go to their churches. But they still lie, cheat and steal like everyone else. I’m better than that!” And she was absolutely right. Plenty of people who aren’t Christian in any way, realise that it is wrong to lie, cheat and steal, and they at least try not to do these things. We don’t have to be a Christian to know that these things are wrong. But what an indictment on the so-called “Christian” population of Henan. Surely, it ought not to be like this.

What about the *lives* of these Christians? Their lives don’t seem to have changed at all, even though they would tell you vehemently that they are “born-again,” and invite you to share their experience.

If anyone continues to lie, cheat and steal after they have supposedly “become a Christian,” then they’ve not truly been born-again at all. Such people can say that they love the Lord as much as they like, but the fact remains that they don’t. Christ speaks about many who say they are true believers, but are not, in very solemn words:

Matthew 7:21

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.

Yes, we are all called, if we are a Christian, to “witness” for Christ. But that doesn’t simply mean just outward evangelism. In fact, if we continually evangelise in that manner, people will actually be turned off from Christianity completely, thinking that we are just another religious nutcase. Why should we be right? Why should people go to our church, as opposed to any other church? Why should people choose our religion, as opposed to any other? This is no witness at all for Christ.

Of course, if we are asked about what we believe, then we should always be ready to give an answer:

1 Peter 3:15,16

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear: having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ.

But aggressively witnessing in such a way that puts people off the things of the Lord? Do we really realise that that sort of witnessing is vain?

It is our *lives* that are the true witness for Christ, not our aggressive evangelism. So, for example, women with unbelieving husbands are told:

1 Peter 3:1,2

Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives; while they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear.

Timothy was told to be an example to others, despite his youth:

1 Timothy 4:12

Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.

And when people unfairly persecute us, our witness to them ought to be our good conversation in Christ:

1 Peter 3:16

Having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ.

Yes, we need to tell people about Jesus. But by far the greatest witness we can have is to *do* what Christ says. We need to live our lives no longer the way the world does, in the vanity of our mind, but live by the new heart that has been put within us, nurturing the fruit of the Spirit, which the world does not have. Then, and only then, can we be of some use in the kingdom of the Lord, and be true witnesses for Him.

Matthew 7:24-27

Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the

sand: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.

Matthew 12:50

For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.

2 Corinthians 1:12

For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world, and more abundantly to you-ward.

Ephesians 4:17-24

This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart: who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. But ye have not so learned Christ; if so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus: that ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; and be renewed in the spirit of your mind; and that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.

1 John 2:17

And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.

Good Works

My unbelieving neighbour said something very interesting to me the other day. We were talking about religious extremists. He said that all religions are essentially good, but in every religion there are people who take the religion too far and become extremists. He mentioned as examples, extremist muslims who become suicide bombers, and extremist Roman Catholic nuns who abuse young girls.

After our conversation, I began to start thinking on these things.

Firstly, of course, no religion is good, except the one true religion that worships the only true and living God, Lord of heaven and earth. All other gods, indeed all other religions or philosophical systems which do not acknowledge the one true God, or that distort Him in any way, are figments of people's imaginations, and are by definition false and therefore evil.

However, I could see exactly where my neighbour was coming from. All religions, apart from a few obvious ones like Satanism, DO have, as an integral part of their religion, the performing of good works of charity towards their fellow men. By this, we mean kindness to their neighbour, helping little old ladies across the road, looking after the poor, and so on. In this sense, all major religions, including Secular Humanism (the majority religion in the West), are seemingly "good" at least in my neighbour's, and in most of the world's eyes.

Except Protestantism.

Protestantism, on the other hand, emphasises salvation by grace through faith. Can we not see how terrible this seems in the eyes of unenlightened men, who believe so strongly in doing good works to their neighbour? To them, Protestantism believes that all we have to do is say that we believe in Jesus, and we can be saved and go to heaven. No good works, nothing. We can carry on in sin all we like, and then in the end be saved to eternal life anyway. What a terrible religion! God, seemingly, has no interest in our doing good works at all. He saves us whether we do them or not. This caricature of Protestantism is so far

from the truth, but it is completely understandable why unbelievers think that way about us when we emphasise the doctrine of justification by faith alone so much.

We ought to be clear. We are saved by grace through faith, not of anything in ourselves. But we are only saved in a way whereby God grants us a new heart, so that we are then enabled to perform the good works that God wants us to do, which we could not do otherwise. We are saved **UNTO** good works:

Ephesians 2:8-10

*For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus **unto good works**, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.*

All other religions believe that we are able to do enough good works by ourselves to warrant heaven (or whatever reward the religion has). Protestantism is unique in that it believes, quite rightly, that we do **NOT** have the ability to warrant heaven, no matter how much we try to please God. That's because of the fall of man in the garden of Eden:

Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 19

All mankind, by their [Adam and Eve's] fall, lost communion with God, are under His wrath and curse, and so made liable to all the miseries of this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell forever.

a Genesis 3:8,24; John 8:34,42,44; Ephesians 2:12; 4:18.

b John 3:36; Romans 1:18; Ephesians 2:3; 5:6.

c Galatians 3:10; Revelation 22:3.

d Genesis 3:16-19; Job 5:7; Ecclesiastes 2:22,23; Romans 8:18-23.

e Ezekiel 18:4; Romans 5:12; 6:23.

f Matthew 25:41,46; II Thessalonians 1:9; Revelation 14:9-11.

Romans 8:7,8

The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.

Hebrews 11:6

But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

So what we need is to see our inability, then cry to God for mercy. Only then could God (if He so wished) grant us the faith and repentance required to turn to Him and become one of His children. Only then will He grant to His people a new heart and an ability to perform the good works that He has before ordained that they should walk therein.

Acts 2:39

For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.

Acts 13:48

As many as were ordained to eternal life believed.

Acts 11:18

Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.

This is the true gospel that we should be proclaiming. However....

The problem is compounded greatly in that most Protestant churches themselves don't believe this, and promote the gospel as simply believing in Jesus with no mention of any good works to follow. God forbid that that should be the gospel!

Romans 6:1,2

Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid.

I heard on television someone say that "We don't need to do anything for our salvation, except believe." But any exception is a work. To believe in the Lord Jesus Christ for our salvation is a work on our part. In reality, faith is a gift of God, therefore it is not really a work but a gift. But if we feel we have to whip it up ourselves, then we are making it a work, and trusting in our faith rather than in the grace of God for our salvation. No wonder such people think we can lose our salvation. If it was up to us, we stand no chance of keeping it.

Consequently, sin is taken so lightly by such people. But the most mature believers in the Bible saw how wretched they really were:

Job 40:4

Behold, I am vile...

Psalm 51:5

Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.

Romans 7:24

O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?

But an even greater problem in Protestant churches is that people are taught that anyone trying to keep the law is a legalist. People wrongly assume that all such people are doing so in order to curry favour with God and gain salvation by works. Those who do try to keep the law because they think it is a way of salvation (which it never was since the Fall), are wrong. Salvation is by grace through faith. However, there is another kind of person who also tries to keep the law of God, namely all those who have had the new heart put within them, and who consequently try to do good works out of gratitude for the salvation that has been freely given to them in Christ. They want to please God. They outwardly appear exactly the same as those trying to work their way to salvation, but they are not performing good works for the same reason. Simple Protestants who don't understand the new birth properly, don't understand that true believers should love the law and want to keep it out of gratitude and love for God.

Psalm 119:97

O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day.

So there are an army of people in Protestant, Evangelical churches, who think that all we need to do is "believe in Jesus," that thinking about sin is wrong, and that to strive to keep the law is works religion and should be avoided. Are people who believe all this regenerate? I don't wish to speculate. But they are certainly not mature Christians, otherwise they would love good works, want to do them, and be able to see how wretched they are by nature.

May we become such like mature Christians.

Galatians 5:9,10

And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.

One final thought. The unbelieving neighbour who I had a conversation with which sparked me thinking on these things, is a really good neighbour. I have no problem in having him to look after my house when I go away for months at a time. He has a key, keeps an eye on the place, and I can trust him completely with my property. He even did some odd jobs around the house, which I would never even have thought of doing if it was me looking after his house. He is a really good neighbour to have. Contrast this with professing Christians. Lend them a book, and it is almost unheard of that they would give it you back. I used to be involved with publishing Christian books, and I can witness that most Christian bookshops just won't pay their bills. If you eventually remind them, their attitude would be something like, "Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot. But you have to forgive me because you're a Christian." The sad fact is that professing Christians are hopeless at doing good works, compared to the world.

May we be true witnesses for Christ.

Matthew 5:20

For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.

I know this verse primarily refers to Christ's righteousness imputed to us, but I suggest that, if we truly love God, we should take heed of it ourselves, if we want to walk worthy of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

Colossians 1:10

That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God.

The Doctrine According to Godliness

1 Timothy 6:3-5

If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, Perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself.

Doctrine. What goes through your mind whenever you hear that word?

Many people in the church today hate that word. They would say, "Doctrine divides, but love unites." And maybe they would quote Scripture:

1 Corinthians 8:1

Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth.

But that statement in itself is a dogmatic, doctrinal statement. It is impossible to be without doctrine. Doctrine is useful. Doctrine is the body of truth that we believe. Do we believe that the earth is billions of years old, and that when we are dead that is the end? That is a doctrinal statement, and millions of people live their lives in the light of that statement. But it is a totally false doctrine, and millions of people go to hell as a result of believing in it. It is therefore very important that we have correct doctrine, so we may know what is true.

There are many people that hate the truth:

Romans 1:28

And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient.

Romans 10:2

For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge.

2 Timothy 3:7

Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.

But we, true Christians, love the truth, and we want to grow in the knowledge of it. God:

1 Timothy 2:4

....will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.

2 Peter 3:18

But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen.

But the purpose of knowing what is true is not so that we can be clever and impress our friends. Or even that we may win theological debates. The purpose of coming to a knowledge of the truth is solely for the purpose of then applying it to our lives practically.

Christ taught doctrine:

Mark 1:22

And they were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one that had authority, and not as the scribes.

And His doctrine came from the Father:

John 7:16,17

Jesus answered them, and said, My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself.

And such doctrine is most important as the only source of all our teaching in the church:

1 Timothy 4:16

Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee.

We need to make sure we have the knowledge of the truth, and that we keep hold of it. But unbelievers can know the truth – after all it is

freely available in the Bible – and as a result they can easily become better theologians than true believers, and many of them shame us with their knowledge of the Bible.

There are plenty of people who receive the truth, join the church, and maybe are in it for many years, but they are without a regenerate heart, and consequently their lives don't change in accordance with it:

Hebrews 10:26

For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins.

Many people in the church think that true doctrine and the defence of it against all comers is all that there is to true religion. They love a fight. They love to have a good debate whereby they can defend (what they think is) the truth. And many church splits have occurred because of this.

There are thousands of different denominations in the world now, all living as though they were the only church in the world, having no connection with any other church. This can't be a good witness for Christ. Yet the people who try to defend their denomination, and who feel they are called of God to do this, won't agree with me. They'll say "To keep the testimony to the truth, we must split from the parent church because it has allowed error into its teachings."

Do you know any churches like this? I do. I've been in them. They're very attractive, because the defence of the truth is a very important part of the Christian faith. I can understand people who think this way. But the problem we must face is that no denomination or movement on the face of the earth will ever have no error in it. No matter how many times they split, they will still have some wrong theology somewhere.

That doesn't mean that we should not ourselves as individuals continue to seek the truth by studying God's Word, so long as we never think that a time has come when we no longer hold any major errors any more. This is especially a concern when we have been blinded into believing that only one denomination on earth has the truth.

Many people know the truth, but they've never been born-again in their hearts. Yes, it is possible to be sound in our theology and still go to hell. All our theology may be right, but without a new heart, we are still in our sins and trespasses. We can spend our entire life defending the truth, and at the last end up in hell fire.

