

# Knowing God's Forgiveness

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# Foreword

Real happiness! Peace! Fulfilment! Purpose to life!—we all long for these realities. Perhaps in the past we have been given some ‘formula’, a ‘new method’ or a ‘failsafe procedure’, only to find the dreams for a better life collapse—in spite of all our efforts to make them work. Our inherent human weakness seems to dog us, and so we fail. We say: ‘It didn’t work!’—and yet we tried—the Lord knows we tried! In our failure we feel unclean; the pangs of guilt gnaw at us and we long for release from the shame and defeat. These seem to hound and torment us. We feel hollow inside. We pick ourselves up and with childlike resolve and expectancy, set off again, searching, groping, and hoping to find the truth that will spring a real release. We long for an inner joy and dynamic that we won’t have to keep fuelling by our own efforts. Though our resolutions don’t seem to work, we instinctively know there must be a way.

Until we understand deep within us the reality that ‘there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus’, that as Christians we are no longer held guilty before our God, and that forgiveness is full, free and complete, *we will not know the reality of inner peace and true happiness*. As the truth of this forgiveness breaks in upon us, it floods our inner being with such joy that it

spontaneously bursts out of the heart into a life of love, worship and service for our God. Suddenly we know what is meant by ‘God’s power unto salvation’.

In this book *Knowing God’s Forgiveness*, John Dunn captures the heart of the message of full forgiveness. He shows that forgiveness is the motive of love as well as the driving force which frees the Christian and sets him on fire for God. John has been down the road of pain and suffering himself—you will identify with him as he seems to read your own heart with its inner longings and struggles. He has been there. You will get to know him through these pages and feel his warmth and sensitivity as he breaks open the jewel of God’s forgiveness. This book is not some regurgitated rhetoric but a distillation of experience acquired in the crucible of life.

It is liberation gained from the revelation of Christ’s purpose to set the captives free.

As the awesome truth of complete and full cleansing from all past, present and future sin sweeps over us, so the Gospel will take on new meaning. We will not be ashamed of its message because it will be seen to be totally liberating and complete. Our search will have ended! The revelation of us having no past history of sin in God’s eyes and the reality of being acquitted by him of all guilt will free us in realised forgiveness to be what we were always meant to be in Christ. We will praise God for this release. It will be a massive driving force for good. We will love to share it. We will expect it to change others, and it will, for this is powerful stuff!

John prepares us by leading us step by step so that we gain confidence and assurance as the material of each chapter unfolds. And he gives us down-to-earth questions that we can grasp and ponder. Once the reality of forgive-

ness dawns on us we will then be able to use this material to disciple others.

I used these studies in prototype form in 1991 in a small Bible Study group in New Zealand. The effect was astounding. The studies were so easy to follow and so enjoyable that the folk were soon telling others of the new freedom they had come to experience in the Lord. The fullness of free forgiveness dawned upon them and became a living reality. For us, the book was not a passive presentation but a series of studies that kept us on tiptoe until we could pick up the next gold nugget.

This is not academic, bookshelf, dust-collecting stuff. Get it into the right hands and it will be compelling reading. Get it into the right heart and it will be liberating. There is nothing like realised forgiveness. I heartily commend these studies.

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# Preface

I was raised in a family where our father led prayers in the lounge in the mornings, and Sundays were set apart for church in the morning and evening homily and Bible readings. In spite of this I had no real understanding of what was being taught and could not see its relevance to my daily life. Although I am now deeply grateful for this background of faith, none of it meant much to me at the time. Churchgoing was just ‘what we did on Sundays’ and being a Christian had no personal element to it. I had been ‘brought up as a Christian’ and that was that. I would have thumped anyone who might have tried to convince me that I wasn’t genuine!

At high school I was drawn into the weekly lunchtime Crusader meetings. I can’t recall why I attended, nor do I have any recollection of what went on. However, Crusaders did introduce me to the idea of reading the Bible each day. My godmother Rita Waters had given me a small Bible at my Confirmation and I slowly got into the habit of reading half a chapter each day.

I joined a local youth fellowship in my late teens and often accompanied them to the Saturday night ‘This Is Life’ rallies in the Assembly Hall in Sydney. Through the guest speaker at one of those meetings I was suddenly confronted by the very personal claims of God on my life. I made what was called in those days ‘a decision for Christ’. From that moment everything changed. God

became real, the Bible came alive, and worship at church took on new and rich meaning. In my zeal for the Lord I probably also became obnoxious to those around me as I tried to share my experience! I soon began teaching, even though my actual knowledge of the Scriptures was very superficial. In the years that followed, although I grew spiritually, I had a nagging and growing uncertainty about the reality of my experience of God's truth, as well as a deep unhappiness about my lack of genuine spirituality.

I had been struggling with the problem of sin and guilt in my life and could find no release or genuine peace. Although I knew the Gospel and believed with all my heart that Jesus Christ had died for me, I nevertheless felt such a hypocrite! It was then that I heard a missionary—the Rev. Geoffrey Bingham—speaking at the Church Missionary Society Summer School at Katoomba in the Blue Mountains. As he spoke (on the Book of Romans) I suddenly knew that what he was saying was immediately applicable to me! When we were able to talk alone some weeks later, the whole wonder of God's total forgiveness through the Cross broke in upon me for the first time. My sense of guilt evaporated. Although I had been a Christian for many years, it was as if I had never heard the Gospel before. I had to un-learn much, but I realised as never before that I was a forgiven man. What had always been objectively true (from God's point of view) now became subjectively real to me. I knew I was righteous in God's sight! I knew I was justified! I knew I was now clean through and through as far as God was concerned—because of Christ. My whole life changed. My sharing of the Gospel took a new turn and, as a result, others began to embrace these truths also. That discovery of God's forgiveness which changed my life in the early

60s has gone on being real to me ever since and continues to occupy the central place in all that I teach.

God's forgiveness is no academic matter. He is out to radically change the lives of human beings. The message of the Gospel is stupid to some and a scandal to others, but it is still God's way of transforming guilty human beings and of bringing them into peace. It is his way of bringing release to those who have lost all hope; to those who can make no sense of life; to those who are tired and worn out with trying to avoid God and his claims upon their lives. It is this message of Christ and his love at the Cross of Calvary which can turn a person right side up and bring them into a wonderful, vibrant relationship with the Living God. And it's a message for *Christians* as well as for the unconverted! As was my case, many people come into an experience of the Lord without ever really understanding what his total forgiveness means. It may be years later that the full implication hits home.

This book is the outcome of those many years of sharing these discoveries with others. I first prepared notes on God's forgiveness for a youth House Party for St Paul's Anglican Church Chatswood in the 1970s and then later reconstituted these as a series of talks for St Paul's Sunday morning 'College for Christians' classes. They have been through a number of revisions for other occasions, but in 2002 the notes were greatly expanded and entirely rewritten to include more recent material to form this present volume.

*Knowing God's Forgiveness* can indeed be read straight through, but the original notes were prepared specifically for my study groups and used as weekly sessions over a period of a year or so. Therefore, in respect to the contents, I need to give a word of warning as well as a word of encouragement. The first half of the material

deals with Man's moral dilemma and the bondage into which sin has plunged us. It's rather depressing and can easily be discouraging. However, I firmly believe that the confronting word of the law ought to be taught, provided it is accompanied by the sweet message of grace. We live in an age of 'easy-believism'. We don't like being told how sinful we are or how much we have bankrupted ourselves in relation to God's glory. Such short-cut gospels usually produce half-baked Christians. We need to see clearly how deep our need is and what sin has done to us before we will fully appreciate just how grand Christ's salvation is! The full realisation of God's forgiveness often comes to us only after we have had sights of our own wretched depravity and sinfulness. So, I can only urge you to stay with it and persevere through the early chapters in order to discover God's magnificent remedy!

I am indebted to Geoffrey Bingham for all that I have learned from him of God's forgiveness and have quoted often from his prolific writings. I am also grateful to all those who have contributed by way of suggestions, proofreading and editing. And thank you to my dear friend and brother Geoff Duffy for his Foreword.

*John Dunn  
Chatswood, NSW  
June 2005*

# I

## Who Needs God's Forgiveness?

Blessed is he  
whose transgressions are forgiven,  
whose sins are covered.

Blessed is the man  
whose sin the LORD does not count against  
him  
and in whose spirit is no deceit.

When I kept silent,  
my bones wasted away  
through my groaning all day long.  
For day and night  
your hand was heavy upon me;  
my strength was sapped  
as in the heat of summer.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you  
and did not cover up my iniquity.  
I said, 'I will confess  
my transgressions to the LORD'—  
and you forgave

the guilt of my sin (Ps. 32:1–5, NIV).

These are the words of David the Psalmist. Like him, and in common with a vast multitude of other Christians, I believe God has forgiven my sins. Not that I've done anything to deserve or merit such an extraordinary favour. Rather, it has been entirely due to God the Father graciously and lovingly taking the initiative to do me good through his Son, Jesus Christ. As a result of his action, *I have come to know him personally*. The reality is, it's impossible for any human being to have a true relationship with the Living God unless he or she is first forgiven by him. That's why forgiveness is the pivotal teaching of the Christian faith and basic to daily living for all who truly believe in Christ.

I recognise there are those who think 'sin' (in the way Christians talk about it) is non-existent, or at least insignificant. A business executive once told me he thought Christians were paranoid about moral failure and so-called 'guilt'. He said he believed there was 'good' in everyone and that all this talk about us being guilty and needing to be 'forgiven by God' was utter rubbish.<sup>1</sup>

There are yet others who would say that our failures are all relative and that there is no such thing as true guilt. Nevertheless, all these folk would have to admit that the world is not a happy place and that the human condition with its many fractured and distorted relationships is far from perfect. They recognise—as we all must—the dreadful things we do and say to each other, as individuals, as families and as nations. They see

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<sup>1</sup> Years later a great crisis came into that man's life which forced him to see the reality of his own deep spiritual need. He has since come into a full and rich knowledge of what it means to be forgiven by God and he now smiles when I remind him of how loudly he once objected to such a notion!

the pain and suffering which these actions ultimately bring into the life and consciousness of every man, woman and child. They think this is just how life is. They see no need for any explanation as to *why* we are like we are. Nor (if they be honest) do they have any long-term answers for the dilemmas in which we find ourselves. As to a remedy for our personal traumas, they would say that the psychiatrist or the professional counsellor is the person to see. I would be the last to say anything against the immense value and importance of psychiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapy and counselling agencies, but there are insights into what a human being is and what his needs are which cannot be gained purely on the horizontal level. They belong to the vertical dimension. The fact is, Man's deepest problems are those concerning his relationship with the Almighty. If, however, we only take a horizontal view of life then we can never deal with the real issues. We have to understand that all of creation has both horizontal and vertical components—there is both the human and the divine.

It is my experience that many people have never been honest about their real moral condition and do everything they can to avoid being confronted by God *as he is in the Scriptures*. They hide behind the weak excuse that there is no God and that the Bible is a contradictory book full of paper promises. They try to rationalise their unbelief by saying that the Christian message is irrelevant to modern Man. Yet, deep down inside those same people may be disturbed and deeply unhappy. They may be empty, lonely, frustrated, vulnerable, unstable in their relationships and have no personal sense whatever of a meaning to life.

The extraordinary thing about the Bible is that it actually gives clear and unequivocal answers to these

issues! It gives us insights regarding Mankind which are not just psychological. Why then won't we read this Book? Why don't we search it and mine its resources? Why do so many dismiss it and refuse to even open its pages? Could it be that we all instinctively know that we ought to believe in God and that we ought to relate to him—and to others—with genuine selfless love? Is it that no matter how much we rationalise, we all know that this is how life is meant to be? Since the Bible confronts us with a God who is both holy and just, and because it faces us with our moral responsibility to know and love him and to love our neighbours as ourselves, we stay well clear of its teaching!

I know that some may dismiss the contents of the following chapters as absurd and irrelevant. Others will see them as superficial, inadequate and even simplistic. But for those who are prepared to be honest with themselves and who genuinely desire to find answers to life's most pressing moral and relational problems, then I believe God will speak to them. I make no apology whatever for using the Bible as my source and basis for all that I teach in this book. Many times I have tested out the effectiveness of this powerful word of God—the Holy Scriptures—and know that where its teaching is met with faith, it transforms lives like nothing else can. The true stories interspersed throughout the various topics covered in each chapter all testify to that fact.

To my Christian readers I would say, we—*of all people*—ought to be deeply aware that everything we do and say and think is ultimately related to whether or not we are living in a realised experience of God's total forgiveness. Sadly, many churchgoing, professing Christians do not seem to know they are forgiven. I was speaking one Sunday morning on forgiveness and the

moment the service was over an elderly man came rushing up to me: ‘*Young man, do you mean to tell me that God has forgiven my sin? I've been going to church all my life and didn't know that!*’ On another occasion a gentleman who had recently come into the blessing of forgiveness through attending studies on Romans asked the sad question: ‘*Why hasn't someone told me this before? I've lived with my guilt through forty years of hell.*’

Only God's total forgiveness frees us to live as he intended from the beginning of time, enabling us to fulfil our created role in his great plan for his wider creation. ~~Forgiveness is the only basis upon which we can be sure of one day standing before our Creator~~—face to face—with a clear and tranquil conscience. If we have the slightest doubt about our total cleansing from sin through the Cross, then we will have no confidence before God ~~here and now, and will certainly~~ fear to face him on that great day of reckoning which lies ahead. Guilt will rise to the surface and paralyse us. We may have the desire to do what is morally right, but will lack the power to resist temptation. As we pray, we will be drawing near with our lips but our heart will not be in it—a faith to believe that God is both hearing and answering our prayers will be lacking.