The most important thing in life is that we get ourselves a new heart, that we become a new creature in Christ. That involves humility, crying to God for mercy. These unbelieving truth-defenders don't know what true humility is, they just want to aggressively defend their position in a worldly way, using human means of persuasion.

But we can't do that. Yes, we may, by human persuasion, get followers for ourselves and our own little cause. We may even be able to start a church and see it grow. But that is not what Christianity is about. Our job is to get followers for Jesus, not ourselves.

What truth these people do teach can indeed be used of God to convert people. But it is the truth that converts. The Word of God is living and powerful, not the words or persuasive power of men:

Hebrews 4:12

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

1 Corinthians 2:4,5

And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

The Christian life is not just about defending true doctrine. It is far more than that. It is also about applying the doctrine we know in order to live a godly life. If every time we come to the Scripture, we have no interest in practically applying it, then there is no spiritual life in us at all.

This is also the test we can use whenever we listen to others. Did that sermon, that article, that conversation with that so-called believer challenge me? change me? inspire me to live in a more godly manner?

If not, we need to doubt the faith of the person we have been listening to. If all they wanted was to teach:

1 Timothy 1:4

...fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith....

.... then it was a waste of time listening to them. It is “*godly edifying*” that we need. This is the true “*doctrine according to godliness.*”

1 Timothy 1:5-7

Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned: from which some having swerved have turned aside unto vain jangling; desiring to be teachers of the law; understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm.

Here is an example of what I mean. Do we believe that we are bipartite or tripartite beings? There we are, I have lost some readers already. By that I mean, do we believe that man is made up of body and soul (two entities), or body, soul and spirit (three entities)? True Christians disagree on this issue. But the question is not which side do we fall into, but rather, does it affect my way of life whichever of them I believe? If it doesn't affect my way of life at all either way, it is pretty much a waste of time arguing about it.

How many angels can fit on the end of a pin? This is an interesting philosophical question, but does finding the answer to it change my attitude towards loving my neighbour? If not, we shouldn't waste time thinking about it.

However, what about this question: Does everything happen by chance, or does everything happen under God's providential control? Now, this question can seriously affect the way we live. If we don't know the answer to it, or if we believe the wrong answer, we will go well astray. It is important that we know the answer to this question.

Nothing, absolutely nothing in this world happens by “chance.” I really don't know how people can live believing this, they must live very anxious lives. Many scientists believe that one day a giant asteroid will crash into the earth and wipe many of us out. What a life. Believing in

such a thing as “chance” must make life intolerably miserable. However, if we truly believe in the providence of God, that God is in control of all things, then we can have the comfort of knowing that God knows what He is doing, and we can put our trust in Him:

Romans 8:28

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

And even if an asteroid does come and wipe us out, we can rest in the knowledge that there was a purpose behind it, rather than it being just a random event.

Our belief in sound doctrine should therefore always lead to practical Christian living:

Titus 2:1-8

But speak thou the things which become sound doctrine: that the aged men be sober, grave, temperate, sound in faith, in charity, in patience. The aged women likewise, that they be in behaviour as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things; that they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed. Young men likewise exhort to be sober minded. In all things shewing thyself a pattern of good works: in doctrine shewing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity, sound speech, that cannot be condemned; that he that is of the contrary part may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say of you.

Let us teach sound doctrine by all means, but let it also inspire us on to teaching godly living:

Hebrews 12:14

Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.

The Undetectable God

What is the biggest problem that we come across when we are witnessing our faith to people? Surely it is the fact that everything we have to say to them is spiritual, and therefore invisible to their senses. They therefore conclude that our religion is just “pie in the sky when you die,” and consequently, they will not listen. They want something tangible.

This problem is not just confined to ignorant people. Many very intelligent people, Oxford professors, think this way as well. They can't detect God with their senses, nor with any of their sensitive scientific instruments (and they never will be able to), so, they conclude that God is just a delusion in the minds of weak people. And they make lots of money writing popular books on the subject.

Ever since the fall of Adam and Eve, all of us are now bound by nature to the things of time and sense:

Westminster Shorter Catechism Q.19

All mankind, by their fall, lost communion with God, are under His wrath and curse, and so made liable to all the miseries of this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell for ever.

a Genesis 3:8,24; John 8:34,42,44; Ephesians 2:12, 4:18.

b John 3:36; Romans 1:18; Ephesians 2:3, 5:6.

c Galatians 3:10; Revelation 22:3.

d Genesis 3:16-19; Job 5:7; Ecclesiastes 2:22,23; Romans 8:18-23.

e Ezekiel 18:4; Romans 5:12, 6:23.

f Matthew 25:41,46; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Revelation 14:9-11.

God is a Spirit, and so, whether we are fallen creatures or not, He will never actually be seen or sensed with the senses that we have as created beings:

John 1:18; 1 John 4:12

No man hath seen God at any time.

But before the fall of Adam, God was at least detectable by man in some way, and Adam could at least commune with Him and have a relationship with Him. Now He is not. From the fall of Adam to Christ's second coming at the end of time, this will be the situation we will find ourselves in.

But, God has not left man in this situation, although He could have done, if He had wished to do so. He left the fallen angels without any plan to save them, why not men? Just let them fall into hell fire, which is where they all deserve to go. But:

John 3:16

God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

So, the wonderful news is that a number that no man can number are going to be saved from the wrath to come through the blood of the Lamb. They are going to be regenerated, given a new heart and a new nature, and restored into communion and fellowship with the living God. Are we one of these people? We must pray to God for a new heart, and not give Him rest until we get it.

How do these people now walk, while they are in this world? They are still in these bodies and consequently still cannot detect God by their natural senses. Yet, they now **know** in their new hearts that He exists and is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him:

Hebrews 11:6

But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

So they:

2 Corinthians 5:7

Walk by faith, not by sight.

The change that has happened to them is spiritual, and therefore invisible to the naked eye. That's why the world doesn't understand them:

Matthew 13:13

They seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.

But true Christians can still have a problem with the invisibility, the spirituality, of their religion.

Sometimes they can feel that God is not with them. But even Christ in His human body had this problem too, actually. Once. Christ on the cross cried:

Psalm 22:1

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

Christ Himself at that point felt utterly forsaken by His Father, but of course, the Father was actually never more pleased with Him than when He was hanging on the cross making atonement for the sins of His people.

And also, quite often, Christians can think along the lines that surely something about God and about true religion ought to be visible.

Surely, we ought to be baptised by water to be saved? No, baptism is merely a physical picture of the spiritual reality that we need to be baptised by the Holy Spirit, i.e. born again, and have a new heart put within us.

1 Peter 3:21

The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Surely we must have to take the communion to be saved? After all, Christ said:

John 6:53,54

Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.

No, this too is spiritual. We must eat and drink Christ spiritually to be saved:

John 6:58

This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live for ever.

Surely we must have to be a church member to be saved? No, visible churches in this world, like all these visible things, are again only ever a physical picture of the spiritual reality:

Hebrews 12:22,23

But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect.

But what about Old Testament saints. Surely they had to be circumcised to be saved? No:

Romans 2:28,29

For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.

Surely they had to make animal sacrifices to be saved? No:

Hebrews 10:4,11-14

For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins.... And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: but this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; from henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool. For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.

Surely the Jews had, and still have, a piece of real estate at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea as their true home and Promised Land? No:

Hebrews 11:13-16

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

Hebrews 13:14

For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.

Surely in the Old Testament men had to keep the law to be saved, whereas now in the New we just have to believe in Jesus? No, to be saved to eternal life they had to believe in the Messiah that was to come, in exactly the same way that we have to look to the Messiah that has been:

Romans 3:29,30

Is he the God of the Jews only? is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also: seeing it is one God, which shall justify the circumcision by faith, and uncircumcision through faith.

1 Corinthians 10:1-4

Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and did all eat the same spiritual meat; and did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ.

Galatians 3:8

And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed.

Hebrews 4:2

For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.

So we see that absolutely everything about true religion is, and ever has been, spiritual, and the sooner we learn that, the better.

But did not God ordain all these visible things such as animal sacrifices, the law on tables of stone, the Promised Land, baptism, the Lord's Supper, etc., and did He not give instructions in the Bible as to how to order visible churches?

Yes, that's true. But the reason He did that is because we are always going to need visible representations while we are in this world, exactly because we can't see the spiritual reality. But we must always keep in mind that the visible things are merely physical pictures that point to the spiritual reality, and never the real thing. We should at no time let the picture become more important than the reality.

So, how are we to live our lives? We are to live them in the light of the eternal:

2 Corinthians 4:17-5:1

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal. For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

Colossians 3:1-3

If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.

Matthew 10:28

Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

It is because of the invisibility of everything about our faith that the world will laugh at us, ridicule us, ignore us or even may persecute us. But we should humble ourselves and:

Philippians 2:5-8

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Do we really do this? Or are we still hooked onto the things of this world, outward church appearances and the like, and think that these can be our witness to the world?

1 John 2:15-17

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.

Everything under the sun is vanity:

Ecclesiastes 2:11

Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.

This is the message we need to get across to others. Many people already know it. In China, every day I see many young people on the underground, slumped in their seats, going to work for 12 hours a day, getting on the underground again in the evening to go home, again slumped in their seats (yes, they get a seat, so they must travel a long distance), then they spend all night in their internet cafes gaming, before doing it all again the next day. Regularly there are reports of one of these pathetic creatures throwing themselves out of the window from a high building because they can't face it any more. These people KNOW that "*all is vanity and vexation of spirit.*" We don't have to tell them. But at the same time they refuse to come to an invisible Saviour who is the only one who can help them.

John 5:40

And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life.

We must face eternity. We are only here in this world for a time:

Hebrews 9:27

It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.

There is nowhere else to go to. The disciples realised this:

John 6:67-69

Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away? Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God.

Let us make sure that we do too.

Psalm 73:25,26

Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.

The Lost Art of Suffering Wrongfully

Acts 26:25

I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness.

I used to work in a hospital, and I often went to the hospital chapel during my tea breaks for some quiet time to read my Bible. However, I had to give up in the end and go elsewhere, because I was so frequently interrupted by patients from the psychiatric ward coming in and disturbing the peace. Many people with psychiatric illnesses are “religious.” Consequently, the world thinks that all “religious” people, even those who have truly been born-again and have the true religion, have got something wrong with them.

Christ and the apostles had to confront this problem as well. On several occasions in the Bible we are told about someone with an unclean spirit who was actually speaking the truth, but because their lives did not reflect godly living, they were told to be quiet as their verbal witness was not in line with their lifestyle, and therefore not a good witness at all:

Mark 1:23,24

And there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, saying, Let us alone; what have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God.

Mark 1:34

And he healed many that were sick of divers diseases, and cast out many devils; and suffered not the devils to speak, because they knew him.

Mark 3:11,12

And unclean spirits, when they saw him, fell down before him, and cried, saying, Thou art the Son of God. And he straitly charged them that they should not make him known.

Mark 5:7,8

And cried with a loud voice, and said, What have I to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of the most high God? I adjure thee by God, that thou torment me not. For he said unto him, Come out of the man, thou unclean spirit.

Acts 16:17,18

The same followed Paul and us, and cried, saying, These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation. And this did she many days. But Paul, being grieved, turned and said to the spirit, I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And he came out the same hour.

This, primarily, is a warning to us all. Our lives should never be at odds with our testimony. Now we have a new heart put within us, we Christians are no longer like the world, indeed we will, and should, be different from the world, and this difference is our witness before men. As soon as we, who profess Christianity, make one mistake, the world will be after us and conclude that our religion is false and that all their psychologists are right. They will instantly dismiss us as having a religious “delusion,” and consequently they won’t listen to us.

But we make mistakes and fall all the time. How can we possibly be a credible witness to those around us? Whenever we give in to our carnal nature and behave like them, they get what they want. As we are sadly doing this all the time, it can truly be said that:

John 7:7

The world cannot hate you; but me it hateth, because I testify of it, that the works thereof are evil.

However, it is important that we should not let this bother us.

Firstly, let us look positively at how we are to be different from the world:

We are to be sober, children of the day:

1 Thessalonians 5:6-8

Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let

us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation.

1 Peter 1:13-16

Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance: but as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy.

1 Peter 4:7

But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer.

1 Peter 5:8

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.

We are to speak and live truth at all times:

John 3:21

But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.

John 8:32

And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

John 14:16,17

And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you.

1 Corinthians 5:8

Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Ephesians 4:25

Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another.

2 John 4

I rejoiced greatly that I found of thy children walking in truth, as we have received a commandment from the Father.

3 John 4

I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.

We are to be genuine and sincere:

Philippians 1:10

That ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ; being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 2:15,16

That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; holding forth the word of life.

Joshua 24:14

Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the LORD.

1 Corinthians 5:8

Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

2 Corinthians 2:17

For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ.

2 Corinthians 8:8

I speak not by commandment, but by occasion of the forwardness of others, and to prove the sincerity of your love.

Ephesians 6:24

Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. Amen.

Titus 2:7,8

In all things shewing thyself a pattern of good works: in doctrine shewing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity, sound speech, that cannot be condemned; that he that is of the contrary part may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say of you.

To sum up, our lives should be lives of (and I love this phrase) “*simplicity and godly sincerity*”:

2 Corinthians 1:12

For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world, and more abundantly to you-ward.

And we should be continually producing the fruit of the Spirit:

Galatians 5:22,23

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.

This is impossible for the natural man. We must be born again:

John 3:3

Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Hebrews 11:6

But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

Our calling as truly born-again believers is to be spiritually minded at all times:

Romans 8:6-8

For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.

Romans 8:13-14

For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.

Our true witness to the world takes place whenever we live according to the Spirit. Whenever we fail, and let the carnal nature take over, the witness is gone. People will see inconsistency in our lives and laugh at us and reject our religion. So it is important to understand the necessity of our living according to the Spirit.

Truly the Christian life is such a high calling:

Philippians 3:13,14

Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

However, we are also taught in Scripture that even if we do what is right and obey the Spirit of God in our actions, the world will still hate us. We can't win, in their eyes. Even if we do good works, they will still speak against us as evildoers:

1 Peter 2:12

Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation.

But it is still our witness to the world to do good. If we are to follow Christ, this is exactly what He had to suffer. Unlike any of us, He was sinless, yet the world persecuted Him so much it put Him to death. If we are to follow Him, we can expect no better. We must learn the lost art of suffering wrongfully.

Here is an interesting teaching from Christ:

Matthew 5:38-48

Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: but I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them

which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.

If we really do live our lives in the manner suggested here, namely to “resist not evil,” and “Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away,” does not that make the Christian a doormat for everyone else to walk all over? Surely, people will ask us for everything we have, and if we say, “No,” they can point to this passage and say that we are not being a very good Christian. So how should we really behave?

Yes, we should, as Christians, love righteousness and hate wickedness, yet at the same time we are told to love our enemies:

Romans 12:19-21

Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.

But our enemy has wronged us, and we quite rightly hate wickedness. Yes, but here we are told that we shouldn't fight back but leave vengeance to the Lord.

Christ tells us that we should expect persecution in this world, because we love (and want to do) what's right:

Luke 6:22

Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake.

1 John 3:13

Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you.

John 15:18-20

If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also.

So, inevitably, we will suffer wrongfully at the hands of the wicked around us. How are we to live our lives in the light of this?

Firstly, we are to realise that suffering at the hands of men for doing well is acceptable before God:

1 Peter 2:19,20

For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God.

Indeed, it is exactly to such a life that we, as Christians, have been called. Why? Because this is the way Christ went before us, and we should expect no better:

1 Peter 2:21-25

For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously: who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed. For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.

Secondly, everything is under the Lord's providential control, and He won't allow us to become destitute as a result of following Him and doing what is right, so we shouldn't worry about such things, but rather put all our trust in Him:

Matthew 5:25-34

Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they? Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: and yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek;) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

Therefore we need to realise that the Christian life is going to be one of suffering wrongfully, we can't avoid it.

We are called to go against every last natural instinct in our bodies. Our natural instincts aim at the preservation of self, the promotion and well-being of self. Modern psychologists assume that this is a good thing, and consequently people won't understand us. Like Festus, they will think we are mad. But actually, this is still the witness we need to be:

Acts 26:24,25

And as he thus spake for himself, Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad. But he said, I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness.

Christ did not defend Himself before Pilate but was silent:

Matthew 27:13,14

Then said Pilate unto him, Hearest thou not how many things they witness against thee? And he answered him to never a word; insomuch that the governor marvelled greatly.

Our unjust persecutions are a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God:

2 Thessalonians 1:4,5

So that we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure: which is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God, that ye may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which ye also suffer.

And our not being terrified by our adversaries is also a witness:

Philippians 1:28

And in nothing terrified by your adversaries: which is to them an evident token of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that of God.

All this is a part of our witness to the world around us. Despite everything, we should continue to follow Christ, love the Lord and trust in Him to keep us to the end, and indeed to judge our enemies in righteousness at the appropriate time:

1 Peter 3:14-17

But and if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled; but sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear: having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ. For it is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing, than for evil doing.

1 Peter 4:12-16,19

Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters. Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.... Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator.

Matthew 5:10-12

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

What If I Am Not One Of The Elect?

John 15:16

Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you.

Many people have a problem with the subject of God's electing grace. If salvation is solely dependent upon God's choice of who would be saved and who goes to hell, then, they would argue, that is totally unfair. Surely, God is a fair God, and should give all men an equal opportunity to be saved. They would say that it has to be our decision to follow the Lord or not which makes the difference between the saved and the lost, otherwise a loving God is creating people then sending some of them to hell with never any chance of escape. The thought of God sending some people to hell fire and saving others without any merit on their part, without there being any difference in nature between them and those going to hell, many people, including many professing Christians, would find abhorrent. They would say it is unfair and makes God a monster.

However, that is not true. An incident occurred once which may help to show why God choosing some and not others, is not unfair at all.

My wife's sister came over from China recently, and we had to do the tourist trail. I don't like or recommend doing the tourist trail, but we had to be good hosts, and they wanted to see the sights. One place they wanted to see was the palace at Versailles, just outside Paris. We spent the whole day there, mainly because it took three hours of queuing to get in. It was totally unenjoyable simply because of the number of people. However, at about 4.30pm, we decided we had seen all we wanted to see, and made our way back to the railway station. The problem was that thousands of others decided to do the same thing at the same time.

Once at the station, we had to join a long queue for tickets for the train back to Paris. After about half an hour, however, the staff at the station were so overwhelmed with the number of people, that the decision was made to throw all the gates open and let everybody on the train for free. In the huge surge forward, the phrase "Hillsborough

disaster” did cross my mind. Give people something for nothing and they’ll all want it. Anyway, we got on the train for free.

But while I was on the train I was thinking about all those who had actually paid for a ticket, before the authorities decided to throw the gates open. I had to admit, if I was one of them I would have been most aggrieved to find out that I had paid, yet thousands of others got on for nothing. In fact I would have been very angry at the train company. “Why couldn’t I get on for free as well?” I would be demanding. This is totally unfair!

But was it really unfair of the train company? No. The people who had paid for their ticket, paid the right amount of money, and received the correct service from the train company. The train company had done nothing wrong to them at all. They hadn’t overcharged them, or taken them to the wrong place, they had given them exactly what their ticket contracted them to do, at the correctly advertised price. The fact that a lot of people had got on for nothing was completely irrelevant to the argument about the fairness of the train company to those who had paid for a ticket.

Now, translate this argument to God’s dealings with men. What does God do wrong by throwing anyone into hell fire for ever? Nothing. They get exactly what we all justly deserve. If He threw every one of us into hell fire for ever, what would He have done wrong? Nothing. Hell fire for ever is the perfect punishment to fit the crime for the utter sinfulness by nature of every one of us. If God ever gave anyone too much punishment, or inappropriate punishment (like letting them off after only a temporary punishment in a place like the fictional purgatory), now THAT would make God unfair, and consequently a monster, because He would be totally unjust. But the perfect punishment to fit the crime? Of course that is fair and just. Only God knows the heart of every individual, and so only God can judge justly:

Genesis 18:25

Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?

Rather than complaining about God, which people are all too ready to do by nature, the real problem is that we don’t see the depth of our

absolute, utter sinfulness before a holy God, and don't recognise that hell fire for ever is actually what we all truly deserve.

The reality is that we all need a Saviour because we can't save ourselves. While we are in this world, God has thrown the gates to heaven open. He has provided a Saviour in the Lord Jesus Christ. But we must also be granted repentance and faith by the Lord to put our trust in that Saviour. If we sit around doing nothing, not bothering about our sinful nature other than giving in to it all the time, what do we expect from God? Of course He could rightly eventually drop us into hell fire, the place we all deserve to be for eternity. He would have done nothing wrong in doing so. The fallen angels never had an "opportunity of salvation" after they had fallen, so why should we?

Jude 6

And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day.

The prerogative is always with God as to whether He will save us or not. We can do nothing. But does that mean that we should just sit back and actually do nothing? No. Our sins before a holy God ought to bother us. If they don't bother us, we have a serious problem. We can never be good enough to please the holy God who created us and rules all things by His providence. We must at least recognise this, and be concerned about it, not least because of the fact that we are utterly unable to do anything about it. Such concern is what we need, because it is the only thing that will make us cry to God for mercy. If we have such concern, we can look up! God may be working in us to bring us to salvation. We must cry to Him! Call on Him! He is a merciful God.

John 6:37

All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.

How many people realise any of this and rush through the gates onto the train to heaven for free? None. People just laugh at such a religion and ignore it, because they are quite happy in their utter sinfulness. This is always going to be our response unless the Lord intervenes and changes our heart. We all deserve to justly reap the wages of sin, and

God will have done nothing wrong if we end up in hell fire for ever. But if the Lord sees fit to open the eyes of some people to see their predicament, and enables them to call on Him to have mercy upon them, He will indeed save them by giving them a new heart that is now able to respond to His calling and can now begin to keep His commandments. As well as being a just God, He is also a merciful God. Both His justice and His mercy need to be displayed in order to show the true extent of His glory. One without the other would not do this. He has sent a Saviour into the world to save a certain number from the consequences of their sin by punishing their sin in the Saviour instead, i.e. some people get on the train to heaven for free. Others are left on the train to hell that they have fully paid for by their own sinful ways:

Romans 6:23

For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Which group of people are we in? Only God can tell us. If we are one of the elect, with a free ticket to heaven, and the Lord has delivered us from the wrath to come, how then should we react? Should we be proud, claiming that we are better than those who didn't receive such mercy? God forbid! We are no better than them at all. The only difference is that the Lord has been merciful to us. This should humble us to the dust and give us such a thankful heart for all the benefits that the Lord has showered upon us. Pride has been destroyed. Boasting is excluded. Praise the Lord!

Daniel 4:37

Those that walk in pride he is able to abase.

Romans 3:27

Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay; but by the law of faith.

If we are not one of the elect, what about us? If there is no hope for us, why not sin all we like? Why not hate God more and more and ridicule true religion? If there is no hope of salvation for us anyway, why not riot to excess? Hang on a minute.