Men and women, boys and girls need to know God's total ~~forgiveness~~ forgiveness. It has been said that a partial forgiveness from God, a grudging forgiveness, a conditional forgiveness or an uncertain forgiveness would be useless. These would only tantalise and mock us.<sup>2</sup> We would never know where we stood in our

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<sup>2</sup> Horatius Bonar, *God's Way of Holiness*, Moody Press, Chicago, n.d., p. 53.

relationship with him. But when we know we are totally forgiven, then loving God comes as a natural result. On the other hand, if we see God as having only partly or conditionally forgiven our sin, then we will have a difficult time loving him. If we think forgiveness is contractual (God will pardon me *if I do this or that*), then our attention will be focussed on our own guilty failures rather than upon Christ and his cleansing power. The conclusion we will inevitably draw from such a relationship is that God is pleased with us when we don't sin, and angry with us when we do! We will be measuring our relationship with him by our 'performance' rather than by what Jesus Christ has done for us on the Cross. We will come to think that our pious mode of living—rather than his sacrifice for us—is the measure of our ongoing acceptance by God. As a result, we will set up a program of works (of not sinning and of doing good) in order to gain God's favour. This self-righteous, 'do-it-yourself' program may well be an unconscious act on our part, but it will have betrayed a false and deficient understanding of God's way of accepting sinners. It would simply prove that we have never really known his wonderful and free forgiveness!

In truth, however, holiness—or right living—comes neither from trying to be good, nor by trying not to be bad. Rather, it comes from seeing that the sacrifice of Jesus on that Cross was for us personally, and that it totally, once and for all, deals the death blow to all our sin and guilt and failure and defeat. The forgiveness of the Cross reaches down into the depths of our conscience to cleanse from shame and blame; from bitterness and hatred; from anxiety and self-despising. God's forgiveness touches the deepest levels of our unconscious fears and insecurities, our inferiorities, our damaged

emotions, our unresolved conflicts and tensions. It provides the only true base for the resolution of many of our physical and mental disorders. It is able to penetrate the hidden recesses and chambers of our memory and there cleanses and purges totally and permanently.

*Such a transformation took place in the life of my mother when she was in her late 50s. She was invited by a neighbour to hear a visiting missionary speaking at a teaching mission at a nearby church. Though a regular churchgoing woman, she was rather shy and it was not like her to go to a 'religious' meeting in a strange church, at night and during the week. She was normally very private in regards to what she believed about God and Jesus Christ, and so I was somewhat surprised when she readied herself and went off with her friend.*

*When she returned later that evening she came straight into my bedroom to tell me about her outing. I immediately knew something extraordinary must have happened because her face just shone. Her eyes were bright and there was a calmness about her that I had never seen before. As she sat on the end of my bed she told me that the preacher had been speaking about God's holiness and his forgiveness of sins. She then said very simply: 'I saw the Lord tonight'. I was puzzled. She explained that while the preacher was speaking, he suddenly seemed to disappear from the pulpit and Jesus stood in his place in all his glory. She said: 'The Lord looked right through me and immediately I knew I was entirely forgiven'. From that moment she was a transformed woman. She later told me that her conscience was at rest and her memory of past failures was entirely cleansed. Her otherwise formal*

*belief in God suddenly came alive. No longer did she grind through the day never being sure if she was in a right relationship with her Lord. She now knew it to be so—with a quiet but deep inner knowing.*

*Mum lived to 86 and was a constant and eloquent demonstration of the reality of God's love and forgiveness. She communicated this forgiveness at every opportunity and was a grand testimony to God's grace to all who knew her. Although she never felt very confident in speaking to people about the Lord she loved, she nevertheless spoke often and at length to him about them!*

*God's forgiveness is no light thing.* The Cross is God's complete answer to all the deepest of human needs in respect to our relationship with him. We only *come to know God* as we enter and live in a realised experience of his total forgiveness, and we only *go on knowing God* as we go on knowing and living in that same experience of liberation. There is no higher, greater or richer experience for any man, woman, boy or girl than to know the wonder of God's love and grace in his forgiveness of their sin. That's why God has placed the Cross in the very centre of history as a demonstration and revelation of his unchanging love and mercy to our fallen race. The Cross is God's complete answer to every human moral need. There is no solution beyond the Cross of Christ. There is no substitute for his Cross. There is no other remedy for the evil of the human heart.

The great benefits and blessings of the Cross of Christ are conveyed to us by the Holy Spirit. It is God's Holy Spirit who works in us to apply the riches of his grace to our heart and conscience. It is he who enables us to believe all that has been done for us through God's Son.

However, the mystery of Christ's love for Man at Calvary can never be unravelled by human wisdom—we will never arrive at this insight by ourselves. We come to see and know God's forgiveness only as the Holy Spirit unveils that truth to us. In other words, we have no resources of our own with which to know this forgiveness, nor are we able of ourselves to understand what God has accomplished on the Cross on our behalf. Realised forgiveness comes to us therefore as a *revelation* by the Holy Spirit. The more we open ourselves in obedience to the Holy Spirit's leading and direction, so the more he will reveal this glorious truth to us. The more the Spirit reveals it to us, so the more he will go on warming our hearts in the knowledge of the Father's love and mercy towards us.

## QUESTIONS

At the beginning of this book let me put to you the following questions to ponder:

1. Does God's forgiveness seem to you remote and unattainable? In other words, is God's forgiveness real to you, or is it only a concept you vaguely know about?
2. Have you been liberated from guilt, or do you only know *about* these things? Do you have a constant 'sense of guilt'?
3. What do you think is the relevance and/or significance of the quotation from Psalm 32 at the head of this chapter?

4. Is your conscience at rest? Does your past nag you, or do you know that all has been cleansed as a result of what God has done through Christ's death on the Cross? Is there a tranquillity and a peace and a joy in your day-to-day experience of life, or do you feel vulnerable, afraid and ill at ease?
5. Are you living each day in his total forgiveness? Is there a settled joy in your heart in knowing that you are forgiven by God? Do you really know God in that full and free relationship of absolute pardon and cleansing which he has extended to you through his Son, Jesus Christ?
6. Are you living each day in the fullness of the Holy Spirit, especially as he communicates God's love and pardon to you?

Don't be discouraged if you feel your answers are unsatisfactory. Take heart—the great themes in these chapters are for you! Make the time to work through the material, especially the various Scriptures quoted throughout the text. Pray over each chapter, attempt to understand what is being said and get into the habit of applying the teaching to yourself as you go.

## 2

# Our True Roots

If we wish to understand the truth about moral and spiritual realities then God, not Man, must be our starting point. We need to know who God is and what he is like before we can know who and what we are as human beings. Having said that, it is equally pointless to start with our own human concepts of God because there will be an infinite variety of views, depending on the cultural, educational and moral basis from which each person approaches the subject. There has to be an absolute, objective revelation from God's side if we are to know him and if we are to know ourselves—who we are, why we are here and where we are heading. It is my conviction that such a divine revelation has been given to us in the Bible—the Old and New Testaments of the Holy Scriptures. I have therefore deliberately made the Bible the basis of all that I have to say in this book.

The Bible teaches that we were made in God's likeness and that he has revealed all that we need to know in regard to his character, his purposes for Mankind, and the way in which he has designed us to live. Thus, coming to know God as he really is ought to be the primary objective of every human being. The implication

is that only as we truly know him can we truly know ourselves, be at peace within ourselves and enjoy genuine relationships with others.

### **WHAT IS LIFE ALL ABOUT?**

This leads me to ask the questions: What was God's purpose in creating us? Why are we here? Is there a reason? Is there a meaning to life? Where have we come from? Where are we heading? I suggest you pause and ask yourself: 'Could there be more to life than I am experiencing at present? Is my experience of living fully satisfying, or are there elements of which I am ashamed, afraid, confused, guilty, defeated, frustrated, disturbed, depressed? For what purpose am I alive?'

*These very questions arose one day with one of my colleagues. Bruce was about 40 at the time and employed as a drawing checker in the engineering department of the company where we both worked. One day I noticed he was very depressed. When I asked what was wrong he expressed his utter disillusionment with life. Without really thinking about it I said to him: 'I know where I've come from, why I'm here and where I'm going'. I wasn't boasting—I was stating a fact. A week later he came to see me—he couldn't get out of his mind what I'd said. 'I don't have a clue why I'm here or where I'm going.' That one remark of mine led to many months of delightful lunch-hour conversations as I began to share very simply with my good friend the great truths concerning the plan of God for his creation and of the*

wonderful Gospel of Christ. He was keen to hear and ready to learn. In time, he came to believe that Jesus Christ had died for him and that God had forgiven his sin. From that moment his life completely changed. Everyone could see the transformation. He quit complaining, was now full of joy and had an obvious peace as he went about his tasks at work. Of course, not everyone was comfortable with the changes in Bruce, and he came in for a fair amount of flak as some of his workmates tried to dislodge him from his new-found ‘religion’. He knew very little of the Bible and could only answer their sarcastic taunts and questions with the simple reply: ‘Once I was blind, but now I see’. Bruce really did come to see things from God’s perspective and developed a profound insight into the meaning of life. He came to understand that God is the only true reality and that all else must be measured in relation to him and his original plan for us human beings. Bruce discovered his true vocation in life by discovering the freedom that flows out of God’s gracious forgiveness and pardon.

In order to understand why we are here, what life is meant to be like and where we are headed, it is essential that we go back to the beginning and see what God’s purposes were when he first created us. Of course, the moment I say this I know there will be those who will object on the grounds that ‘evolution’ is the current scientific rationale for Man’s beginnings. Science would seem to present powerful evidence as to our origins—all of which appear to discredit the biblical account in Genesis. Let me just say a word or two about this apparent dilemma. I personally have no problem with the theory of evolution (and it is still only a theory)—so long as it does

not include Man. We do not know how long the Genesis ‘days’ were during which God created and they may well have included a vast evolutionary process. On the other hand, God could have simply included a built-in history to such things as the rocks with their fossils! I often ask my students, ‘How “old” was Adam when God created him?’ In other words, if you could have been a fly on the wall just moments after God created Adam, what ‘age’ would he have appeared to be—16, 20, 25? Clearly he had a built-in pre-history. When just ten seconds old, he probably *looked like* he had been around for two decades or more. If that principle is true of Adam, then it could be true for the whole creation. I am not saying this is how it is, but simply pointing out that other possibilities exist to our current theories of evolution. I suspect the real reason why we object to Creation and our divine origins is that it faces us with moral obligations that we’d rather avoid.

So then, when it comes to Man, the first book of the Bible is quite specific in stating that we were created in God’s image:

Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness . . .’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (Gen. 1:26–27).

If we abandon this doctrine of the divine creation of Man, then the whole structure of the Bible collapses and we are left without a clue as to what life is all about. The Bible’s major themes are all rooted and grounded in Creation so that if we take away that foundation the edifice comes crashing down. It is therefore not surprising that Creation is the most attacked doctrine of the whole Bible. And little wonder we are so unsure and so insecure of our origins when we abandon this revelation given in the first

book of the Bible. Nor is it remarkable that the alternative theory of evolution is so attractive! What we need to do is come back to these first chapters of the Bible and look at them more closely and with a renewed determination to understand what they are saying. If we can get this foundational truth right, then all else will fall into place. Let's think then about these verses quoted above and work through what they are saying:

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness . . .' (Gen. 1:26).

### **WE ARE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD**

When I look in a mirror I see an image of myself. That image is not the 'real me' and never can be. It is only a *reflection* of the real me. What I see in the mirror is a derived likeness. If I move away from the mirror or if the mirror is shattered, my 'image' ceases to be. In a similar sense we have a derived image of God. Of ourselves we are not, and never can be, 'the real thing'—only God can be that. We can never be more than a reflection of what he is. So when the Bible says we were created 'in God's image' it must mean that we were made to be *like* God in the sense that we were designed to reflect his moral characteristics. From the beginning we mirror-imaged him, deriving our existence and true meaning in life entirely from him.

Of course, this means none of us were ever designed to be the *same* as God. In other words, we can never originate our own image or existence as he does his. We can never be all that God is: Love, Righteousness, Truth, Holiness, Goodness. We can never *originate* these

attributes. Rather, we *derive* these virtues from God by reason of our creaturely dependence upon him. About this Geoffrey Bingham writes:

For man to be made in the image of God means he reflects God. Everything that God is, man is like that, although he is none of God Himself. Man is man, not God. But he is the reflection of God. God is love: man loves. God is holiness: man practices holiness. God is truth: man is truthful. And so on.<sup>1</sup>

This is why we can never be *as God is*, even though we have been trying to do just that right from the beginning! One ancient biblical writer put it this way:

See, this alone I found, that God made human beings straightforward [upright], but they have devised many schemes (Eccl. 7:29).