No-one can know whether they are elect or not while they are in an unregenerate state. In other words, neither the elect nor the non-elect can know which category they fall into without the Lord regenerating them and giving them a new heart first. One can only know of one's election after having been regenerated. So someone concerned about whether they are elect or not before regeneration is concerned about the wrong thing, because he can't possibly know such a thing. Knowledge of our election or otherwise is not our warrant for coming to God. The command of the gospel is our only warrant to come to Him. If one is elect, one will respond to the gospel command to repent and believe in Christ, because the Lord will grant the faith and repentance required; if one is not elect, one will never respond to it. And just because someone on one particular occasion rejects the gospel, this doesn't prove that they will never come. Many of the elect reject the gospel for a time, maybe a long time, but in the end they do respond, so we can never give up hope in this world and say about anyone, "You're not one of the elect, I am not preaching the gospel to you!"

All men, whether elect or not, are commanded to repent and turn to Christ. This is the duty of all men, as it is the only way of salvation, because no man now, since the fall, is able to keep God's holy law. The command is to all men to perform that duty. No man can do this of himself, but needs the Lord to regenerate him, so only the elect will ever respond. But the command is to all men everywhere. To the elect, God will grant the faith and repentance required to keep it. Then they will know their election of God:

1 Thessalonians 1:4

Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God.

To the non-elect, God will never do so, so the non-elect will never fulfil the command, and therefore be justly left in their sins and punished for them. The non-elect can never know in this world whether they are non-elect or not. They are lying if they tell you otherwise. While they are here, they are indistinguishable from the unregenerate elect, of whom it is said:

Ephesians 2:2,3

In time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.

The non-elect only find out they are non-elect when they arrive in hell fire, and then it will be too late to cry for any kind of mercy from the Lord.

The only thing any of us, elect or non-elect, can do now, today, is to cry to Him for mercy whilst we still have life and breath in this world. He may not answer, we may never be given the inclination to do this. He does not have to answer and will not have done anything wrong if He doesn't answer, but this is the only hope any of us has:

Zephaniah 2:3

Seek ye the LORD, all ye meek of the earth, which have wrought his judgment; seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the LORD'S anger.

Matthew 25:46

And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.

2 Thessalonians 2:13

But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth.

The End Does Not Justify The Means

I want to start this article, uncharacteristically, by giving an example from football.

There was once an occasion in the World Cup when Argentina played England, and Argentina won 2-1. It became clear on the television replay, that in the process of scoring the first Argentinian goal, the goal-scorer handled the ball. However, the referee didn't see it and the goal was allowed. Afterwards, the goal scorer admitted he handled the ball by calling it "the Hand of God." If he's reading this, I'd like to tell him, GOD DOESN'T CHEAT.

Now, the reason I'm using that example is to show one of the most important differences between Protestant Christianity and most other religions. To that goal-scorer, having the goal accepted by the referee was far more important than how he did it, namely by handling the ball where the referee couldn't see it and not telling him what he'd done. In other words, the end was far more important than the means. And most religions would hold to that way of thinking.

Some Muslims (thankfully not many) think that the glory of Allah is served in silencing unbelievers. So they strap bombs to themselves and set them off in public places, trying to kill as many unbelievers as possible, really believing they have glorified Allah by doing that. The end (of silencing as many unbelievers as possible) has been achieved, and they have simply been martyred in the process to go to a far better place. They think they know what Allah wants, they think they know the end, the means whereby they achieve that end, by killing and maiming, doesn't matter to them, it's irrelevant.

Roman Catholics have as their end the glory of the pope of Rome and their church. At one time they thought it was just and right to burn Protestants at the stake because they were opposing their glorious church. Again, they thought the end, silencing Protestants, outshone the means by which they did it, by killing them.

I know that most muslims and most Roman Catholics today would never dream of doing such things as this. But the fact remains that a fundamental part of both religions is the philosophy that the end justifies the means. They can cheat, lie, steal and kill, as long as the glory of Allah, or the pope of Rome, is in their mind upheld. That is not the way we should behave.

In Protestant Christianity, it's all the other way around. The means are far, far more important than the end. We must not cheat, lie, steal or kill. We must not sin. God has given us a moral law to live by, which is summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments. That is our rule of life. And the fact is that, most of the time, we don't know the end God has in mind anyway, we don't know what God wants to bring to pass, we leave the end to God. We just stick to the means, keeping the Commandments, and rest in the fact that whatever comes to pass is in God's hands and is always to His own glory.

We all need to get away from living for ourselves in this world. It is a wretched condition we are born into by nature. We need to see the far, far bigger picture, and love God and want to see Him glorified in all things, regardless of our own personal circumstances.

Psalm 86:12

I will praise thee, O Lord my God, with all my heart: and I will glorify thy name for evermore.

Isaiah 24:15

Wherefore glorify ye the Lord in the fires, even the name of the Lord God of Israel in the isles of the sea.

John 13:31,32

Therefore, when he was gone out, Jesus said, Now is the Son of man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God be glorified in him, God shall also glorify him in himself, and shall straightway glorify him.

John 21:18,19

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldst: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldst not.

This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me.

Romans 15:5,6

Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus: That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Romans 15:9

And that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy; as it is written, For this cause I will confess to thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name.

1 Corinthians 6:20

For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's.

2 Corinthians 9:13

Whiles by the experiment of this ministration they glorify God for your professed subjection unto the gospel of Christ, and for your liberal distribution unto them, and unto all men.

1 Peter 2:12

Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation.

1 Peter 4:16

Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.

Matthew 16:24-26

Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?

Romans 11:36

For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.

Our chief end, the reason why we're all here, whether we know it or not, is to glorify God:

Westminster Larger Catechism Q.1.

Q. What is the chief and highest end of man?

A. Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy Him forever.

a Romans 11:36; 1 Corinthians 6:20; 1 Corinthians 10:31; Psalm 86:9,12.

b Psalm 73:24-28; John 17:21-23; Psalm 16:5-11; Revelation 21:3-4.

We should long to glorify God more than anything else. But most of the time we don't know what God actually wants. But we do know how He has asked us to live, and we must just stick to that, and leave everything else to God.

Here's a Biblical example, which in fact is unusual in that Abraham did actually know what God wanted. Abraham was promised that he would have a child:

Genesis 12:1,2

Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing.

Genesis 13:16

And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth: so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered.

Genesis 15:3-5

And Abram said, Behold, to me thou hast given no seed: and, lo, one born in my house is mine heir. And, behold, the word of the Lord came unto him, saying, This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir. And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be.

This promise was a glorious end in view for Abraham and his wife Sarah, not least because of the fact that one day, many generations later, the Saviour would be born through that promised child's line. However, Sarah could not ordinarily have children. For years and years

she was barren, and now she was past child-bearing age. So she concocted what she thought to be a way of Abraham having the child God had promised:

Genesis 16:1-3

Now Sarai Abram's wife bare him no children: and she had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the Lord hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai. And Sarai Abram's wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife.

Sarah had a good end in view, namely the child God had promised Abraham many years before. She knew that was the end God wanted. But she tried to take things into her own hands. Was the means that God would use really going to be through an adulterous union with Hagar the servant girl? God forbid! The point is that God would NEVER ask us to use unlawful means to achieve the end He wants to achieve.

This is the difference between real Christianity and any false religion. True Christians always make sure they keep the commandments, and leave the achieving of the right end to the Lord to bring about in His overarching providence. This is why it is so important to believe in the providence of God, and not to pretend that we know what God has in mind as an end:

Colossians 1:17

He is before all things, and by him all things consist.

True Christians do not try to force an end to come about by their own means, because we usually don't know what God's end is. Abraham was an exception here.

Who would have thought that the death of Christ would be what God wanted? We know now that without it, there would be no salvation for the Lord's people. But we would never have thought that that was the way God intended to do it at the time. The people who killed Him will still be punished according to their own sin:

Acts 2:23,24

Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it.

Any time we think we know what God wants, and try to force it to come about by our own efforts, we will invariably end up doing something stupid. True Christians leave the end to God, and concentrate on making sure they don't sin. We are just unprofitable servants:

Luke 17:10

So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.

What servant should have to know *why* his master has told him to do something before he does it? The master *may* tell him, but there is no obligation on his part to do so. Our duty is to do what we are told in all the circumstance of providence that come our way. And what we are told to do is summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments.

Many times we may be put into a dilemma (in the Lord's providence) whereby it would be so easy to sin, for example if someone, such as the government, tries to force us to sin or risk heavy consequences. In such circumstances it is always the right thing to do to not sin. If that means imprisonment or death or some other kind of totally unjust punishment, then so be it. In such a case, that is the way the Lord wants us to glorify Him. Of course this is easier said than done if we find ourselves in such a circumstance, but nevertheless, to not sin is always the right thing to do. Our job is to make sure we do not sin. Only then we need not fear the Lord's blessing on our actions.

Let us hate sin with all our heart, and never let a supposed end justify the means:

Psalm 119:11

Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.

Psalm 129:97

O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day.

John 14:15

If ye love me, keep my commandments.

Spiritual Growth

We all know that the Bible gives us specific instructions on how to build up and run an outward manifestation of the church:

1 Timothy 3:14,15

These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly: But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.

There are many different ideas as to the interpretation of what the Bible teaches on these things, and men disagree with each other profoundly. For example, some think that the Presbyterian church system is the Biblical one, others think that we should be Congregational, or Baptist, or more like the Brethren churches.... er... sorry, assemblies. Whichever one is the true Biblical outward pattern for the church, even though men disagree, we all must still agree that the Bible does speak about this matter, and so it can't be unimportant.

We also know, as true believers, that we need spiritual food to grow in the faith:

1 Peter 2:2

As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby.

We all differ as to what food we think necessary, but nevertheless, whatever we think, the fact remains that we need the good nutrition of the Word of God. It is vital for our spiritual health. True believers have also been given the Holy Spirit to lead them into the truth whenever they read the Scriptures. Spiritual growth is vital to our sanctification, and so this too can't be unimportant.

Hebrews 5:13,14

For everyone that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

So the question arises: Is it more important to be in a church where the outward pattern is Biblical but the spiritual food is wanting, or to be in a church where the outward pattern is not completely Biblical but the spiritual food is excellent?

This is particularly a dilemma in the modern age, where we have so many different Christian denominations, and we are all free to choose which one we attend on a regular basis.

There are many, many people who fully believe that the church they are attending has the correct Biblical pattern, and they will not leave for anything (whether they were born into the church or whether they have joined it at a later point is not an issue here). They will not leave, even if, just up the road there is another church belonging to another denomination, with far more spiritual food available, where they would grow in the faith a lot, lot more.

The opposite extreme is that we should just follow the best preachers all the time, no matter what the church organisation. This is idol worship. Even the best of communicators of the Word are fallible and can teach wrong things. We must pray for the spirit of discernment wherever we go.

Spiritual growth is the most important thing that the Christian needs, and he should be thirsty for it. We all need to:

2 Peter 3:18

...grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Because no church is perfect, and indeed no preacher is perfect, our condition in this world is that we will always be foraging for our spiritual food, which we can only find ultimately in Christ:

John 10:9

I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.

Where can Christ be found today? In good teaching, yes, but also in good spiritual fellowship with other true believers. We need to weigh things up, wherever the Lord has placed us in this world. If we can find

all these things in one particular congregation, then fine. Otherwise, we may need to move around a bit to find good pasture. Does this mean an outward Biblical pattern for the church is not important? No, it is there in the Bible. But our spiritual growth is by far the most important thing to us, and this can only be found if each one of us seriously asks the Lord to guide us into where we ought to be going to church, what we ought to be doing for the Lord, and who we can have true Christian fellowship with. With each one of us this will be different, depending on the situation the Lord has put us in.

Outward form is important, but far more important is our inward, spiritual life. If this is being starved due to lack of good teaching or fellowship, we need to do something about it and move on.

Hebrews 13:9

Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines. For it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace; not with meats, which have not profited them that have been occupied therein.

Romans 2:28,29

For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.

The Guidance Of The Holy Spirit

Not unlike today, the church in Corinth in Paul's day was dividing into factions:

1 Corinthians 1:10-13

Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul.

Our situation today however is far worse than that of Corinth. At least in Corinth there was still one visible Christian church:

1 Corinthians 1:2

Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours....

In our day we have many visible churches, all of which have absolutely no connection with each other. And one can begin to understand why. After having been involved with several of them, it is obvious that they are separate because they just can't work together. Each of them has its own cosy way of doing things, and nothing and no-one can change them (humanly speaking, of course).

What a terrible situation! How can the Christian church be effective in its witness to the world if this is the case? We should never cease to be amazed at how genuine, true believers – who are collectively the one body of Christ – can, over time, become so different from one another, all of them believing that they are growing in the faith, and that the others are not.

We all know that there are hypocrites in the church, i.e. people who have never been born again, have never had a new heart put within them, and who therefore are not the Lord's true people. And many are in high places in the church. Christ warns us of these:

Matthew 7:21-23

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

But we have gone far beyond the right understanding of this phenomenon, and we exclude, or at least marginalise, many who are truly born-again from our fellowships because they are not quite like us. Five-point Calvinist churches think they are so superior to all the others and look down on the rest for their inferior understanding of theology. Pentecostal churches look down on all the rest because they don't speak in tongues, and so cannot possibly have been filled with the Holy Spirit. Brethren assemblies think they are so superior because they alone have the New Testament outward pattern for the church. All these profess to be Christian, and indeed can be mainly populated by true, genuine believers, but their vision of the body of Christ is so limited.

We are talking about real, true believers that can so easily get caught up in such things. We are not speaking here of the hypocrites who we will always have with us. Paul found this problem:

Galatians 2:11-13

But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation.

A false teaching was coming in, and even the apostles were succumbing to it. James was totally convinced of it, because we're told these false teachers "came from James." Barnabas was "carried away with their dissimulation" for a time. And even Peter "was to be blamed." How can this

be? Surely true believers – especially apostles – have the Holy Spirit within them to lead them into all truth:

John 16:13

Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come.

The above passage is often thought of as referring to all believers, but it was only actually spoken by Christ to the apostles, and only refers to them. But even so, this did not stop even Peter and James, who *were* apostles, still being led astray for a time by false doctrine.

The following verse *does* apply to all believers:

1 John 2:27

But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him.

We see here that all of us should be able to discern the truth clearly to some degree, because we all have the Holy Spirit within us to guide us. But we still see so many true believers being led astray by what they are convinced is the Holy Spirit, yet it is not.

I knew an old lady once who didn't believe in hell, yet if I challenged her, she would quite firmly tell me, "The Holy Spirit has told me this." How can we argue against that?! I heard another lady once say, "I really felt the Holy Spirit moving when that music was played." The tune referred to was an instrumental with no words. Yet we are clearly told in Scripture, with regards the Holy Spirit:

John 16:8

And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.

A tune with no words can stir us emotionally, but it can never reprove the world of anything.

I have no reason to suspect that either of these ladies was not born-again, I can't presume that. In other respects they were good Christians, but in the end, we find it very difficult, if not impossible, to work with such people because of their completely different understanding of how they have been guided by the Holy Spirit.

Oftentimes we true believers can be led into by-path meadow. The Lord allows this for a time to teach us things – no experience is useless in the life of a Christian. But we should be aware of how easy it is even for mature Christians to be led astray. We need constantly to keep close to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who uses the Word of God as His main instrument, and make doubly sure we are not being led astray by other things – our own feelings, the teachings of a powerful, persuasive human being, and so on. In every decision we need to make, we should be so very careful that it is the Lord who is leading us, and not something or someone else.

Let us all stay close to Him and His Word, and not be led astray by anything. This involves true humility of mind.

Proverbs 3:5,6

Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.

Rejoice in the Lord

There are many exhortations in Scripture to rejoice in the Lord, particularly such passages as:

Philippians 3:1

Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not grievous, but for you it is safe.

Philippians 3:4

Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice.

1 Thessalonians 5:16

Rejoice evermore.

However, most sermons I have heard on this subject are very vague about *why* we should rejoice, and most end up being no more than a simple positive thinking exercise, telling us that we ought not to be negative, but rather accentuate the positive and be happy.

Such a sermon is of absolutely no use to anyone. By nature all of us are born in sin:

Psalms 51:5

Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.

Ephesians 2:1-3

And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.

As a result of this, nobody can ever have anything to truly rejoice about at all in this world:

Ecclesiastes 1:2

Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.

1 Corinthians 15:19

If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.

James 4:14

For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.

For any of us to have anything to rejoice in at all, we need to have an eternal hope, not just one for this world. Yet so many people all around us are quite happy here, living their cosy little lives. And when the Lord intervenes with a sore trial, such as a family death or what we term a “natural disaster,” rather than turning to the Lord, they turn away from Him and hate Him even more:

Amos 4:6-12

And I also have given you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and want of bread in all your places: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the Lord. And also I have withholden the rain from you, when there were yet three months to the harvest: and I caused it to rain upon one city, and caused it not to rain upon another city: one piece was rained upon, and the piece whereupon it rained not withered. So two or three cities wandered unto one city, to drink water; but they were not satisfied: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the Lord. I have smitten you with blasting and mildew: when your gardens and your vineyards and your fig trees and your olive trees increased, the palmerworm devoured them: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the Lord. I have sent among you the pestilence after the manner of Egypt: your young men have I slain with the sword, and have taken away your horses; and I have made the stink of your camps to come up unto your nostrils: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the Lord. I have overthrown some of you, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and ye were as a firebrand plucked out of the burning: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the Lord. Therefore thus will I do unto thee, O Israel: and because I will do this unto thee, prepare to meet thy God, O Israel.

It actually takes a lot of will power and positive thinking to turn away from God, but this is exactly what the world wants to do, and they would rather listen to sermons and encouragements to think positively about themselves, than messages telling them that they are sinners in need of a Saviour.

We can't just try to whip up rejoicing outwardly, when there is no inner motive for doing so in our hearts. In the end it won't work, and, no matter how much of a show we are able to put on for others, we will fail in ourselves eventually. In order to truly rejoice, we need a sure, concrete reason for rejoicing, deep within our hearts and minds. And only true believers have this in the Lord.

The Bible mentions two sure reasons, which give true believers the motivation to rejoice continually. The first one is the knowledge of their own personal salvation:

Matthew 5:12

Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

Luke 6:23

Rejoice ye in that day, and leap for joy: for, behold, your reward is great in heaven: for in the like manner did their fathers unto the prophets.

Luke 10:20

Notwithstanding in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven.

Acts 2:26

Therefore did my heart rejoice, and my tongue was glad; moreover also my flesh shall rest in hope.

Romans 5:2

By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

1 Peter 1:6,8

Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations.... Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.

1 Peter 4:13

But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.

Do we have the full assurance of hope in our heart that we personally are saved to eternal life? We must pray and pray again until we have this, because it is most certainly attainable, but only from the Lord.

Isaiah 32:17

And the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever.

Colossians 2:2

That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ.

1 Thessalonians 1:5

For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake.

Hebrews 6:11

And we desire that every one of you do shew the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end.

Hebrews 10:22

Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.

2 Peter 1:10

Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall.

The second sure reason that the Bible gives the Christian for rejoicing, is God's upholding all things in His providence.

There is a very popular (but false) teaching around which speaks of God being in control of some of the world, with Satan in control of the rest, both of them battling it out for overall control – although we who have read the Bible know that God wins in the end. This is a terribly wrong way of thinking. Let there be no mistake: God is in control of all things in His over-arching providence, yes, even over all the sins of men.

Job 1:12

And the Lord said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand. So Satan went forth from the presence of the Lord.

Job 2:6

And the Lord said unto Satan, Behold, he is in thine hand; but save his life.

Acts 2:23

Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain.

Genesis 50:20

But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.

To begin to think of the fact that God is in control of all things, despite the trials we all go through and all the sin that is in the world, is another sure source for our rejoicing in Him:

Romans 8:28

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

So, Christian, for these reasons we can exercise the spiritual fruit of joy, which the world cannot have. Exhortations to rejoice in the Bible are so much more than merely an exercise in positive thinking. Rather, they are there because true Christians have a sure hope of eternal life that can never be taken away from them. Hallelujah!

2 Timothy 2:19

Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.

Cry To God For Mercy

The other day I came home from church praying for real Christian fellowship. It is few and far between. Even though we go to church every week and mix with others of supposedly like mind, church can be a very lonely place. Anyway, I am sure that sometimes the Lord has a sense of humour, because just after praying this prayer, I had a knock on the door, and there stood two Jehovah's Witnesses.

The lady then started her aggressive evangelism, as they usually do, not letting me get a word in edgeways. This should be a lesson to us all that when we evangelise, we should actually listen to others, and be willing to respond to them, rather than just going through a pre-planned speech. Anyway, she then suddenly asked me, "How do you think we can obtain eternal life?" Now, I knew that whatever I said, she would ignore it and tell me what she thought regardless, but what an opportunity! Such opportunities don't come along very often, and when they do, we are usually taken aback and suddenly become tongue-tied, not being able to find the words to say.

On another occasion, I was in church, and a visitor came and sat in the seat behind me. After the service, one of the elders came up to him to ask the usual questions, "Are you on holiday? Where are you from?" and so on. He didn't respond, but just took a deep sigh and said from the heart, "How can I be born again?" What another wonderful opportunity! Such occasions are so very rare. The elder, just like me with the Jehovah's Witnesses, was so taken aback, he just waffled and couldn't find the words to say either.

In response to the Jehovah's Witness lady, I said that we need to repent and turn to Christ, which, to my consternation, she agreed with! However, what she meant by that statement and what I meant, were two completely different things. Anyway, after the Jehovah's Witnesses had gone, I felt my complete inadequacy, and racked my brains as to what I should have said. I came to the conclusion that in both the above situations, whether the enquirer is genuine, as in the case of the man in church, or whether not, as in the case of the Jehovah's Witnesses, the answer must always be: *Cry to God for mercy.*

This statement would immediately imply that we can't save ourselves, we need a Saviour outside of ourselves, our own efforts are worthless, and that we need mercy, lest a worse thing come upon us. The openings this answer could then lead to are immense.

So next time, I will have a bit more of an idea as to what to say. May the Lord grant such occasions again. In the meantime, as it was the Lord who brought those Jehovah's Witnesses across my path, I can at least pray for them, even if I never see them again. Who knows how much their hearts will be disturbed, and maybe opened, by the Lord as a result of them being prayed for!

Luke 18:13

God be merciful to me a sinner.

The Loneliness of the Serious Christian

We are such base, worldly creatures, aren't we? The other day I spent far too long watching television. Then the day after, I was in my local supermarket. For a moment, I stood there with my trolley looking at all the other people around me. They were full of themselves, their own little lives, walking:

Ephesians 4:17-19

....in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.

And then, I realised that I myself couldn't concentrate. I could only think for a few seconds before images from last night's television came popping up in front of my eyes all the time. I had become just like them, my mind filling with this-worldly garbage, of no consequence and no use whatsoever. I should have realised this would happen, because this is what I too was like all the time before my regeneration by the Holy Spirit:

Ephesians 2:1-3

And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.

So I realised how important it is to stay close to the Word of God. Only by the Word of God can we be sanctified, i.e. set apart from the ways and thoughts of this world unto a far far better life:

John 17:17

Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

We need to be set apart in this manner so we can begin to be Christ-like in our walk in this world. Only then can we produce fruit worthy of our calling:

Colossians 1:9,10

....to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God.