Back at the beginning God was fully imaged in us and his outlines were total in us. The image of God in us was not distorted or indistinct as it now is. Originally, there was in Mankind a pure and un-blurred reflection of all that God is. We had purity of motive and action; freedom and fullness of love and fellowship; power and dynamic in a purposeful existence; perfect insight, understanding and knowledge; great joy, peace, serenity of mind and conscience, and a complete liberty of will in moral action. *That's what we were!* Of course, that image—though marred and defaced—is still there. We are still creatures in God's image. As we are going to see in later chapters, that image will one day be fully restored because of the work of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *Oh, Father! Our Father!* NCPI, Blackwood, 1983, p. 7.

## WE ARE SPIRITUAL BEINGS

Secondly, unlike his forming of the animals, when God created us he breathed into us ‘the breath of life’ (Gen. 2:7). Although the word ‘breath’ can have several meanings in the Bible, this was more than just biological life such as the animals shared in common with Man. God breathed into us his very own life. His life in us bound us to him in a relationship such as none in the animal kingdom shared with their Maker. Our unique bond with God is derived from the fact that we are in his image and that we share his life. This means that, in every sense of the word, human beings are *spiritual* creatures. We are those who have the capacity to enter into the very life of God himself and to so know him in an intimacy that shapes our true being and destiny as humans. That’s why the idea of evolution is so demeaning to Man’s true dignity and to his true origins:

The spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life (Job 33:4).

Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it . . . (Isa. 42:5).

## WE WERE GIVEN FUNCTION AND VOCATION

Thirdly, the Book of Genesis also tells us that we were created as functional creatures with an incredible vocation. Not only were we made in the moral image of God himself and share his life, but we were also given a

reason, purpose and function to our existence:

Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’ . . . God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good (Gen. 1:26–28, 31a).

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it (Gen. 2:15).

God’s creational mandate (or command) to us was to be lords over his whole creation. He pre-planned that we would be given oversight of every part of his creational order with the responsibility of looking after it and attending to it. Our God-given vocation was that of subduing and having dominion over all things—everything being in our power and under our control. What a fantastic destiny!

The Psalmist reflected on this amazing vocation God gave us and reminds us that we are the crowning peak of his creation and just a little less than God himself:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you have established;  
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?  
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,  
and crowned them with glory and honor.  
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;  
you have put all things under their feet,  
all sheep and oxen,

and also the beasts of the field,  
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,  
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.  
O LORD, our Sovereign,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth! (Ps. 8:3–9).

God put all things under our feet! We must understand this staggering vocation which he originally set for us, otherwise we will miss the whole point of why we are here! *We cannot know what we should be as men and women unless we relate to the blueprint God purposed for us back there at the beginning.* He had a reason for designing us the way we are, and true fulfilment and satisfaction in life can only be found when we discover the nature and extent of his intention and goal for us.

## GOD BLESSED US

The fourth great truth that we see in Genesis is that when Man was created in God's image, 'God blessed them' (Gen. 1:28). That is far more than just giving us a pat on the head and wishing us well in all our endeavours! His blessing is the empowering of us so that we are set on the path to being able to complete and fulfil the task he has given. He blesses us so that we will finally and certainly arrive at the end goal which he has destined for us and his wider creation. In effect, God is saying to us: 'I will always be to you all that you will ever need'. This same covenantal blessing and promise goes on being renewed throughout the Scriptures and is an enormous encouragement to the people of God who, though fallen, are sure that he will bring them to the final goal of life. *Nothing can defeat this blessing of God!*

Sadly, because we are fallen creatures we have trouble

going back to our origins and so fail to see the importance and relevance of these wonderful foundational truths. We have trouble living in the good of all that God has done, and we keep losing sight of all that he is constantly doing to fulfil his plan. We cannot face the shame and guilt attached to our Fall and we want to keep the blind pulled down on our past rebellion against God. Even as Christians we have trouble facing our genesis in a wholly objective way. But in spite of these handicaps, we need to go back to our roots and understand the incredible moral and spiritual freedom in which, and for which, we were created. When we begin to grasp the grandeur of what we were before the Fall; when we see the Eden he intends to bring us back into; and when we see what God has done in order to restore us to our creational glory, then the truth and reality of the Christian Gospel will burst into life.

*I was invited to take a week-long teaching mission in a Christian church in Tokyo—speaking through an interpreter on God's forgiveness. Communicating such a message in the Japanese culture is not easy. There is no word for Christian ‘forgiveness’ in their language. They do not have a concept of ‘sin’ in the way we do in our culture and, although there is a deep awareness of ‘shame’ for wrongdoing, there is no place in their vocabulary for ‘guilt’ as we understand the word.*

*The series commenced with a study on Creation and the account in Genesis. As the great plan of God was opened up and as an understanding of our ancient vocation and destiny dawned on the audience, so deep guilt came over many of the listeners. One lady told me afterwards—in faltering English—‘I feel so sad*

*that I am not the person God created me to be'. In tears, she tried to explain that she now saw how far away she was from God's intention for her and that a sense of failure and accountability had swept over her during the meeting.*

*As the studies progressed during that week, so the meaning and relevance of the Gospel of Christ became more and more evident to the audience. The lady who had previously spoken to me subsequently came to see what Jesus had done on the Cross in cleansing her and bringing peace. She saw that the gift of life God gave to Mankind, but which she had rejected in Adam, had now been given back to her through his Son. She saw clearly the true meaning of forgiveness.*

We all need to see what that Japanese lady glimpsed—that God has created us for glory. No matter what our cultural background may be we all instinctively know we have been made for eternity. We have a nostalgia for purity, holiness and wholeness. And deep down inside we know that we cannot be satisfied unless we are about the business of worship. We all have a drive to give ‘worth’ to something or someone—for that’s what worship is. That the Living God ought to be the undisputed object of that worship may never have dawned upon us. But that happens to be the way God has structured all of us. We are made to worship him—to give him the worth and honour due to his name. We are made to give him glory. We are made to know him and to be in his presence. We are made to be contingent on him, drawing all our resources for living on him alone. Until we come to that realisation we can never be at peace. We can never be ourselves.

Only the Gospel of Christ reverses the tragedy of our

lost Eden and brings us back into a living relationship with our Creator. As we will see in more detail in later chapters, only through Christ can we once again know the glorious creational freedom for which God originally designed us.

## QUESTIONS

1. According to Genesis chapter 1, why did God create us? What role or vocation has God given us in his Creation?
2. Is it possible for us to go our own way as human beings *and get away with it*? What are the consequences of such an action? Is there ever an exception to those consequences?
3. What is the difference between being ‘like’ God (mirror image) and being ‘as’ God (the real thing)? List ways in which these differences give expression in our daily lives.
4. What do the following Scriptures tell us about our dependency (as human beings) upon God: Jeremiah 10:23; Psalm 87:7; Acts 17:26–28; John 15:5?
5. What does it mean when the Scriptures say we have fallen short of God’s glory (Rom. 3:23)? How is our ‘glory’ as human beings related to God’s glory?
6. What is the creational freedom that God originally planned for us?
7. Why are human beings instinctively ashamed to think

about their creational beginnings? Could there be a reason why Genesis and the doctrine of Creation is so opposed by our modern culture?

8. Why is the theory of evolution so popular? How do you square this with the Genesis account of our God-given origins? Is our fascination with evolution but an excuse for not having to face our lofty origins? What are the implications of this? Do you think we have a deliberate amnesia about our true beginnings?

# 3

## Our Divine Vocation Rejected

It is impossible for us to comprehend what it would have been like for our first parents to have lived in a right relationship with God prior to their fall in the Garden of Eden. They would have had no experience of guilt, no sense of shame, no feelings of inferiority and no dread of death. They would have enjoyed a tranquillity of conscience such as we can't even begin to imagine. There would have been an absolute peace and serenity in their daily living to an extent that we have never known.

However, in their innocence they were nevertheless faced with a clear command from God which prohibited them from eating the fruit of one of the trees in the Garden. God said:

You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die (Gen. 2:16–17).

As we saw in the last chapter, we humans were designed to be completely dependent upon God. That doesn't mean we had no freedom of will to be able to act morally and responsibly. God did not create us as robots.

Quite the opposite. Clearly he expected Adam and Eve to exercise their wills and so to obey him. They had God's word to guide them as to the right course in life (for only he knows what is 'good' for Man) and they had no need to look any further than the constant reassuring word of the Living God. They ought to have been content to trust God's word — for his 'yes' and 'no' were all they needed in order to be true persons as they set out to fulfil the vast mandate he had given them. On the other hand, their innocence did not insulate them from the possibility of failure and its inevitable consequences if they attempted to 'go it alone'. Thus Genesis chapter 3 tells us that, in the enticement by Satan, the primal couple were seduced into 'doing their own thing'. They were faced with the temptation to go against the plain command of God and to violate his blessing. It was put to them that there couldn't possibly be anything wrong with them knowing good and evil!

But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil' . . . she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate (Gen. 3:4, 6b).

Geoffrey Bingham writes:

The serpent knew best—better than God. The woman knew best—as well as the serpent. The man knew what he wanted to know, and did what he wanted to do. He chose self-sufficiency. This means moving without God, or using God when required. It means pursuing one's own path. It means conflict with all others who differ or who do not defer . . . The man was sure he had the

resources to handle life.<sup>1</sup>

## THE FOUNTAIN OF LIFE REJECTED

What Adam and Eve could never have foreseen was the incalculable and disastrous rupture that would overtake all humanity as a result of their primary defection from God. They stepped out of God's blessing. The prophet Jeremiah was later to pen the words of God's lament as to what had happened:

Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the LORD, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water (Jer. 2:12–13).

Though we were all designed to draw sustenance and meaning for life from God alone—‘the fountain of life’—we still attempt to find our source of satisfaction within ourselves, from one another and from ‘things’. But it’s not possible! Not only does breaking from God mean we break from one another but it also brings an *internal* dislocation to every one of us. The ‘wells’ from which we seek to draw meaning, purpose and fulfilment in life are ultimately empty and useless. And in vain do we attempt to find our own authentic goals in life. Left to ourselves we can’t see where life is headed and we have no clear understanding of a genuine long-term vocation.

As we saw in the last chapter, God designed us as creatures to reflect the glory of all that he is as the Creator. He spoke of us in these words:

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *Great and Glorious Grace*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1988, pp. 10–11.

*. . . the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise (Isa. 43:21).*

We were originally created as true persons, as whole persons, as fulfilled persons, as glorious persons. As such, we not only related to God totally but we also related to ourselves, to others and to the rest of creation. As I have said, we were built so as to have to derive everything from God—drawing from him all that we need in order to be authentic human beings. Apart from him it is therefore impossible for any of us to be a ‘real’ person! Only so long as we draw all our resources from him are we living in the way he intended. *That very dependency upon God is the guarantee of our freedom as human beings.*

This means that the basic sin of Adam and Eve was their refusal to be content with what they essentially were—**creatures dependent upon their Creator:**

In the beginning man was a gloriously happy, peaceful and tranquil creature . . . Loved by God, he loved God and his fellow creature. This was life! Living within the bounds of his humanity he was contented. Then he was tempted to go outside those boundaries and strike out into areas of Godhead which are not part of being human. The results were disastrous.<sup>2</sup>

## **WE ALL WANT TO BE GOD**

Adam and Eve tried to go it alone. In a very real sense they tried to be their own god. They were urged by Satan to be autonomous. In so doing they cut themselves off from their only source of life and attempted to live independently from God. They failed to see that their life

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<sup>2</sup> Bingham, *Oh, Father! Our Father!* p. 9.

depended entirely upon him and that such a desire for independency is in fact a creational impossibility. Just as a train cannot function if off the rails, so neither can we function if not in a dependency-relationship with God. Without him we are no more ‘free’ than the derailed train. A motor car is designed to have fuel in the fuel tank, water in the radiator and oil in the sump. Change this order and the car will not function. Neither can we ‘function’ as true humans if we ignore God’s order of things or if we try to operate in ways that are against his design for us:

When man rebels he is at odds with himself. He is awry in his own creation. He is cut off from God and becomes as a wandering star or a trackless planet. He is creature without Creator, servant without King, son without Father. He is thus disoriented, disjointed, and dislocated. His agony and anguish come from the fact that he can never be totally fulfilled. He is deprived of emotional fulfilment. His vocational drive has no true direction, no real goal. In this state he is in company with all other sinners who are equally bereft of truth and hence of basic reality.<sup>3</sup>

Over the years I have talked with hundreds of people whose lives have been messed up because they did not take into account their inherent need to be dependent upon their Creator. Like the rest of us, they have tried to go it alone, trying to be their own god—often with disastrous results. When we deny our contingency upon God we automatically die in our relationship to him and, as a consequence, battle to sustain genuine relationships with others. The consequences of this collapse in our true being are farreaching even though the outworking of our

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<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *I, The Man!* 2nd edn, NCPI, Blackwood, 1996, p. 32.

defection from God will manifest itself in different ways in each of us. We think we have ‘freedom’, whereas in reality we have come into a deep bondage from which we cannot extricate ourselves. Even though we are fallen, at core, we can never cease to be what we essentially are—creatures designed to be in a right relationship with the Creator. The sooner we face that reality the better.