But this experience begs the question: What is the church to do? If we have services with hour-long Bible-based sermons – which would suit the more mature Christians quite nicely – then the people who only have an attention span of a few seconds will be driven away. But on the other hand if we dumb down the church to try to appeal to all these people with attention deficit syndrome, then no-one in the church will ever grow in the faith at all.

Sadly, the church of this modern age tends to the latter of the two extremes. Hence, for anyone who really loves the Lord and wants to grow in the faith, it is a lonely time. We love the Lord, and want to grow in the truth. We ideally want to attend a church where the sermons stick close to the Biblical text, the truth is taught in all seriousness, and the people genuinely love one another. But such churches hardly exist. The modern-day Christian has to forage for his food daily, wherever he can find it. In the end, this can only be found in Christ, not in any one human institution:

John 10:9

I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.

So how do we reach out to all these people living their lives oblivious to the reality of the impending judgment coming upon the whole world because of our wretched, sinful human condition? Well, the very last thing we should do is try to laugh and joke our way into their hearts. The subject is far too serious for that. Did Christ do that? Of course not. Most sermons these days seem to be a cross between a cosy little chat and a comedy routine. That's not going to impress anything on anyone. They will just laugh back at us and carry on their pathetic lifestyles. No, a genuine and serious demeanour is the very

witness we need to be in this world. We need to be genuine, i.e. not putting on a show like all the rest, and we need to be serious, because after all, the subjects of God and eternity are deadly serious. But who is willing to witness for Christ in this manner today?

1 Thessalonians 5:6

Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober.

Titus 2:1-8

But speak thou the things which become sound doctrine: That the aged men be sober, grave, temperate, sound in faith, in charity, in patience. The aged women likewise, that they be in behaviour as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things; that they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed. Young men likewise exhort to be sober minded. In all things shewing thyself a pattern of good works: in doctrine shewing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity, sound speech, that cannot be condemned; that he that is of the contrary part may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say of you.

Prayer Changes Things

Prayer for the Christian is the most wonderful thing imaginable. The concept that we miserable creatures can have a real, living relationship with the one true living God who not only created us in the first place, but upholds and arranges all things in His providence, is quite overwhelming. Why should the Almighty, ever-living God bother with each and every one of us? We're not only tiny, but we're sinful creatures, continually letting Him down. But He still encourages us to pray to Him. To cast all our care upon Him. What a great comfort it is to know God cares for His people and listens to them:

Psalm 34:15

The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears are open unto their cry.

Atheists have no such concept as prayer at all. They think they can sort everything out by themselves without God. They're welcome to try, but they won't get very far. And to every other religion in the world, prayer is no more than simple recitation. Set words, maybe with set actions, in an empty ritual. No real, living communication at all. That is so sad. To see otherwise devout people going through the motions of some ritual they have learned, and thinking that some deity, somewhere, is somehow impressed with it.

And the saddest thing of all is that there are so many people who call themselves Christian who have exactly the same attitude to prayer. Mechanically going through their church's liturgy without thinking, believing that it's pleasing to God. Merely reciting the Lord's Prayer superstitiously, thinking that's real prayer, and it isn't. The Lord's Prayer was only given as a template for real prayer using our own words:

Matthew 6:9

After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven....

But even many true Christians, with a proper attitude to prayer still don't quite understand what it's all about. We often hear the phrase, "Prayer changes things," but do we really think about what that phrase actually means?

When we use this phrase, we usually mean that the ever-living, almighty God, Lord of heaven and earth, will actually change His mind about something if we pray about it hard enough and persuade Him differently. What a terrible thing to believe!

God ordains all things to His greatest glory, and has ordained exactly what will happen from the foundation of the world. We can't possibly change His mind on anything, because He knows exactly what He is going to do in every situation. He doesn't need us to tell Him what to do. In any case, we have absolutely no idea, in any particular circumstance, what the best thing to do is anyway, even though we might think we do.

We can have the confidence to know that the Lord always does what's best for His people:

Romans 8:28

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

If God did change His mind every time someone prayed, what a terrible life this would be. Everything would depend on who prays the hardest, I suppose. If even one thing in this world depended on us, we would become so proud and arrogant about ourselves and our own ability to influence God.

God cannot and does not repent:

Numbers 23:19

God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?

There are places in Scripture where it is said that God repented. If you want a list of them, here they are:

Genesis 6:6

And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart.

Exodus 32:14

And the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people.

Judges 2:18

It repented the LORD because of their groanings by reason of them that oppressed them and vexed them.

1 Samuel 15:35

The LORD repented that he had made Saul king over Israel.

2 Samuel 24:6

And when the angel stretched out his hand upon Jerusalem to destroy it, the LORD repented him of the evil, and said to the angel that destroyed the people, It is enough: stay now thine hand.

1 Chronicles 21:15

And God sent an angel unto Jerusalem to destroy it: and as he was destroying, the LORD beheld, and he repented him of the evil, and said to the angel that destroyed, It is enough, stay now thine hand.

Psalms 106:45

And he remembered for them his covenant, and repented according to the multitude of his mercies.

Jeremiah 15:6

Thou hast forsaken me, saith the LORD, thou art gone backward: therefore will I stretch out my hand against thee, and destroy thee; I am weary with repenting.

Jeremiah 26:19

Did Hezekiah king of Judah and all Judah put him at all to death? did he not fear the LORD, and besought the LORD, and the LORD repented him of the evil which he had pronounced against them?

Hosea 11:8

How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee, Israel? how shall I make thee as Admah? how shall I set thee as Zeboim? mine heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together.

Joel 2:13

And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil.

Amos 7:3

The LORD repented for this: It shall not be, saith the LORD.

Amos 7:6

The LORD repented for this: This also shall not be, saith the Lord GOD.

Jonah 3:10

And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.

In all these cases, God is not changing His mind. Neither is He acknowledging a mistake and correcting Himself. He is always in control of what is going to happen. The word “repent” is used in these passages simply to try to accommodate us. For example, God may see certain people repent, so it is said that He “repents” from the punishment He would have given them if they had not repented. But He knew they were going to repent anyway. Or God sees the wickedness in men, and it is said that God “repented” that He made them, but His making them was never a mistake. In every case, He knows full well what’s going on, because He planned everything that was going to happen in the first place.

So, we must understand that God is not at our beck and call, every time we decide to pray for something. That’s not how prayer works at all.

God always knows what is best, and we don’t. Let us start there. We can’t change His mind in any way, and it would be a terrible thing if we could. We need to change our way of thinking, God never needs to change His. And this is the key to what prayer actually is.

Prayer does change things. But it is never God’s mind that is changed as to what He intends to do. The sole purpose of prayer is to change us. It changes our minds, from what we think is right, into an understanding of what God knows is right.

To better illustrate this, let's take an example. Let's suppose that Aunt Bessie is sick and in a hospital bed. We pray for her recovery. That's the right thing to do. It's good to do that. It's right to pray for the saving of life, that's the essence of the sixth commandment.

But, after we have been praying for some time about Aunt Bessie, let us suppose that God sees fit to take her away, and she dies. What do we think then? Well, there are one of two attitudes we could take:

We could shake our fist in God's face and say, "I hate you God, for taking her away. You can't answer prayer."

Or, we could say,

Luke 22:42

Not my will, but thine, be done.

Job 1:21

Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.

The Christian's attitude should be the latter, in which case, we are having our minds changed away from our own will, to fit in with the will of God.

And this is exactly what God wants us to learn to do. This is exactly why God ordained prayer in the first place. Prayer is a mechanism which God has given us to wean us off desiring our own will all the time, and to get us into line with His will. Only then can we truly understand Christ when He said:

John 14:13

And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

John sums it up clearly:

1 John 5:14,15

And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.

The more we come to understand the Lord's will, and learn to accept it in every circumstance, the more set apart for His work we can become. This is the Christian life.

1 Thessalonians 4:3

For this is the will of God, even your sanctification.

Reluctant Workers

We've become a Christian. We've repented of our sin, and turned to Jesus Christ as our only hope of salvation from the wrath to come. And He has heard our cry, come in to our hearts and fundamentally changed us from the inside. We're no longer what we used to be. We're altogether new creatures. And we're sure of it.

2 Corinthians 5:17

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

We now have many new desires that we never used to have. We now hate evil:

Proverbs 8:13

The fear of the Lord is to hate evil: pride, and arrogancy, and the evil way, and the froward mouth, do I hate.

We now love righteousness:

Psalms 119:97

O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day.

And we now hate ourselves for always falling short of what we ought to be:

Psalms 119:5

O that my ways were directed to keep thy statutes!

One of the new desires that we're given, is that we want to obey the Lord. The Lord has put an earnest desire in our hearts to please Him. We'll want to do anything for Him. Isaiah had this desire when the Lord called him:

Isaiah 6:8

Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me.

It's good to have this desire in our hearts to go wherever the Lord sends us. We ought to be ready and willing to go anywhere. Although Isaiah's job of calling people to return to the Lord wouldn't quite go the way he thought it would, because at that time it was the Lord's plan to close the people's eyes and ears by his preaching, not open them:

Isaiah 6:9-12

And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed. Then said I, Lord, how long? And he answered, Until the cities be wasted without inhabitant, and the houses without man, and the land be utterly desolate, And the Lord have removed men far away, and there be a great forsaking in the midst of the land.

The Bible tells us:

Ephesians 2:8-10

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

Our salvation is all of grace, we do nothing to deserve it. But we aren't saved to sit back and do nothing. All of us have work to do that the Lord has already ordained for us. So first of all, we need to know what our individual calling is. And we find that out through providence and prayer. Then we need to do it. That's where it gets tricky.

As we read our Bibles, we see that we're not the only ones with a problem here.

In Genesis 11, we read that Terah, Abram's father, left Ur of the Chaldees to take the whole family to Canaan. But they only got halfway and settled down in Haran instead:

Genesis 11:31

And Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran his son's son, and Sarai his daughter in law, his son Abram's wife; and they went forth with them

from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan; and they came unto Haran, and dwelt there.

They all stayed in Haran until Terah died. Then the Lord came to Abram to tell him to leave his extended family and go to a land He would show him:

Genesis 12:1-3

Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.

But notice it says “*the Lord **had said** unto Abram...*” In other words, the Lord had told him all this before, way back in Ur of the Chaldees, where they’d started from. This was the second occasion God spoke to him, now in Haran. I suggest that the reason the family decided to go to Canaan in the first place was because God had already told Abram to go there, but he’d disobeyed, he’d delayed. So Terah, his father, took things into his own hands and uprooted the whole family with the intention of going to Canaan all together, thinking he was obeying the Lord’s call to Abram, but he wasn’t. God specifically told Abram to go to Canaan without his family, and he hadn’t obeyed. His whole family was now coming with him instead.

After Terah died in Haran, the Lord appeared a second time to Abram, and told him again to leave his family and go. Even then he didn’t obey fully, because he took his nephew Lot with him, as well as a load of worldly possessions:

Genesis 12:5

And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran; and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came.

And if we read the story further, the amount of possessions they took with them became a cause of dissension and separation from Lot, who ended up dwelling in Sodom.

Simple obedience to the Lord's calling is more difficult for us than we think, because, like Abram, we all have baggage. In Abram's case, and many of our own cases, separation from family and possessions is the most difficult problem. But the Lord wouldn't let Abram obey on his own terms, it had to be on the Lord's terms. And eventually, the Lord Himself separated Abram from both his extended family and at least half of his possessions, so he could fulfil his calling.

We find the same with Moses. He was a shepherd in the back side of the desert, when he came across the strange sight of a bush burning without being consumed. As he went to look closer, the Lord spoke to him:

Exodus 3:7,8,10

And the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians.... Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt.