*One of the most extraordinary events of my life—and certainly one of the most memorable—began one evening when I was having my time of Bible reading and prayer. I suddenly had a very strong urge to go for a drive in the car. It made no sense whatever as it was quite late and I was more than ready for bed. I tried to dismiss the thought but it just wouldn't go away. Against all my natural reasoning I eventually backed the car out the drive and headed down the highway. I had no idea where I was going nor why. Never before had I allowed such an ‘impression’ to sway my better judgment. But there I was, late at night, driving I knew not where. I felt really foolish!*

*At each major intersection I had to decide which way to turn. Each time the ‘impression’ seem to indicate the direction. I kept thinking how ridiculous this was and hoped no one would ever find out! I was soon driving well out into the bush, quite some kilometres from suburban habitation. Eventually I came to a side road and turned into what was really no more than a dirt track. It petered out and I had to stop. I was now deep in the bush. I sat there trying to decide whether or not I was going crazy! Was this just me? Was this impression from God or not? If not, what was it? Was the whole thing just a figment of my imagination? I didn't know.*

*I turned the headlights off and was then able to make out a light in the bush nearby. It was from a small hut and I then remembered that a recluse lived in this area. I made my way up to the door and, after a long hesitation, knocked! Instantly the door was flung open with a crash. Silhouetted against the light was a large man dressed only in shorts and wielding a huge carving knife! I wanted to run for my life but was riveted to the spot. The man stared at me wide-eyed. Without a word he slowly lowered the knife and turned back into the room and sat down at a table. Then he said: ‘Thank God you’re here, I was just about to end it all’.*

*I think we talked for an hour or more. He was a violent man who hated any form of authority. As a result he’d made a real mess of his life. There had been a broken marriage and then other sordid affairs involving the seduction of young girls. Gradually he had retreated from society—insisting that he have his own ‘freedom’—away from God and everyone else. But things had not worked out as he planned and he was now in despair, seeing no reason for living. I talked about the meaning of life and why we are here and where we are headed. I tried to show him that God had once given us an incredible vocation but which we had stubbornly rejected. My friend’s messed-up life was but a reflection of that rejection.*

*I talked about purpose for living and how sin prevents us from truly knowing God. I took him right back to Adam in order to help him see why we are the failures we are. I tried to show him it was impossible to retreat from humanity as such—that he was part of this fallen race whether he liked it or not. And he certainly couldn’t get away from God by living alone*

*in the bush. Like the rest of us, one day he would have to give an account to the Almighty.*

*From what I could make out the Gospel was not new to him, but he had no comprehension of the depths of God's love and of what really happened at Calvary when Jesus Christ died for Man's defection and sin. As we talked, something of the truth began to penetrate. Slowly an understanding seemed to come as he began to glimpse something of what Jesus had accomplished in dying for him. He seemed to vaguely comprehend what it meant for the Son of God to take up into himself all the pain and misery of human sin and guilt.*

*I have no idea what happened to my reclusive friend in the bush. I returned one day to find he had gone and have never seen or heard of him since.*

The point is, the whole universe is structured to be dependent upon God and Man is no exception. Nevertheless, ever since the Fall, the human drive is constantly towards independence from God and from one another. We all want to 'god it'. We hate authority and want to be in charge. We want to be free-standing. Adam did, and so do we. We all want to go it alone—even if not literally like my friend living in the backwoods. He had tried to 'get back to nature' by living alone in his bush hut. What he had failed to realise was that he could never be the person he ought to be until his conscience was at rest in relation to his Creator.

### **WE HAVE MALFUNCTIONED AS HUMANS**

In Genesis 1:31 God pronounced his total creation to be

‘very good’. In other words, everything was operating according to his design and was therefore fulfilling its created, functional goal and purpose. But when Adam set out to go it alone, he brought a fundamental *malfuction* into God’s created order of things. In fact, according to Romans 8:19–23, the whole creation is out of step as a result of that ongoing human rebellion.

The Bible tells us that the current tension in creation results from our defection and refusal to function as lords over that creation. It says the creation has been subjected to futility by Man’s sin and, as a result, a dislocation has occurred throughout the whole universe. It is as though our human sin has infected creation with a deadly virus that it cannot withstand. In ways we can’t begin to comprehend there is now a fundamental disunity in God’s creation due to our sin. This discord is in stark contrast to the essential oneness which is inherent in the very nature of God and which was therefore built into his creation at the beginning. As a result, creation is waiting ‘on tiptoe’ (so to speak) for the time when God will redeem us, restore us to our true role and bring us back into Eden. Only then will creation ‘snap back into focus’ and be able to function as God originally intended.

### **EDEN AND INNOCENCE LOST**

The outcome of Man’s broken relationship with God was the entrance of guilt into what was otherwise an innocent humanity. When Man ceased to love God because he chose to love himself instead, then division came within humanity as well as within the wider creation. True relationships were impossible to establish:

The break with God, with one another, and with oneself, has caused man to come into the horrific states of suffering, anguish, anger, bitterness, hatred and violence . . . The war against God has been an unending one. [Yet, in the midst of this, there has been] . . . a great yearning for love, a longing for emotional fulfilment, and grim anger and violence where fulfilment has not been reached.

All this is the fruit of Man's initial rebellion against God.<sup>4</sup>

Because God is our *Father*—Creator our failure and sin and guilt have brought disunity and malfunctioning into his family. But wonderfully, it is also in the context of family that our Father brings us back into a relationship with himself as members of his restored household. At the heart of God's salvation of us is his intention that we belong to him once again as his children: he makes us members of the people of God; citizens of his Kingdom; members of his family—his true sons and daughters.

We will see in a later chapter that the role and purpose which God originally intended for Mankind—at the time of creation—is fully restored through the person and work of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus the person who is ‘in Christ’ is a *new* creation (2 Cor. 5:17). The person whom the Son sets free, is free indeed! (John 8:36). Thus the creational freedom, which we have so wilfully and arrogantly rejected, God wonderfully and graciously restores to us when we come to faith in his Son Jesus Christ—the second Adam.

## QUESTIONS

1. What is the fundamental fallacy in the argument of

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<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *God's Glory, Man's Sexuality*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1988, p. 18.

those who say they have ‘freedom’ but do not relate to or obey God? What have they failed to understand about the reality of life? What is their fate?

2. What does Psalm 8:1–9 tell of our original status in God’s order of things? Where are we, and what are we, as far as God is concerned?
3. Genesis 1:26–31 and Hebrews 2:5–9 tell us that God originally put everything in subjection to Man. Is that how things are now? If not, why not? What has happened to the Creation as a result of our failure?
4. What are some of the false and empty ‘wells’ from which we seek to draw satisfaction in life? Can they ever bring real fulfilment?
5. Is it possible to know and experience that freedom of living for which God originally created us? What is this freedom? Where does it come from?
6. In what ways do Christians now enjoy a freedom by being members of God’s family? What are the implications of us having been adopted by God as his sons and daughters?

# 4

## The Genesis of Human Guilt

Most of us understand that we humans often experience feelings of guilt when we know we have done something wrong or have deliberately broken an accepted law or rule. We all know what it is like to feel guilty even if only over some trifling incident. But we sometimes find it difficult to grasp that we are also actually guilty if we break some law or rule which we don't consciously know anything about. We often don't see that we can be legally guilty even when we don't *feel* guilty. Let me illustrate this: If I fail to see a roadside speed-restricting sign and drive too fast in that zone, pleading ignorance of the law to the police officer may perhaps get me off a fine, but it does not alter the fact that I actually broke the law. Nor would it be of any use saying to the constable, 'I didn't *feel* any guilt so I can't have done anything wrong'. The fact is, law does not allow ignorance as an excuse and we can be terribly guilty of violating law without even being aware of it. This is especially true when we visit a foreign country and are not familiar with their laws. We can easily find ourselves in trouble without realising it, and without there having been any intentional wrongdoing on

our part.

On the moral level the principles are the same. However, the consequences of our apparently unwitting *moral* guilt are devastating. That's because moral guilt does something to us. Without us being aware of it, it works on us and—as we will see in a later chapter—does terrible things to our conscience and to our sense of equilibrium. We may be able to fob off our guilt for having exceeded the speed limit, but when it comes to guilt relating to God's moral laws, then that's another matter altogether. God has structured his creation according to certain laws and when we go against these we are guilty, whether we feel it or not and whether we like it or not. His commands are not negotiable—that's just the way things are.

As the basis for our discussion in this chapter we need to read Genesis chapter 3, verses 1 to 13:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God say, “You shall not eat from any tree in the garden”?’ The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.”’ But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees

of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, ‘Where are you?’ He said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.’ He said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?’ The man said, ‘The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.’ Then the LORD God said to the woman, ‘What is this that you have done?’ The woman said, ‘The serpent tricked me, and I ate.’

What really happened in the Garden at the time of the Fall? What went on when Satan faced Eve with the question, ‘Did God say, “You shall not eat from any tree in the garden”?’ (Gen. 3:1). What was he trying to do? What was the inference? What was the implication behind such a question?

It is safe to say that, in Eden, Adam and Eve enjoyed God’s immediate presence and blessing every moment of every day. They would have been entranced by all the good things he had put in Eden for their use and enjoyment—after all, it was ‘a garden of delight’! They would have known a beautiful security and sense of purpose in being in God’s image and in being about the vast vocation he had set for them. I suspect there would have been a noble, regal dignity characterising this primal couple. And can we doubt but they enjoyed a state of complete trust and reliance in their wonderful and beneficent Creator?

But into this tranquil state of utter confidence in their God there came a sudden twinge of uncertainty about his trustworthiness. The thought came right out of the blue—as we say. They certainly were not expecting such an intrusion and it must have been a shock. How could it happen? Genesis 3:1 (above) tells us that Satan brought *the intrusion of doubt* into their minds.

## THE INTRUSION OF DOUBT

Satan sowed a seed of distrust in their thinking concerning the integrity of their God. Let me illustrate how this happens: Suppose a man—who had no reason to suspect his wife of anything inappropriate—was suddenly confronted by a friend who said: ‘At least *I* don’t believe what they are saying about your wife’. Though he had no grounds for suspecting anything to be wrong, he might wonder, ‘Could it be true?’ This is the intrusion of doubt—and this is what Satan did to Eve. He sowed a doubt in her mind about the character of God when there had previously been nothing but trust and approval.

When Eve repeated to Satan God’s prohibition about eating from the forbidden tree and also the warning that she would die if she disobeyed (Gen. 2:16–17), Satan said to her, ‘You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil’ (Gen. 3:4–5). He now stated a blatant lie. Having sowed doubt in her mind he could now openly demean the character of God to her face. He was saying in effect, ‘You stupid woman, you don’t mean to tell me you really *believe* this? Could it be true that God would actually say a thing like that? God knows full well that you ought to be *as he is*. He’s pulled the wool over your eyes! Go on, make a move now for your rightful independence. That’s what life’s all about! You’ll be really free then. Do this and you won’t have to toe the line on anything. You’ll be able to make your own decisions on good and evil and you won’t have to wait for *him* to tell you what you can or can’t do! You ought to stand up for your rights!’

No doubt this sounds all too familiar! Haven’t we all thought it—if not said it—at one time or another?

Haven't we heard it many times from the lips of others? Hasn't this been the catchery of young people down through the ages? The principle of demanding our 'rightful independence' hasn't changed—it all started in the Garden with Satan's seduction of Eve. Satan was out to destroy the plan of God because he had his own plan! He wanted to entice Adam and Eve to make a decision that would obstruct God's purposes and further his own. He wanted them to act in a way that would impede the blessing of God:

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate (Gen. 3:6).

Eve believed Satan's lie and it didn't take too long for Adam to side with her in direct disobedience to God's command. The immediate consequence was that they came under the dreadful effects of guilt:

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves (Gen. 3:7).

Suddenly they knew they were naked and felt ashamed. No doubt their immediate sense of shame at being physically naked was but a reflection of their inner sense of exposure to God's holy gaze as a result of their guilt.

As we read Genesis 3:1–13 we note the progression of the events which followed and the elements resulting from Adam and Eve's sin:

- (a) 'I was afraid'—there was FEAR (v. 10).
- (b) 'I was naked'—there was SHAME (v. 10).
- (c) 'the woman did it'—there was BLAME (v. 12).

These three elements were all the result of one basic

fact—their primary **GUILT** in the eyes of a holy God for having disobeyed his simple command. Let's be clear about this: it was not just that Adam and Eve had sudden *feelings* of guilt—though they surely experienced that. No, they were now in a state or condition of having done wrong. They had committed an irreversible offence. They had gone against God's word or 'law'. They were culpable and therefore deserving of punishment or a penalty. They were now blameworthy. They were at fault and no longer in a position of innocence. *This then is the genesis of all human guilt.* This is where our roots lie as a race. This is why we have all become fundamentally guilty in the eyes of the Creator.

### **WE DIED IN OUR RELATIONSHIP TO GOD**

We read above that God walked in the Garden in the cool of the day (Gen. 3:8), and Adam and Eve undoubtedly delighted in the enjoyment of this intimate and personal fellowship with the Almighty. But their guilt now made it impossible for them to face him. Their fellowship and communion with God was broken. Their relationship with him was shattered and they now felt inferior and insecure in the presence of the one against whom they had sinned. God was now an ogre to them. Fear filled their hearts when God enquired as to their whereabouts.