But Moses immediately reacted against this calling and started making excuse after excuse to try to get out of it. And the Lord gave him plenty of signs to prove this was indeed what the Lord was calling him to do:

Exodus 3:11,12

And Moses said unto God, Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt? And he said, Certainly I will be with thee; and this shall be a token unto thee, that I have sent thee: When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain.

Exodus 3:13,14

And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them? And God said unto Moses, I Am that I Am: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I Am hath sent me unto you.

Exodus 4:1-5

And Moses answered and said, But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice: for they will say, The Lord hath not appeared unto thee. And the Lord said unto him, What is that in thine hand? And he said, A rod. And he said, Cast it on the ground. And he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from before it. And the Lord said unto Moses, Put forth thine hand, and take it by the tail. And he put forth his hand, and caught it, and it became a rod in his hand: That they may believe that the Lord God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath appeared unto thee.

Exodus 4:6-8

And the Lord said furthermore unto him, Put now thine hand into thy bosom. And he put his hand into his bosom: and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous as snow. And he said, Put thine hand into thy bosom again. And he put his hand into his bosom again; and plucked it out of his bosom, and, behold, it was turned again as his other flesh. And it shall come to pass, if they will not believe thee, neither hearken to the voice of the first sign, that they will believe the voice of the latter sign.

Exodus 4:9

And it shall come to pass, if they will not believe also these two signs, neither hearken unto thy voice, that thou shalt take of the water of the river, and pour it upon the dry land: and the water which thou takest out of the river shall become blood upon the dry land.

How many more signs did Moses need? Finally, he just told the Lord to send somebody else:

Exodus 4:10,13

And Moses said unto the Lord, O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant: but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue.... And he said, O my Lord, send, I pray thee, by the hand of him whom thou wilt send.

This was probably the truth. He was slow of speech and of a slow tongue. His elder brother Aaron was naturally a lot better at public speaking than he was. The Lord said so Himself:

Exodus 4:14

...Is not Aaron the Levite your brother? I know that he can speak well...

The Lord was so gracious to Moses in that, although He was angry with him for not obeying, He allowed Aaron to be his mouthpiece, but only to the people, not to Pharaoh:

Exodus 4:16

And he shall be thy spokesman unto the people: and he shall be, even he shall be to thee instead of a mouth, and thou shalt be to him instead of God.

And even when the Lord also graciously allowed Aaron to go in with Moses to meet with Pharaoh himself, we read nothing of Aaron actually saying anything to him. He goes in with Moses and waves his rod a few times, but that's about it. As plague after plague comes along, Moses gets bolder and bolder before Pharaoh, as Aaron, in the narrative, disappears more and more into the background.

The calling of Moses teaches us that we shouldn't look to any natural talents we have when we're trying to discern the Lord's will. We must rely on spiritual gifts alone, gifts given by the Holy Spirit individually to the Lord's people for the specific purpose of doing what He has called them to do. The Lord rebuked Moses for still seeing things from a human perspective:

Exodus 4:11,12

And the Lord said unto him, Who hath made man's mouth? or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I the Lord? Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say.

And then we've got Gideon.

Judges 6:11,12,14

And there came an angel of the Lord, and sat under an oak which was in Ophrah, that pertained unto Joash the Abiezrite: and his son Gideon threshed wheat by the winepress, to hide it from the Midianites. And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him, and said unto him, The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valour.... And the Lord looked upon him, and said, Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent thee?

He was a farmer, threshing wheat to hide it from the Midianites. Yet the Lord calls him a “*mighty man of valour*.” He tells him to “*Go in this thy might*” and save Israel. But what might? Who was he?

Judges 6:15

And he said unto him, Oh my Lord, wherewith shall I save Israel? behold, my family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house.

Another reluctant worker who didn't want to go, because he saw that naturally he really couldn't do what was being asked of him. But this was the Lord's calling:

Judges 6:16

And the Lord said unto him, Surely I will be with thee, and thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man.

Then Gideon started asking for signs. The Lord gave him one straight away by consuming his offering by fire. That should've been enough. But he wanted a sign of his own. He put a fleece on the ground. If it was wet with dew in the morning and the ground dry, he'd accept the Lord's calling. It was, but still trying to get out of it, he asked for another sign, this time for the fleece to be dry and the ground wet. It was. Gideon too couldn't get away from the Lord's calling, even though he knew he hadn't naturally got the gifts required.

Jeremiah received a call to be a prophet to Israel, and he saw his total inadequacy too.

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Then the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations. Then said I, Ah, Lord God! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child. But the Lord said unto me, Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the Lord. Then the Lord put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the Lord said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth. See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant.

And if we read the rest of the chapter, we'll find the Lord strengthened him and also gave him signs to confirm his call.

And then there was Jonah. How reluctant can we get?

Jonah 1:1,2

Now the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me.

Immediately, without hesitation, Jonah's off in the opposite direction:

Jonah 1:3

But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.

We know the story. The ship hits a storm, the lot falls on him as the cause of it, and the mariners reluctantly throw him overboard to calm the storm. He subsequently gets swallowed by a great fish which vomited him out three days later onto dry land. And if we don't believe that, we'll believe anything. Then the Lord comes to him again:

Jonah 3:1

And the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the second time, saying, Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee.

We can never get away from the Lord's calling. In the whole of the book of Jonah, we see some marvellous revivals. The mariners repent, the Ninevites repent. But the one person who never repents in the whole book is Jonah himself. He quotes Scripture in the belly of the fish, and he's genuinely grateful for being vomited out, but he never actually repents of anything. I suggest he repented later, some time after the events described in the book, because he was a true prophet of the Lord and his story ends up in Scripture. But his repentance is not in the text.

And then we've got the apostles. Just before Christ's ascension, He told them to go into all the world to be His witnesses:

Matthew 28:18-20

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

Mark 16:15

And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.

Acts 1:8

But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

They had to wait a few days for the Holy Spirit to come upon them, which they did, but after that they still stayed in Jerusalem. There appears to have been a reluctance to move out. So the Lord arranged some persecution to try to shift them, beginning with Stephen being stoned to death. And then He raised up a great persecutor, Saul:

Acts 8:1

And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.

Whereas the other Christians in Jerusalem were moved to flee, the apostles still stayed put in Jerusalem. And the Lord blessed this movement of Christians, because by these means the gospel spread abroad throughout Judea and Samaria:

Acts 8:4

Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.

But where were the apostles? Still hiding in Jerusalem. So the Lord did something else to try to move them, something even more remarkable. He converted Saul. This brought peace:

Acts 9:31

Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.

And finally, the apostles began to get going:

Acts 9:32

And it came to pass, as Peter passed throughout all quarters, he came down also to the saints which dwelt at Lydda....

We don't really know much about what the apostles got up to after this. Tradition tells us they went all over the place, but the Biblical record is fairly silent, the Lord preferring to concentrate on Saul, now Paul's, missionary journeys.

And we see this reluctance to do the Lord's will throughout Scripture. I'm sure you can find many other examples of biblical characters being reluctant to obey the Lord.

God's people often have a reluctance to do His will, but it's not necessarily because they're lazy. Rather it's because they feel so inadequate for the task. And that's exactly how we should feel. We shouldn't think that we're capable of doing anything for the Lord, because we're not. Whatever we do for the Lord, He works it in us anyway. All we have to contribute to anything is our sin. And that just gets in the way. Of course we should feel totally inadequate in doing anything for Him.

2 Corinthians 3:5

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God.

That's what spiritual gifts are for. They're not natural gifts. We all have some natural gifts we're born with. Maybe a gift of being creative, or logical, or athletic or something. Not even natural gifts such as those of being good with languages, or being an eloquent speaker, like Aaron, are necessarily used by the Lord to fulfil His purposes, although they can be. The Lord gives spiritual gifts for spiritual purposes, quite often to people who never had any similar natural gift at all, like Moses.

Our job is to not depend on ourselves, or any natural gift we may have, to do the Lord's work. We are to depend solely on God to give us all the spiritual gifts we require to do what He wants us to do. And if we know His calling, we know we will receive everything necessary for it.

Romans 11:29

For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance.

1 Corinthians 1:26-29

For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence.

Let Thy Words be Few

Ecclesiastes 5:2

Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few.

Certain verses in the Bible seem to encourage self-mutilation:

Matthew 5:29,30

And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.

Should we really consider chopping off parts of our body if they lead us into sin? Of course not. And we know that, because not only do our eyes and hands lead us into sin, but every other part of our body does too:

Psalms 51:5

Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.

Not least our minds:

Romans 8:7

Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.

We can't possibly be called to physically maim ourselves every time we sin, because we'd have nothing left. We'd have to kill ourselves to completely stop sinning against God. Rather, the calling is to keep all our body parts in check. To be finished with living for self. To put to death the deeds of the body – the way our natural bodies want to go – and to walk worthy of our calling in Christ Jesus:

Romans 8:13

For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.

Colossians 1:10

That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God....

By nature, we continually sin. We can't do anything else:

Romans 8:8

So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.

But, praise God, He has sent a Saviour into the world, who not only saves all those who come to Him from the consequences of their sin, but sends the Holy Spirit to dwell within them, so that they are now given that ability to please God. But that doesn't mean they become perfect, far from it. They now have a battle going on within themselves:

Galatians 5:16-18

This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would. But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law.

We still have to be very careful. We still need to control these sinful bodies. But the difference is that we now have the Holy Spirit within us to help us to do just that.

But there is one member of our body that is far more unruly than any of the others. And James warns us about it:

James 3:1-10

My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation. For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body. Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body. Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth.

Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell. For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.

James starts by telling us that not many should seek to become masters, or leaders in the church. They, by definition, need to use their tongues more than others. They need to explain truth, to comfort the downcast, to exhort the brethren, to rebuke the wayward, to help all within the church, and to be able to bring the gospel of everlasting grace to those outside the church. The tongue is particularly necessary for all these activities.

Too many people fancy themselves as some great church leader. And, in itself, being a leader is not a bad thing to desire in our hearts:

1 Timothy 3:1

This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work.

But James warns us that not many of us should really want to do that, because those who become leaders in the church will be judged far more strictly:

Luke 12:48

For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.

And that's because of the use of the tongue. It can be very influential. Those who crave leadership know that with their tongues they can influence others, so they go out seeking – mainly weaker people – to gather followers for themselves.

Matthew 23:15

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.

James then goes on to tell us why our tongues are so dangerous. If we want to be able to control our whole body, we must control our tongue. Just as a bit in a horse's mouth can control the whole horse, or a rudder can control a whole ship, so important is our need to tame the tongue. But we can't tame it, nobody can. It is impossible. And that's because "*the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity,*" "*set on fire of hell.*"

With our tongue, we think we can get anything we want. From that pushy salesman who persuades us to buy something we don't really need or want, to Jimmy Savile, who made us believe he was such a nice man, to Adolf Hitler, who persuaded millions to vote for him. The tongue is the greatest weapon we have, because with it, we can get others to bow to our every whim. It's all about control. And the wicked know this, and use it to their own advantage:

Psalm 5:9

For there is no faithfulness in their mouth; their inward part is very wickedness; their throat is an open sepulchre; they flatter with their tongue.

Psalm 55:21

The words of his mouth were smoother than butter, but war was in his heart: his words were softer than oil, yet were they drawn swords.

Psalm 62:4

They only consult to cast him down from his excellency: they delight in lies: they bless with their mouth, but they curse inwardly. Selah.

Psalm 73:9

They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walketh through the earth.

Psalm 144:8

Whose mouth speaketh vanity, and their right hand is a right hand of falsehood.

It is such a comfort to the downtrodden Christian that such persuasive, arrogant, pushy, controlling individuals will not be able to avoid judgment in the end:

Psalm 37:35,36

I have seen the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a green bay tree. Yet he passed away, and, lo, he was not: yea, I sought him, but he could not be found.