Thus Adam said

to the LORD: 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; *and I hid myself*' (Gen. 3:10). When their disobedience was exposed Adam blamed God for giving him 'the woman', and then

blamed Eve for leading him astray. Eve in turn blamed the serpent for seducing her! (Gen. 3:11–13). Their fear, shame and blame all flowed out of their guilt at having disobeyed the Lord's clear command. The outcome? *They died in their relationship to God.*

The terrible consequences of our first parent's actions have affected and, indeed, infected our whole race. This means that these elements of guilt, fear, shame and blame are now present in every one of us. We too are relationally dead to God and so suffer the same tragic effects in our lives as they came into that day. This means that in our own relationships, our guilt will always bring the fear of being found out as those who have done wrong, the shame of not being what we really should be as those in God's image, and the conscious or unconscious effort to shift the blame to something or someone else. From this we may deduce at least three fundamental principles of life:

**1. Guilt underlies all our moral failures**

Human guilt is the reason for all our experiences of remorse and bitterness and wrong anger. Moral failure results from our inability to function aright so long as we do not have a clear conscience before God. It is this guilt which makes us feel inferior as human beings. It makes us feel less than the persons we instinctively know we ought to be. It is the reason why we so often feel vulnerable and unable to cope. It is the cause of all our basic breakdowns in our relationships with God, with others and with ourselves. (If you can't live with yourself, you will not be able to live with others.) Guilt prejudices all our relationships in life, pollutes our motives, distorts our perspectives and undermines our

judgments. No matter how hard we might try, we never seem to be able to maintain our moral integrity. Sooner or later it collapses, even if only in our thought patterns. All this is a result of our basic guilt in the eyes of God.

**2. This guilt produces a terrible bondage**

Guilt ties us up in knots *inside*. It produces a bondage from which we cannot extricate ourselves. It ensnares us to the extent that it is impossible for us truly to be ourselves in any consistent, ongoing manner. As such, we can never be free or genuinely at peace. At the same time, the deceit of sin blinds us to just how enslaved we really are and we often refuse to recognise that we are indeed hostages. We live in constant denial as to our real state and condition. We don't see the awful yoke that's around our neck. We refuse to face the fact that we are not free at all—even though we know instinctively that we should be! It is therefore a fundamental fact of life that where there is guilt there is bondage. Where there is guilt, there is an inability to act and live in true liberty. Until such time as our guilt before God can be removed we cannot be truly free. Our conscience will constantly nag us as to our just culpability.

**3. We are so structured as to be unable to tolerate this guilt**

If we are honest, we have to admit that in one way or another we human beings live more or less in a constant state of tension. Our futile efforts to somehow deal with our guilt only leave us exhausted and uptight. We blame our environment,

our circumstances in life, our upbringing, our heredity or whatever, *rather than accept responsibility for our own guilt*. We try to pull down a blind on what we know we ought to be, and we do everything we can to avoid being exposed as the persons we really are. Our guilt forces us into the position of demanding that we be seen to be 'right' in all our endeavours. We are ashamed when we sense that we are not the persons we were created to be. In our shame we have invented all kinds of ruses in order to avoid our shame. We do this as an excuse for distancing ourselves from God and his justification. Of course, if we were not guilty creatures we would have no need for this subterfuge.

The awful dilemma for each us is that the human conscience cannot tolerate this guilt. It must be off-loaded. *We have to get rid of it*. We have to expiate our guilt somehow and we use every means we can to do so. We blame others; we criticise others; we do things to make up for it; we try to cover it over; we become 'do-gooders'. We rationalise our wrong actions; we look for faults in those in authority over us and reject them as not being worthy of our obedience. We avoid responsibility; we try to be very pious; we become very religious. We make great sacrifices; we go on pilgrimages; we become recluses. We submit to therapies, analyses, treatments, medications. We bury ourselves in drugs, sex, music, sport, hard work or 'the job'. We espouse 'causes'. We become interested in 'saving' the environment such as the trees or the whales! (Of course many of these are not bad things to be interested in, but it's the false or wrong motive that may be behind our involvement that's the issue here.)

Unfortunately, though our ‘feelings’ of guilt may depart, *our actual guilt remains*. No matter what we do, our fundamental existential guilt just won’t go away! Try as we may, all our efforts to deal with our guilts only push the real problem underground, ready to surface somewhere else at some other time.

### **WE ALL SHARE ADAM’S GUILT**

Finally, we need to understand that we all share in Adam’s guilt. Remember, our first parents were given a very specific command. They deliberately disobeyed and incurred the penalty of that failure. They came under dreadful guilt with all its consequent impact upon their lives. The Bible clearly teaches that Adam’s guilt has been imputed to all humanity. In other words, God has put that guilt to our account. He considers that what Adam did, we did, and what Adam failed to do, we failed to do—**just as if we had been there instead of him**. This may sound a bit strange unless we recognise that Adam *represented us* in that primary test of obedience in the Garden of Eden. He was what some theologians call, our Federal Head. When he failed—and incurred the guilt of that failure—then so did we *as a race*. One writer puts it this way: ‘the one sin of the one man Adam is accounted to be the sin of all’.<sup>1</sup> Another says: ‘all men offended in the First Man . . . The guilt contracted by him is possessed also by

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<sup>1</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1968, p. 185.

them.<sup>2</sup>

That's why we can't say: 'It's all Adam's fault'! No, we were all involved in that primary failure. Of course, if this was not taught in the Scriptures we would never guess that this is where all our moral problems stem from. What's more, it provides an invaluable clue as to why moral failure is endemic in us humans. We understand the idea that Adam sinned and so we *inherited* sin from him. But perhaps we have failed to realise we have also come under his guilt (or culpability) because of his representative role in God's scheme of things. For that reason it can't be stressed enough how important it is that we come to grips with this principle.

If you say that it is *unfair* of God to load us with Adam's guilt and that we didn't ask for him to represent us, then you will have to be consistent and say that it is equally unfair for God to load Jesus Christ with our sin when he represented us on the Cross! At least we ought to be consistent! We need therefore to look very carefully at the Scriptures because a great deal hinges on us having a right understanding of this important teaching. This principle of **imputed guilt** is taught in Romans 5:12–19, and 1 Corinthians 15:21–23, 45–48. (See Appendix for a further explanation of these two passages.)

## QUESTIONS

1. What was the real issue behind Adam and Eve's failure? In what sense was their sin a decision that went

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<sup>2</sup> H. C. G. Moule, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Pickering & Inglis, London, 1975, p. 147.

against God's plan, obstructing his intentions and impeding his blessing? How does this relate to us?

2. What issues do you think might have been part of Satan's agenda in the Genesis 3 account?
3. What was the immediate outcome of Adam and Eve's disobedience?
4. In what way did Adam and Eve 'die' as a result of their fall? How has that 'death' impacted us?
5. What is the significance of guilt in our human experience? How does guilt infect all that we do and say and think?
6. Examine the ways in which guilt 'prejudices all our relationships in life, pollutes our motives, distorts our perspectives and undermines our judgments'.
7. How do we try to handle our guilt? What techniques do we employ to rationalise our wrong actions? Why are all these attempts ultimately unsuccessful in dealing with our guilt?
8. How is it that Adam's guilt can be imputed to us (put to our account)? Is this fair? Give reasons for your answer. Is it fair that our sin can be imputed to Christ?
9. Do you think you would have acted any differently to Adam and Eve had you been in the Garden of Eden instead of them? What is your reasoning? Can you support your answer from Scripture?
10. What are the implications of the Scriptures telling us that we are all born guilty? Is this why all of us, even from earliest childhood, won't readily accept author-

ity?

# 5

## A Deadly Virus Has Infected Us!

Adam and Eve were excluded from the Garden of Eden because their sin was real and their guilt was real. They had broken fellowship with God by violating his word and his holiness—and they had to bear the consequences of that failure. Try as we may, we human beings cannot get rid of our primary guilt imputed to us from Adam. It is a deadly virus that has overrun our whole race. That very guilt (or culpability in God's eyes) drives us into sin of our very own and each of us will have to bear the consequences of *those* failures. Because guilt is always there as a burden and pain to the conscience, it works on us. In other words, when we fail, guilt does not just lie there peacefully and still, *it acts on us*. It is a dynamic and destructive force which *does something to us*. Whether we be conscious of it or not, our guilt is always at work, shaping and moulding our thoughts, words and actions—not for good but for evil! This fact is powerfully stated in Genesis 6:

The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts

was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, ‘I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them’ (Gen. 6:5–7).

So serious had the sin and rebellion of Man become that God almost wiped us out at the time of the Flood—only Noah and his immediate family surviving the dreadful deluge. Of course, this view of Man’s sin as expressed above is not how we see ourselves! If the Scriptures did not tell us that this is how God sees us, then we would never have known our true condition. The extent of human guilt, and therefore of sin, is universal. God says that he sees the motives of the heart of Man in the following terms:

The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it? (Jer. 17:9).

### **WE ALL PROJECT OUR GUILT**

Because human guilt is always there in every one of us, and because we were never designed to have to cope with this guilt, then we do everything we can to get rid of it. We do so primarily by projecting our guilt onto others and by striking out at those around us. Let me illustrate this principle. Genesis gives the account of Cain and Abel’s offerings to God:

In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. The LORD

said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it’ (Gen. 4:3–7).

Although Adam and Eve were created ‘in God’s own image’, as the result of the Fall their first son had the seeds of rebellion, arrogance, anger and murder in his heart. As the quote above indicates, guilt was powerfully at work in Cain’s life. There was nothing wrong with Cain’s offering as such, but he came with a proud, self-righteous spirit, thinking to buy God off by his sacrifice. He came with a wrong motive and with a wrong attitude. He did not bring his offering in faith. Hebrews 11:4 says, ‘By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain’s. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts.’ Cain’s guilt led to anger when he saw God’s acceptance of his brother’s offering and the rejection of his own. His anger then led to jealousy and so to murder. We are told that Cain was ‘from the evil one’ and that the reason he murdered was because ‘his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous’ (1 John 3:12).

As we have already seen, because we were created in his image, God always intended us to be men and women of love, caring for one another’s needs and reflecting his compassion and care to our fellow creatures. In his guilt, Cain deliberately chose disobedience, hatred and murder. Such is the outworking of human guilt as we seek to justify ourselves in our relationships with other sinners.

Another example of the impact of guilt is found in the first Book of Samuel. King Saul had disobeyed God’s clear instructions as given to him through Samuel the prophet (see 1 Sam. 15). As a result, God rejected him as king and chose David instead. Saul was furious and tried

to take out his guilt on David as well as on his own son Jonathan:

Then Saul's anger was kindled against Jonathan. He said to him, 'You son of a perverse, rebellious woman! Do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame, and to the shame of your mother's nakedness? For as long as the son of Jesse lives upon the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established. Now send and bring him to me, for he shall surely die.' Then Jonathan answered his father Saul, 'Why should he be put to death? What has he done?' (1 Sam. 20:30–32).

Saul was the one who was in the wrong. Since God had rejected him and chosen David to replace him, Saul's guilt-driven anger was directed at David. He projected his guilt onto him and tried to kill him under the pretext that David had not turned up to a recent royal banquet.

These two examples from Scripture illustrate the principle that '*any repressed guilt evokes an aggressive response*'.<sup>1</sup> We lash out at others when we are in the wrong. We lose our temper and wonder why. We criticise others for what they say or do, in order to justify ourselves—even though we say and do the very same things! Such is the perverse operation of guilt upon us. Such is the deceit of sin.

## **WE CAN'T CHANGE OURSELVES**

From God's point of view it is impossible for Man to do good. The Lord asks the question:

Can Ethiopians change their skin or leopards their spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil (Jer. 13:23).

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Paul Tournier, *Guilt and Grace*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1962, p. 14.

He is saying that if a dark-skinned man can change the colour of his skin or if a leopard can alter its spots, then so too can sinful human beings do good! It is impossible for human beings to change the way they are! We are all in the terrible state of being infected with the virus of sin and guilt and there is nothing we can do about it. The writer of Proverbs describes this awful state of Mankind when he says:

The iniquities of the wicked ensnare them, and they are caught in the toils of their sin (Prov. 5:22).

Of rebellious and disobedient Israel God said:

. . . my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water (Jer. 2:13).

On one occasion Jesus taught his disciples a deep truth about themselves—and about us!

For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person (Mark 7:21–23).

In Romans chapter 3, Paul lists a series of quotations from the Old Testament to show the extent of our human sin:

'There is no one who is righteous, not even one;  
there is no one who has understanding,  
there is no one who seeks God.

All have turned aside, together they have become worthless;  
there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one.'

'Their throats are opened graves;

they use their tongues to deceive.'  
'The venom of vipers is under their lips'.  
'Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.'  
'Their feet are swift to shed blood;  
ruin and misery are in their paths,  
and the way of peace they have not known.'  
'There is no fear of God before their eyes' (Rom. 3:10–18).

We need to pause and look at some of the statements made in this passage above from Romans.

## **NO ONE IS RIGHTEOUS**

**Firstly**, except for Christ, there has never been anyone in all history who is 'right' with God and 'right' with respect to his law. Nobody can stand before the law and be acquitted by it as one who has done good—there simply is no such thing as a righteous person! Of ourselves, all of us are devoid of true righteousness. No human being has been, is now or ever will be morally upright, in and of himself, in God's eyes.

Again, this is not how we see ourselves. In fact, we consider much of our activity to be highly righteous and to be deserving, not only of God's attention, but also of his highest approval! The Scriptures tell us otherwise—because it gives us God's opinion, not Man's:

We have all become like one who is unclean,  
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.  
We all fade like a leaf,  
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away (Isa. 64:6).

Who can say, 'I have made my heart clean;  
I am pure from my sin'? (Prov. 20:9).

Surely there is no one on earth so righteous as to do good without ever sinning (Eccl. 7:20).

## NO ONE SEEKS GOD

**Secondly**, because all men are unrighteous, all men are *naturally* ignorant of God. Unaided by his grace and unenlightened by his Spirit, natural Man neither understands nor seeks God. His mind is in darkness and his will is in bondage. He *will* not, and therefore *cannot* seek God in order to know him. He may *think* he understands, and he may *think* he is seeking God, but the ‘god’ he ‘knows’ and ‘seeks’ is not the God of the Bible:

Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God’s Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:14).

They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart (Eph. 4:18).

Geoffrey Bingham says under the heading ‘No one seeks God, yet some do’:

This is a paradox, but it is understood when we see that God does seek Man, so that when we find him [Man] seeking it is because God has initiated that endeavour. The Bible makes it clear that God seeks Man. Thus the father of the prodigal seeks the son and finds him at the point where his returning child is ready for the reunion through repentance and faith. The shepherd seeks the lost sheep, the wife the silver coin linked with her betrothal. The fact is that God loves the world that he created and he loves all within it. He has a covenant with all, no matter how much they refuse that covenant. The covenant of God keeps man in the place of despair because he cannot disentangle himself from God, never ever fully escape the knowledge of God. Hence . . . he can never be fulfilled apart from God, and his sinful obduracy will never let

him seek for God.<sup>2</sup>

## **WE HAVE ALL TURNED ASIDE**

**Thirdly**, we ‘all have turned aside’ from God and his ways. As we have already seen, he designed us to be in his image and to walk uprightly before him; to live in accordance with his law; to follow in his steps in obedience; to conduct ourselves in such a manner as to reflect his character. But we ‘all have turned aside’—we have deliberately deviated from his path and gone our own way. Our life is in fact out of focus with his. We have fallen away, have become depraved and are contorted and twisted as human beings. We no longer tally up with his straightedge. We are no longer ‘in-line’ with his word or his law. This is what it means to have ‘turned aside’. None are exempt. By turning aside and forsaking God—our fountain of life and only source of true living—we have gone wrong. In an ethical sense we have gone bad and are rotten through and through. We are no longer in line with what it means to be truly human. We have rendered ourselves useless—unfit for that for which God created us. From his point of view, we are unprofitable—worthless! Once again, I suggest that this is hardly how we see ourselves!

## **NO ONE DOES GOOD**

**Fourthly**, this means that of ourselves we are incapable

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<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, NCTM Monday Pastors’ Studies, 3 April, 1995, p. 1.

of ever doing anything *good*. As God sees us, our so-called ‘good’ deeds, actions, words, aspirations—are nothing! To him they are not good at all. To him, they are unrelated to his character as he really is and to things as they really are in his order of creation. What we *think* is good, is unrighteous to God. To the last man we are ‘rotten to the core’. That’s the terrible truth of Man’s depravity. No doubt we all recoil from the idea and are shocked to be told that this is how we are. We instinctively reject the concept of being utterly corrupt. We think that perhaps *some* people are like that, but surely not all? Every day we see people doing good. There are charities, community social efforts and so on. All this is certainly a ‘doing good’ but it is only a doing good in our context as fallen creatures. It is *relative* good. **IT IS NOT ABSOLUTE GOOD.** It is not good in the context of God’s truth, holiness, righteousness and absolute goodness.

### **NO ONE SPEAKS CLEAN THINGS**

**Fifthly**, our language and speech is totally unacceptable to God. We are told that our filthy language is like the putrid stench that comes from a decomposed corpse in an open-top grave—not a very pleasant analogy of a human being! But the picture is accurate as far as God is concerned—because that is how he views our corrupt talk. We use our tongues to deceive. We pull the wool over our neighbour’s eyes. We deceive them, we delude them, we mis-lead, we mis-represent the truth. God created us to live in the truth and to speak truth to our neighbour. Instead, we have suppressed the truth; we have held down the truth in unrighteousness. Further, we

are told that there is poison under our lips like that of a snake with its deadly fangs. We can all remember things that have been said to us that have crushed us at the time. And how often have *we* said things to or about others that have poisoned their character?

### **MURDER IS JUST BELOW THE SURFACE**

**Sixthly**, by nature we all have the essence of murder in our hearts. The whole of human history attests to the fact that Man is a murderer and is swift to shed another's blood. Homicide is just below the surface in human beings. This is true today no less than at any other period in our history. Perhaps you don't think this verse applies to you! Jesus said, 'if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment' (Matt. 5:22), and John says, 'All who hate a brother or sister are murderers' (1 John 3:15). In other words, God takes the thought for the deed. Were we to disclose our thoughts to each other then we would soon discover the awful truth that the seeds of murder are indeed in us all. God says that if a Man takes the life of another, then *his* life must be forfeited. Because we are in the image of God, to kill a Man is to attack God himself. Could it be that Man's propensity to murder his fellows springs from his own basic guilt before God and that his hatred of God is outworked in that act of killing? One way or another, we all have our fist in God's face and therefore in each other's face! No wonder our feet are swift to shed blood.

Thus the Scriptures paint a very black picture of Mankind's degradation as a result of our corporate sin and rebellion. Our awful, innate perversity knows no bounds and history is replete with accounts of man's inhumanity

against his fellows. We read of it each day in our newspapers and see it vividly depicted each night on our TV news. However, bad though things seem to be in our divided world, if it were not for the goodness of God restraining us, we would break out and indulge in every form of evil conduct. A prayerful study of Romans 1:18–32 will soon reveal the degree of rebellion and evil and rage that is in every one of us *at core*. We are all infected by this deadly virus we call existential guilt!

*Nick was probably the angriest man I have ever encountered. I had become involved in his life through a request from friends overseas in his home country. He had been in jail several times for assault and was quite capable of smashing me up—had he tried. He had been involved with the occult and was violently opposed to anything to do with God. At 25 he'd been a heroin addict for about 10 years. At one stage he had attempted suicide following a road accident which had left him severely disabled. When I first met him he was destitute, had been sleeping in Hyde Park in Sydney and was only just alive. His long addiction to hard drugs had been largely overtaken by an addiction to the pain-killing medication prescribed for his injuries when he was in hospital. He was deeply in debt to the drug dealers and was terrified they would find him and demand recompense. He knew only too well they would kill him if he didn't pay up. One night they did try but mistook some other unfortunate wretch for Nick. In the confusion he escaped and was soon on my doorstep looking like he'd seen a ghost.*

*For almost six months he came and went. Of course I knew he was using me, but I determined—the Lord helping me—to persevere. Nick had been brought up*

*in a Christian home and knew the Gospel. But he hated any discussion about God and lashed out whenever I talked of his real need.*

*Nick never came home without doping himself first and was always spaced out on drugs by the time he arrived on the doorstep. I'd made up my mind to speak directly to his conscience irrespective of what condition he appeared to be in at the time. One night, when he had been especially aggressive and foul-mouthed, I asked if he knew why he was like he was. Surprised by the question, he said he didn't know. I told him it was because he had his fist in God's face. I told him that he hated God because he was a guilty man. I told him he was guilty because he knew he was not the person God had made him to be. Not only had his guilt driven him to hatred of God, but he hated his parents, he hated the police, he hated society, and he especially hated me for telling him the truth! In a fit of rage he stormed out of the house—slamming the door behind him. During the next few weeks I spoke to him many times about God's forgiveness, of the Cross and of peace in the heart. Each time his eyes would be rolling—the effect of his latest drug dose. Was he even hearing me? I didn't think he could be.*

*He disappeared again for almost three weeks. When he eventually rang it was another Nick speaking to me. He was coherent and polite. It took a three hour drive down the South Coast to finally locate him. We sat in McDonalds and talked at length. I marvelled at the change! When I commented that his anger had gone, he said: 'Yes, it's gone. It was all so stupid. You were right, in my guilt and anger I've had my fist in God's face for years. I wanted to smash him but couldn't get at him—so I smashed his image in others instead.' He*

*had been reading the Bible I'd given him and had accepted the fact that only through Christ could he ever hope to survive and start a new life. He seemed to understand that his guilt had been taken by Christ and that he really could be free. I was deeply humbled by God's goodness. His word had been penetrating—even when I had thought it was impossible for Nick to have been hearing the things I had been saying to him for six months.*

*We returned to Sydney and spent the next few days talking nonstop about the Christian life. He couldn't believe the change in himself! He no longer wanted his drugs. He no longer craved for his 'fix'. He began to think more rationally about himself and about the heart-broken parents he'd almost driven to the grave.*

*The change in Nick was real. The power of the Gospel had set him free from the dreadful bondage in which he'd lived for half his life. Eventually he decided to go back to his home country and to his parents. There was nothing to show for his wasted 25 years, and he now genuinely wanted to start a new life. But he knew the moment he landed he would have to give himself up to the police for the crimes he'd committed when just a youth. 'If that means going to jail, then so be it. I'm determined to start a new life with Christ.'*

*I've often reflected on those frenetic six months with Nick. He nearly drove me mad. The battle each day was fast and furious. Never before had I been involved in a struggle that so obviously had its roots in the deadly grip which principalities and powers have over fallen men and women. What I learned afresh was that the 'strong man'—Satan—is no match for the*

*'Stronger Man'—Christ. Satan seeks to keep his devotees in his grip but has no armour in which he can trust when it is God's time to release the captives. Certainly no one could have been more in bondage than Nick. But the Gospel is the power of God for salvation, and the contrast in Nick's life after his deliverance was an incredible sight to witness.*

*Nick rang me shortly after his arrival in his home country and said that 'miraculously' the police could find no record of his past involvement in murder and drugs and had let him go free. He got a job and started paying me back the large sums of money I'd expended on him since we'd first met—money spent keeping him alive and in paying off his drug debts. He tried going to church but always felt uncomfortable. Although he never went back onto any narcotics, he had an uphill battle trying to find his feet in society.*

It is essential that we see ourselves *as God sees us* if we are to begin to understand the nature of sin, the extent of our guilt and our need for release. We must resist the temptation to think that some humans are 'better' than others and are therefore not as blameworthy before God. Like Nick, we are all guilty, rebellious and angry at heart. Of course, some men and women act and live in ways that are (by human standards) far 'worse' than others. Perhaps few of us have gone to the excesses that Nick did or have sunk as low as he did. At the other end of the scale we see some people as outstandingly 'good' in the way they conduct their lives. To us, their lives are exemplary.

What we find hard to realise is that from God's perspective we are *all* fallen. We have all come short of his glory. As far as God is concerned *human guilt is*

*universal.*

Paul says in Romans:

What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin . . . Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For ‘no human being will be justified in his sight’ by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:9, 19–20).

## **GUILT TAINTS EVERYTHING**

Our guilt pervades all that we are as persons, and though we may not realise it, guilt taints all that we do and say and think. That’s why, as we saw above, the Scriptures tell us there are none who are ‘righteous’ according to God’s rule and none that are ‘good’ by his standards. We are all guilty in the eyes of our holy and righteous God. One way or another—like Nick—we all have our fist in his face. We have all been polluted by sin and stained right through to the core. Nor is there any moral enzyme or detergent by which we can purge or purify ourselves.

We should learn from this the importance of deriving our theology from the Scriptures and not from our experience of life. We must learn to see things as God sees them and to discern things from the perspective of his character rather than our own. Only in this way will we be able to see what the Holy Spirit is revealing to us of our own terrible depths of depravity and corruption. It was not until Isaiah had a revelation of God’s holiness that he saw the extent of his own sin (Isa. 6:1–5). The same unnerving, but liberating experience came to Paul

on the road to Damascus. The sooner this revelation comes to each of us the better. We will then see our *need* for a Saviour.

The clear teaching of the Scriptures is that only God can do something about Man's guilt. Only God can cleanse us. Only God can bring us into release. Only God can resolve our dreadful moral dilemma. The Christian Gospel is therefore an amazing message of hope and encouragement. It tells us that God has not just left us to 'stew in our own juice' but has entered into our humanity in the person of Jesus Christ in order to become as we are, though without our sin. In his coming, he has totally identified with all our corporate and personal failure, and has taken all of that on board as his own.

In our later studies we will see that there is not one ounce of human guilt and sin and failure which Christ has not dealt with through his death and resurrection. No wonder the Gospel is called the 'Good News'!

At this point it may be helpful to read Isaiah chapter 53, John chapters 1 to 3, Romans 3:21–26 and 5:1–11.

## QUESTIONS

1. Why can't we deal with our own guilt?
2. How does our guilt disturb our relationships?
3. Why is our guilt the most serious of human problems?
4. What do we humans try to do with our guilt towards God?

5. Do you think most people know that they are guilty before God? Give reasons for your answer.
6. Look up Romans 1:18–32 and, in conjunction with 3:9–18 and Mark 7:21–23, see the extent of sin and the effects of guilt on our conduct.
7. In what way do many zealous parents paralyse their children with good advice? What has this to do with human guilt?