Psalm 59:12

For the sin of their mouth and the words of their lips let them even be taken in their pride: and for cursing and lying which they speak.

When finally appearing before the Judge of the whole earth, they will all become speechless:

Matthew 22:12

And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless.

It is exactly because of the unruly nature of the tongue, that the Christian is therefore called especially to keep watch:

Psalm 141:3

Set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips.

We are called to speak as little as possible:

Matthew 5:33-37

Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.

Proverbs 13:3

He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his life: but he that openeth wide his lips shall have destruction.

Proverbs 17:1

Better is a dry morsel, and quietness therewith, than an house full of sacrifices with strife.

Proverbs 17:27

He that hath knowledge spareth his words: and a man of understanding is of an excellent spirit.

Proverbs 17:28

Even a fool, when he holdeth his peace, is counted wise: and he that shutteth his lips is esteemed a man of understanding.

Ecclesiastes 5:1,2

Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil. Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few.

Isaiah 41:1

Keep silence before me, O islands; and let the people renew their strength: let them come near; then let them speak: let us come near together to judgment.

Amos 5:13

Therefore the prudent shall keep silence in that time; for it is an evil time.

Habakkuk 2:20

But the LORD is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him.

Zechariah 2:13

Be silent, O all flesh, before the LORD: for he is raised up out of his holy habitation.

Matthew 6:7,8

But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him.

1 Corinthians 14:28

But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself, and to God.

But there is a time for the Christian to speak:

Ecclesiastes 3:1,7

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.... a time to keep silence, and a time to speak....

On these occasions when the Christian does open his mouth, it is only for one of two things. Either to acknowledge our sin and frailty:

Psalm 32:3-5

When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer. Selah. I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. Selah.

Psalm 39:2-4

I was dumb with silence, I held my peace, even from good; and my sorrow was stirred. My heart was hot within me, while I was musing the fire burned: then spake I with my tongue, LORD, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail I am.

2 Corinthians 12:5

....of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities.

1 Peter 5:6

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time....

Or to praise God:

Psalm 22:26

The meek shall eat and be satisfied: they shall praise the LORD that seek him: your heart shall live for ever.

Psalm 51:15

O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise.

Isaiah 62:6,7

I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night: ye that make mention of the LORD, keep not silence, And give him no rest, till he establish, and till he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth.

When we get to heaven, we won't be able to sin any more, so the self will no longer be a burden to us, and we'll be totally free to praise God continually. The book of Revelation contains the sort of prayers we'll be praying in heaven:

Revelation 4:8

....Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.

Revelation 4:10,11

....Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.

Revelation 5:8-10

....Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.

Revelation 5:11,12

....Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing.

Revelation 5:13

....Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever.

Revelation 7:9,10

....Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb.

Revelation 7:11,12

....Amen: Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen.

Revelation 11:16-18

...*We give thee thanks, O Lord God Almighty, which art, and wast, and art to come; because thou hast taken to thee thy great power, and hast reigned. And the nations were angry, and thy wrath is come, and the time of the dead, that they should be judged, and that thou shouldest give reward unto thy servants the prophets, and to the saints, and them that fear thy name, small and great; and shouldest destroy them which destroy the earth.*

Revelation 15:3

...*Great and marvellous are thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are thy ways, thou King of saints. Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? for thou only art holy: for all nations shall come and worship before thee; for thy judgments are made manifest.*

Revelation 16:7

...*Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are thy judgments.*

Revelation 19:1-3

...*Alleluia; Salvation, and glory, and honour, and power, unto the Lord our God: For true and righteous are his judgments: for he hath judged the great whore, which did corrupt the earth with her fornication, and hath avenged the blood of his servants at her hand.*

Revelation 19:6,7

...*Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready.*

But we're not in heaven yet. While we are still down here on this earth, Christ gives us this solemn warning:

Matthew 12:36,37

But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.

Notice, it's not every wicked word, or every boastful word, or every arrogant word or every cruel word we speak that Christ refers to here. We'll be judged for those right enough. But He refers to every *idle* word.

So often, if we don't know what to say, we say the first thing that comes into our heads. Peter had this problem. He was very impulsive and always felt he had to say something:

Mark 9:5,6

*And Peter answered and said to Jesus, Master, it is good for us to be here: and let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias. **For he wist not what to say;** for they were sore afraid.*

If we don't know what to say, it's foolish to say anything. It's far better to say nothing than to say something wrong or inappropriate. Let's make sure that no idle, useless words ever come of our mouths.

When we become a Christian, the Holy Spirit fills us with such joy in our hearts:

1 Peter 1:8

Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory....

Nehemiah 8:10

.... the joy of the LORD is your strength.

That joy often overflows, and we want to express it. However, in some, it looses their tongue rather too much, and spills over into incessant chattering about anything and everything. Now, I'm not judging anyone for this, in one sense, it's a natural reaction. But coming to Christ should also give us a tremendous sense of our remaining sinful nature, and a recognition of the ease by which our tongues can still say stupid things. A quiet and gentle spirit is by far a greater witness than a chatty tongue:

1 Peter 3:4

...even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price.

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2:28,29. The Undetectable God; Spiritual Growth
3:23. Embracing Self-Hatred
3:27. What If I am Not One of the Elect?
3:29,30. The Undetectable God
5:1. Growing Old
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5:12. Good Works; The Undetectable God
6:1,2. Good Works
6:6,7. Ground to Powder
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6:22. Grow in Grace
6:23. Growing Old; Good Works; The Undetectable God; What If I am Not One of the Elect?
7:14-26. I'm Saved But I'm Not Getting Any Better
7:18. Only Evil Continually
7:24. Good Works
8:6-8. The Lost Art of Suffering Wrongfully
8:7,8. Good Works
8:7. Let Thy Words be Few
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8:11-14. Walk Worthy
8:13,14. The Lost Art of Suffering Wrongfully
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8:18-23. Good Works; The Undetectable God
8:28. The Doctrine According to Godliness; Rejoice in the Lord; Prayer Changes Things
10:1. Trying Too Hard
10:2. The Doctrine According to Godliness
10:14,15. Witnessing
11:29. Reluctant Workers
11:36. The End Does Not Justify The Means
12:1. My Soul is Exceeding Sorrowful Even Unto Death

12:2. I'm Saved But I'm Not Getting Any Better
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12:19-21. The Lost Art of Suffering Wrongfully
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15:9. The End Does Not Justify The Means

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1:10-13. The Guidance of the Holy Spirit
1:26-29. Reluctant Workers
1:27-29. Trying Too Hard
1:29. Ground to Powder
2:4,5. The Doctrine According to Godliness
3:15. Grow in Grace
5:8. The Lost Art of Suffering Wrongfully
6:20. The End Does Not Justify The Means
8:1. The Doctrine According to Godliness
10:1-4. The Undetectable God
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10:31. The End Does Not Justify The Means
13:2. Grow in Grace
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2 Corinthians

1:9. Ground to Powder
1:12. Being Taken Advantage Of; Witnessing; The Lost Art of Suffering Wrongfully
2:15,16. Ground to Powder
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3:5. Reluctant Workers
4:7-11. Ground to Powder
4:7. Trying Too Hard
4:16-5:4. Growing Old
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- 2:1-3. Rejoice in the Lord; The Loneliness of the Serious Christian
- 2:2,3. Only Evil Continually; What If I am Not One of the Elect?
- 2:3. Good Works; The Undetectable God
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- 4:17-19. The Loneliness of the Serious Christian
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- 1:10. The Lost Art of Suffering Wrongfully
- 1:28. The Lost Art of Suffering Wrongfully
- 1:29. My Soul is Exceeding Sorrowful Even Unto Death
- 2:5-8. The Undetectable God
- 2:15,16. The Lost Art of Suffering Wrongfully
- 3:1. Rejoice in the Lord
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1:10. Walk Worthy; Good Works; Let Thy Words be Few; Grow in Grace
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1:27. Grow in Grace
2:2. Rejoice in the Lord
3:1-3. Embracing Self-Hatred; Growing Old; The Undetectable God

1 Thessalonians

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1:5. Rejoice in the Lord
2:12. Walk Worthy; Grow in Grace
4:3. Prayer Changes Things
5:6-8. The Lost Art of Suffering Wrongfully
5:6. The Loneliness of the Serious Christian
5:16. Rejoice in the Lord
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2 Thessalonians

1:4,5. The Lost Art of Suffering Wrongfully
1:9. Good Works; The Undetectable God
2:13. What If I am Not One of the Elect?

1 Timothy

1:4. The Doctrine According to Godliness
1:5-7. The Doctrine According to Godliness
1:15. Grow in Grace
2:4. The Doctrine According to Godliness
2:5. Embracing Self-Hatred
3:1. Let Thy Words be Few
3:6. The Last Shall Be First
3:14,15. Spiritual Growth
4:12. Witnessing
4:16. The Doctrine According to Godliness
5:3,4. Being Taken Advantage Of
5:7,8. Being Taken Advantage Of
5:8. The Last Shall Be First; Growing Old
6:3-5. The Doctrine According to Godliness

2 Timothy

1:9. I'm Saved But I'm Not Getting Any Better
2:19. Rejoice in the Lord
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- 2:1-8. The Doctrine According to Godliness; The Loneliness of the Serious Christian
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- 4:2. The Undetectable God
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- 5:13,14. Spiritual Growth
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- 1:27. Growing Old
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- 3:1-10. Let Thy Words be Few
- 3:1. The Last Shall Be First
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1 Peter

- 1:6,8. Rejoice in the Lord
- 1:8. Let Thy Words be Few
- 1:13-16. The Lost Art of Suffering Wrongfully
- 1:17. Walk Worthy
- 2:2. Spiritual Growth
- 2:7,8. Ground to Powder
- 2:12. The Lost Art of Suffering Wrongfully; The End Does Not Justify The Means
- 2:19,20. The Lost Art of Suffering Wrongfully
- 2:21-25. The Lost Art of Suffering Wrongfully
- 2:21-23. My Soul is Exceeding Sorrowful Even Unto Death

3:1,2. Witnessing
3:4. Let Thy Words be Few
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3:15,16. Witnessing
3:15. Trying Too Hard
3:16. Witnessing
3:18. Embracing Self-Hatred
3:21. The Undetectable God
4:3. Grow in Grace
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4:13. Rejoice in the Lord
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4:19. The Lost Art of Suffering Wrongfully
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5:6. Ground to Powder; Let Thy Words be Few
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2 Peter

1:5-7. Grow in Grace
1:8. Grow in Grace
1:10. Rejoice in the Lord
2:21,22. Grow in Grace
3:18. I'm Saved But I'm Not Getting Any Better; The Doctrine According to
Godliness; Spiritual Growth; Grow in Grace

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2:16. Ground to Powder
2:17. Witnessing
2:27. The Guidance of the Holy Spirit
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5:14,15. Prayer Changes Things

2 John

1:4. The Lost Art of Suffering Wrongfully

3 John

1:4. The Lost Art of Suffering Wrongfully

1:9. The Last Shall Be First

Jude

1:6. What If I am Not One of the Elect?

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2:3. Walk Worthy

3:17. Only Evil Continually

4:8. Let Thy Words be Few

4:10,11. Let Thy Words be Few

5:8-10. Let Thy Words be Few

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5:13. Let Thy Words be Few

7:9,10. Let Thy Words be Few

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11:16-18. Let Thy Words be Few

14:9-11. Good Works; The Undetectable God

15:3. Let Thy Words be Few

16:7. Let Thy Words be Few

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19:6,7. Let Thy Words be Few

20:12,13. Walk Worthy

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22:3. Good Works; The Undetectable God

22:12. Walk Worthy