# 6

## What's the Big Deal about Sin?

We have seen in the last chapter that the extent of guilt upon the human race is universal. No one can escape its ravages—its trail of havoc can be traced in our corporate history all the way back to Adam. Right from birth, guilt has invaded the inner lives of every human being, and it does terrible things to us—*whether we realise it or not.*

Sadly, no one is exempt from the dreadful consequences of Adamic guilt and, as we work through what the Scriptures teach, the picture is very depressing. Nevertheless, I urge you to keep going, even if what you are seeing about yourself may be unpleasant. All of us find it hard to accept our fallen state. We are secretly ashamed of what we have become and it's not much fun facing the truth about ourselves. We are tempted to deny it and we try to pretend that, though it may be so for others, it's not that way with us! As fallen human beings, we are masters at denial when it comes to our sin and guilt! But face these truths we must, otherwise we will never see our desperate need for God's full forgiveness; we will not appreciate the wonder and glory of the

salvation which he has provided for us through his Son, Jesus Christ; and we will fail to enter that magnificent freedom of living which leads to the Eden that God intended for us from the beginning.

The Scriptures speak about us humans as being in a state of ‘captivity’ as a result of our guilt in God’s eyes. In other words, we are not free. We think we are, but from God’s perspective nothing could be further from the truth. He sees us as being hopelessly and helplessly bound in chains—imprisoned and enslaved. This may all seem unrealistic and fanciful until we really start to think about it in the light of what the Bible teaches. Only then do we begin to see the awful truth of our situation.

The person who thought long and deep about these matters was the 16th century German reformer Martin Luther. Out of his own bitter experience as a tormented Augustinian monk he came to see the depths of Man’s bondage under guilt and then of the freedom God brings to us through Christ. During his research and study he made up a list of the various aspects of this ‘captivity’ or ‘bondage’ into which guilt has plunged all human beings. (His list is by no means exhaustive.) They are what Luther called ‘tyrants’—enemies which grip and hold us in an appalling servitude: sin, death, law, God’s wrath, the world, the flesh, Satan, demonic powers, idols, the conscience. One way or another every one of these impact our lives and keep us in a state of bondage *even though we may not realise the extent of their power over us.*

The sad reality is that every human being—by one means or another—is subject to the slavery imposed by these oppressors. As we are going to see, their stranglehold over us is due entirely to the fact that we are guilty creatures. In other words, there is a fundamental

principle of life that: **WHERE THERE IS GUILT THERE IS BONDAGE.**

Where there is an indictment hanging over our heads, there is no freedom of conscience to live as those who are truly unfettered. These enemies of the soul take advantage of our guilt and trade on it as the means of holding us in their grasp. Of course, if we weren't guilty then they couldn't do a thing to us.

In the previous chapters we have learned that in fact guilt paralyses us in our attempts to obey God's truth—a guilty person never really obeys, though he/she may 'toe the line' well enough! This means that guilt really underlies all our moral failures. We may wish we could obey aright but, hard as we try, we keep failing because guilt acts as a permanent brake holding us back from accomplishing even the very best of our moral endeavours.

We are going to see in what follows just how much and in what way we are paralysed in our day-to-day moral action. *The single common denominator in every case is this same guilt*, and it is guilt which is the means by which these powers have a hold over us—no matter what form they may take. Needless to say, if there was some method by which we were able to deal with our guilt, then the bondage of these tyrants would be broken forever. In later chapters we will see in more detail how God has done just that for us. He has dealt with our guilt and has thereby broken the back of these oppressors, setting us free from their paralysing and dominating power.

Before we go any further, I need to give a brief explanation. In the following chapters we look at these 'tyrants' one by one. In each case I have tackled the subject by showing firstly the way in which each hold *all* human beings in some form of bondage. I then indicate

how Christ has released believers from their grip. Keep in mind that I start each topic by talking in *general terms* about how we all are as fallen human beings, and then I move on to show how Christians are set free by Christ's finished work on the Cross. I trust that if this pattern in each chapter is recognised then the reader should be able to avoid any confusion as to just who I am talking about in each instance!

## THE TERRIBLE TYRANT CALLED SIN

The first 'tyrant' on Luther's list is sin. That's a word we tend to avoid these days. What's more, everyone has their own idea as to what 'sin' is. So then, how do you define sin? What is sin in the way the Bible talks about it?

### **Sin Is to Go against God's Law**

The Bible describes sin simply as violation, transgression or infringement of God's law. We are told that: 'Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness' (1 John 3:4). In another place it says: 'All wrongdoing is sin' (1 John 5:17). This immediately raises the legitimate question in some people's minds as to what constitutes 'lawlessness' and how does one define 'wrongdoing'? If we were to look at these statements on the horizontal level only, then there would be no clear answer—it would be one person's opinion as opposed to someone else's. But the Bible always speaks in objective terms about our vertical relationship with God. It is what *he* thinks that really counts. How does *he* see us? What is *his* definition of our motives, behaviour and attitude of heart? He tells us very bluntly, 'all have sinned and fall

short of the glory of God' (Rom. 3:23). Here we have to face a very real fact: 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us' (1 John 1:8). We deceive no one but ourselves if we claim not to be sinners! From God's vantage point, we are all in the same boat. We are all sinners. We have all sinned. We all want to be autonomous and so avoid obedience to him. We are all 'law-breakers' and we are all 'wrong-doers'. To God, *degrees of sin* is irrelevant. We are all infected by this deadly virus. Sin is a universal disease that has corrupted the whole human race. None are exempt. We all 'sin' because we are all 'sinners' by nature. At core we are all 'fallen' human beings.

### **Every Sin Impedes God's Blessing and Plan**

Another way to view sin is to see it in the light of God's original plan and purpose. We have already thought about God's creative mandate and the vast vocation he set for us. He blessed us by empowering us to accomplish that plan and enabling us to see it through to the end. So all sin is a going against that plan. It is to go against his blessing. Sin is incredibly serious because it is a deliberate action on our part to impede God's purposes. There is no such thing as 'innocent' sin. When we sin we are saying that we have *our* plan and that this is more important than God's plan. We want to do and say and think what *we* want, and 'to hell' with what God wants. Every sin is therefore a violation of his holiness. It is to deliberately go against all that our loving and holy God has purposed in order to bring rebellious men and women back to Eden. No wonder Luther called sin a tyrant!

### **Sin Always Enslaves Us**

Having said all this, we now need to work through the extent to which this sin dominates our lives and to what degree it manipulates and has control of us. In this regard Jesus once said, ‘everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin’ (John 8:34). In describing our true state as God sees it, Jesus used the analogy of slavery to illustrate how sin has a hold over us.

A slave has no will of his own. He has to do what he is told. He has to obey his master. He has no choice in the matter. Thus the Bible makes it clear that because we are fallen creatures we are now slaves of sin—held by its power to do its bidding. ‘Man is indeed the pitiful and abject slave of tyrannous sin.’<sup>1</sup> Another writer—commenting on John 8:34—describes our state in these words:

He [Man] is a slave, for he has been overcome and taken captive by his master, sin, and is unable to deliver himself from this bondage. He is as truly (nay, *more* truly) chained as is the prisoner with the iron band around his leg, the band that is fastened to a chain which is cemented into the wall of a dungeon. He cannot break the chain. On the contrary, every sin he commits draws it tighter, until at last it crushes him completely. That is the picture which Jesus draws here of sinners as they are by nature.<sup>2</sup>

### **Power, Penalty, Pollution and Presence of Sin**

There are four aspects to the hold sin has over us, namely: its power, its penalty, its pollution and its presence.

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *I, The Man*, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> William Hendriksen, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John*, vol. 2, Banner of Truth, London, 1961, p. 53.

**Firstly**, sin exercises authority or power over us by forcing us to go its way and to obey its dictates. It has power over us in that it drives and conditions our thoughts,

words and actions without us necessarily being aware of the fact:

The iniquities of the wicked ensnare them, and they are caught in the toils of their sin. They die for lack of discipline, and because of their great folly they are lost (Prov. 5:22–23).

They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption; for people are slaves to whatever masters them (2 Pet. 2:19).

**Secondly**, the sin of these wrong thoughts, words and actions brings with it an indictment that goes against us in God's court—and hence we are under his condemnation. We are under penalty. Everyone knows that somehow his/her sin has eternal consequences. We all know that sooner or later our sin and rebellion against God will land us in trouble and under God's judgment. We can never be truly free so long as we go on living under that sentence:

They know God's decree, that those who practice such things *deserve to die*—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them (Rom. 1:32).

**Thirdly**, sin muddies our feet. It stains and pollutes our character and our conduct. Instead of reflecting the pure nature of God as the fountain of living waters, our lives display sludge and defilement:

Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain are the righteous who give way before the wicked (Prov. 25:26).

**Fourthly**, sin's presence is a constant burden to us. We are in misery because we see no way to escape the incessant pressure of sin's presence. Paul lamented this

fact of the presence of sin in Romans chapter 7 when he said of himself:

For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do (Rom. 7:18–19).

Whether we be conscious of the fact or not, we are always in some form of distress due to this four-fold tyranny of sin. Though many scoff at the idea, this is our real state *as God sees us*. Tragically, we humans just don't realise our bondage. Nor would we have a clue that this is our condition and state if the Bible had not told us.

At the end of the Second World War, prisoners at Changi in Singapore had to be assembled in platoons and marched out to freedom. They had developed such a 'prison mentality' that they couldn't believe they were free to just walk out the open gates. We too have become so used to our condition that we've developed a 'slave' or 'prison' mentality. We can't seem to grasp that there is a whole world of freedom, joy, peace and tranquillity of mind that is our rightful way of life as God intended. At the same time, we don't seem to realise that we have no ability of our own to do anything about our need to be free even if we were able to see our real state!

The Jews in Jesus' day took great offence when he told them they were in bondage. They believed they had always been free, whereas they were, there and then, under the authority of the Romans! They didn't see their true situation! Like them, we don't see our own bondage. We don't see our need for release from sin. It enslaves us and blinds us to our real situation. Often, when I speak to people about their sin, they can't hear what I'm saying. They can't because they won't!

I have a friend who is an habitual gambler, but he won't give it up—he can't see what it's doing to his life. Like my friend Nick of whom I spoke in the previous chapter, drug addicts won't believe they're hooked. Alcoholics refuse to recognise their true state. The person who habitually loses his temper won't recognise that he is a violent and dangerous person. The ambitious businessman refuses to see that he is caught by his idolatry to accumulate more and more money. We all live in denial one way or another. Come hell or high water, we hang onto our habits, passions and desires—and they hang onto us!

### **Sin Promises Much but Never Delivers**

The horrible thing about sin is that it is insane! It is forever offering us chocolates and candy but it never delivers! It promises so much but never ultimately gives us what we expect. We fall for its seemingly attractive pleasures but we always end up disappointed. We may think we have been satisfied for the moment by its offerings, but when it all boils down we are left empty in the end. We feel cheated—not once or twice, but every time! The power sin exercises over us is its ability to entice us over and over and yet never satisfy. ‘It is without motive, it is irrational, it is absurd, it is ingratitude, defiance, and *inexcusable*... As the opposition of the self to God, as an enormous contradiction of man the creature, it is surely *fatal*.’<sup>3</sup>

Someone has pointed out that sin has no legitimate

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<sup>3</sup> Deane Meatheringham, ‘The Grace of Covenant and Creation’, in *Great and Glorious Grace*, Pastors’ School 1992 (NCTM, Blackwood, 1992), p. 5.

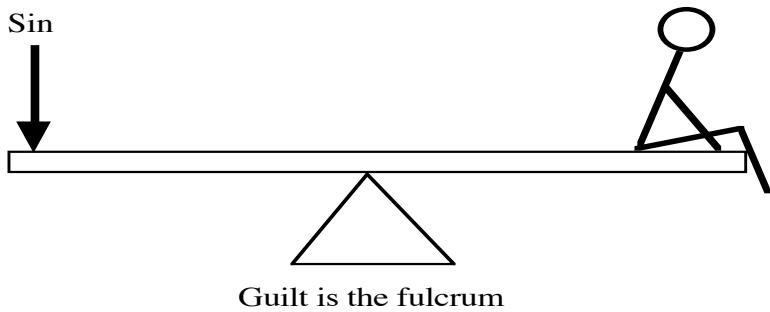
part in our human existence and it has been said that sin therefore has no true ontology. In other words, sin is not how-things-really-are. Sin is not part of God's creation and has no place in his scheme of things. That means sin has no genuine or authentic existence. It can only ever have a *parasitic* existence and 'lives' by denying the truth of God and his creation. However, as fallen creatures, we see sin as very 'real' and risk being intimidated every day by its seeming power.

Because sin is not part of God's creation, we were never designed to have to cope with its effects in our lives. It is foreign to our true nature and therefore has a disintegrating impact upon all that we are as persons. It has permeated our whole moral fibre so that we cannot see *anything* in its true perspective—that is, as God sees things. Not only does sin prevent us from relating to God as we should, but the results of guilt upon us distort our understanding of his true nature. Because of our sin we see God as an ogre. Sin works on us to close our minds to all that God would reveal of himself; sin blinds our eyes from seeing what he is doing and it prevents our ears from hearing what he is saying. Sin carries with it a sort of anaesthetic to deaden and dull the conscience to its own reality and to what it's doing to us. This is what the Bible calls the deceit of sin and this is why Jesus said, 'everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin' (John 8:34). Make no mistake, sin is a powerful master!

Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? (Rom. 6:16).

Sin holds us in its grip only because we are guilty creatures. Sin uses our guilt as a fulcrum in order to keep

us in its power. If we were guiltless, then sin could have no authority or power over us. Take away the fulcrum, and sin loses its leverage! The simple image below of a seesaw conveys the picture as to how sin has power over us:



To use another analogy: if the slaves were in fact free, then the master could have no legal right to hold his subjects. This actually happened following the emancipation of the African-American slaves after the end of the Civil War. They were legally free but many did not know what had happened. As a result many unscrupulous masters took full advantage of their slaves' ignorance and kept them under lock and key even though they were legally free to walk out the gate!

Look up the following passages and see some of the ways in which sin enslaves us because we are fallen, guilty creatures: Romans 3:9–18; 3:23; 2 Peter 2:19; 1 John 1:8, 3:4.

## **RELEASE FROM THE BLIGHT OF SIN**

Now we come to see what has happened to sin for the believer. As we will discuss in more detail in a later chapter, the Lord Jesus Christ has taken the power, penalty and pollution of sin by bearing the guilt of all human failure when he died on the Cross. In so doing he has removed the fulcrum by which sin can claim to have leverage over us. It is men and women of faith who now benefit from this incredible release. Their sin—which once had the right to hold them because they were guilty creatures—has now lost its prerogative due to the Cross. Christ has taken away sin's right to dominate the conscience or to bring the believer back into servitude. Sin no longer has the authority to 'call the tune' in our lives because Christ has borne our guilt. Take away guilt and the fulcrum sin uses to exercise power over us is broken!

Of course, sin will go on trying to assert its power. Even though all guilt is gone, sin is still in our mortal bodies. Sin is still in our 'members'—to use Paul's terminology of Romans chapter 6. Sin still indwells us. Sin is still seeking to use our bodies as its instrument of operation and will continue trying to do so until the day we die! Indwelling sin will remain as a reality in the daily experience of every Christian—*though it has no legal right to rule or reign.*

The Scriptures tell us that our old Adam-nature has been crucified with Christ so that the body—as an instrument of sin—might be rendered ineffective and we might no longer have to serve sin as its slave (Rom. 6:6). We no longer have to use our bodies for sin. When a person is united by faith to Christ they then have a choice in the matter. They can now say 'No' to sin when temptation

comes. God has given us his Spirit so that we might have the moral power to stand our ground and not be intimidated. *Herein lies the great moral dynamic of the Cross.* Sin has no right over us and if we submit to it then we are being very foolish. If we continue to identify with the old life (what we were before being united by faith to Christ), then we will continue to reproduce that life—even though it will be a contradiction of all that God has made us to be in our new standing before him.

I came to faith in Christ as a teenager but had constant struggles because of a sense of failure plaguing my conscience. Not until some years later did I begin to understand the Cross and see my release from guilt. Only then was the power of sin broken. I wrote the following notes in my journal at the time:

*As I've studied Romans six, light has burst in and opened up these passages in a way that has brought transformation and renewal. As yet, I cannot fully understand all that has happened and only slowly am I beginning to be able to express in words what I have begun to see. But the truth is, sin's power has been broken—really for the first time in my life—and I now know that I need never serve sin again. I'm not saying I won't, but I see I need not.*

*This realisation in itself has broken its power. Great peace and joy have come as a result and the Word of God has opened up in so many places and become clear in a new way. Really, all that I have begun to see should have been known years ago, but sad to say, no one seems to be teaching these things.*

*Seeing for the first time that I am now 'in Christ' has been the revolutionising truth. For years I've thought I*

*understood the Cross in its legal side and the cancellation of guilt, but now I realise that I didn't really understand at all, because all that the Cross is and means only becomes really relevant to my every day experience when I see that I am 'in Christ'. His death is my death, his resurrection is my resurrection. So sin and death and law and guilt, none of these have any claim upon me because they have no claim upon him, and I am 'in him'!*

*My conscience is utterly at rest in this fact and sin has lost its stranglehold to reign in me. Sin still dwells in me I know, but I no longer need serve sin. I can serve sin in the sense that I am able to, but I need not. Indeed, as Paul says: 'How shall I sin?' I seek therefore daily to reckon myself to be dead; not reckon myself into being dead, but reckon on the fact that I am dead [to sin]. Why? Because Christ died and I am in him. This reckoning is not a work—it is faith in the finished work of Christ upon the Cross.*

*In and of myself I have absolutely no strength or power not to sin. I don't want to, but I can't prevent it. God has not eradicated all remaining traces of sin, and so Romans seven will always be true of the Christian. However, God has not left me to stand against sin in and of myself, and it is by the Spirit that I am to put to death the deeds of the body. This is only possible when I see that all that I am is 'in Christ', and that I have died 'in him' and have risen 'in him', and that sin, though present in all its power, has absolutely no right whatever to rule over me or dominate me. Left to myself (as a believer) I stand no chance at all. Sin will always win. But praise God, I am not left to myself! I am 'in Christ' and all the power of his Spirit is there to subdue and mortify sin.*

*Once the finished work of Christ is really seen, then the true ground is laid for appropriation. Until then, appropriation always fails, thus leaving one terribly confused and bewildered, and, I think, sometimes shattered.*

*There is no deeper truth, no higher doctrine than the Cross, and I find I must constantly go back to Christ's 'finished work', because not only is that the ground for my justification but it is also the one and only ground for my sanctification. Even as the appropriation of the benefits of Christ's death for justification were by faith, so too are the benefits of the Cross appropriated by faith for daily sanctification. Everything stems from the Cross, and therefore everything is in Christ. Nothing is apart from him.*

The release from sin's power comes from us knowing that our guilt has been taken away. Sin is still there in all its ravaging and raging ferocity, but it is robbed of its ability to dominate our conscience and so enslave us when we know that we are righteous as far as God is concerned. He has justified and acquitted us because of Christ's death and resurrection and we must learn to live each day in the good of that wonderful victory.

Think through the following verses:

She [Mary] will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people *from* their sins (Matt. 1:21).

He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, *free from sins*, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed (1 Pet. 2:24).

For our sake he made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so

that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).

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

He [Jesus] is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (Heb. 1:3).

We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin (Rom. 6:6).

For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace (Rom. 6:14).

## **QUESTIONS**

1. Why do many people dismiss sin as an irrelevant 'concept'? Why do some people say that Christians are paranoid about sin?
2. Most people find sin very attractive, but why is sin actually irrational?
3. What do the above passages teach about the seriousness and significance of sin? Can we lightly ignore such statements? What are the implications if we do?
4. Why do many people—including some Christians—fail to see the full extent of their bondage in sin?
5. How is our guilt related to the hold which sin has

over us? Why do we refuse to see that we are hostages to sin?

6. Think about the statement that ‘every sin impedes God’s blessing and the fulfilment of his plan’.
7. Is there any genuine long-term *human* solution to the hold sin has over us? If not, why don’t we take seriously God’s solution?
8. George Whitefield once said: ‘Man is nothing: he hath a free will to go to hell, but none to go to heaven, till God worketh in him to will and do of His good pleasure’.<sup>4</sup> What does this tell us about our bondage to sin? What is the answer?
9. How has Christ dealt with this enemy we call sin?
10. What should we do when sin tries to intimidate us and tempt us to yield to its demands? Is it right to feel guilty when we know we have done something wrong? What is the difference between guilt for sin and sorrow for sin? What is the difference between ‘feelings of guilt’ and actual guilt?

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<sup>4</sup> Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield: God’s Anointed Servant in the Great Revival of the Eighteenth Century*, Crossway Books, Westchester, 1990, p. 70.

# 7

## Who's Afraid of Death?

We live in an age where science and medicine have greatly increased human life spans. In our Western culture at least, the days are gone when children often died in infancy, and we congratulate ourselves on such things as vaccinations having virtually eradicated many once-feared diseases among the young. Wonderful developments in new medications have contributed to a marked reduction in the number of fatalities from otherwise deadly diseases and, generally speaking, our medical professionals ensure that we live healthier, longer lives. Coupled with this is an emphasis these days on improving our diet, our patterns of behaviour and our lifestyles as primary means of staying alive longer.

Comforting as all this may be, we still fear death. And we still die! We all know that we will eventually end up in a grave. The psalmists of old voiced their laments concerning the fear of impending death:

The cords of death encompassed me; the torrents of perdition assailed me; the cords of Sheol entangled me; the snares of death confronted me (Ps. 18:4–5).

My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me (Ps. 55:4).

The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish (Ps. 116:3).

This lurking dread of death does awful things to us no matter how much we try to push such thoughts into the back of our mind. One eminent doctor wrote that in spite of all the advances in modern medicine:

Death is still a fearful, frightening happening, and the fear of death is a universal fear even if we think we have mastered it on many levels.<sup>1</sup>

No wonder Martin Luther included death on his list of the great ‘tyrants’ that bedevil us sinful mortals. He knew only too well from his own experience the dreadful fear that comes from not knowing what will happen to us when we die. What lies *beyond* the grave?

As we approach this subject we need, once again, to go back to creation to see what God’s intention was for us at the beginning. As we have already seen, God created us to live in his presence—not just that we might be with him, but that we might share his life. We have seen that God placed a prohibition on Man in Eden and warned that we would die if we contravened his instructions. When Adam and Eve stepped outside the bounds their Creator had set, they died in their relationship with him. And in that Fall we have all forfeited the life of God that was in us—we chose not to go on in the great gift he had given. We are therefore no longer truly ‘alive’ in the way God intended from the beginning. We are ‘dead’ in our relationship to him and there is nothing we can do about it.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, Tavistock Publications, London, 1969, p. 4.

## PHYSICAL DEATH COMES TO US ALL

One outcome of that awful separation from God's life that we incurred in Eden is that we are now subject to physical death. As far as we know from the Scriptures we were never designed to physically die—at least, not in the way in which we now experience death. Everything tells us that it is unnatural to die. Thus we instinctively fear death and what lies beyond the grave. Death is a universally lamented and *dreaded* event in human experience. We shun it. We avoid it. We fear it. After all, who in their right mind *wants* to die? No, we protect ourselves from death and insulate ourselves from having to even think about it. Charles Spurgeon once observed:

We admit that we shall die, but not so soon as to make it a pressing matter. We imagine that we are not within measurable distance of the tomb. Even the oldest man gives himself a little longer lease, and when he has passed his eighty years, we have seen him hugging life with as much tenacity as if he had just commenced it. Brethren, in this we are not wise. Death will not spare us because we avoid him.<sup>2</sup>

We all know that death is the most sure thing in life. One writer has said: 'God, to prevent all escape, hath sown the seeds of death in our very constitution and nature, so that we can as soon run from ourselves, as run from death'.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, there is no escape. Each of us will one day end up in a coffin and 'Against this arrest there is no

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<sup>2</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon at His Best*, compiled by Tom Carter, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1988, p. 49, no. 270.

<sup>3</sup> William Gurnall, in *The Golden Treasury of Puritan Quotations*, compiled by I. D. E. Thomas, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1977, p. 69.

bail'.<sup>4</sup> This fear of death and dying keeps us in a constant state of tension and anxiety. Though we may not be conscious of it, this will often come to the surface as a sudden pang of dread when least we expect it—the screech of brakes from the car behind; a foot slipping as we negotiate the path on the side of a steep ravine; severe turbulence when our aircraft is halfway across the Pacific. No matter how careful we are, at any moment we can be faced with sudden death. For many people then, the pain is not so much in the dying but in the living of life when this wretched dread of death hangs over them all the time.

Some people seem to be able to comfort themselves by saying that 'death ends it all'. They think that there is nothing beyond death. After all, they say, who has ever come back to tell us that there is some reality on the 'other side'? They say that if there is any fear, then it is in the process of dying, not in the fact of death itself. They say that when they are dead, they are dead—and that's that. But is this so? Is this really how things are?

The Bible gives us quite a different picture of the reality of death. It tells us that we are immortal creatures, created in the image of God and into whom he breathed his very own life. As we saw in chapter 2, we are spiritual beings. Though our bodies may rot in a grave, there is that within us that is eternal and which therefore cannot die! We may call this our 'soul' or our 'spirit'. However we may put it, God has set eternity in our hearts (Eccl. 3:11) so that we are made to live forever. No matter how much we may rationalise things, there is built into us a sense that death does not in fact end it all. There

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<sup>4</sup> George Swinnock, in *The Golden Treasury of Puritan Quotations*, p. 69.

is something beyond the grave, whether we like it or not.

## WE FEAR WHAT LIES BEYOND DEATH

Could it be that our fear of death is not really the ‘unknown’ beyond the grave but the *known* element of what lies ahead? Is it that we have that instinctive knowledge that beyond death lies an impending encounter with the Living God? As we have seen, God has built eternity into our hearts—he has made us to live forever. Even the ‘God-obsessed’ atheist senses this fact. Whether we will admit it or not, we know that when we die we will be faced with the responsibility of accounting for our sin and guilt. Of course the Bible says as much, many times:

And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, *and after that the judgment*, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him (Heb. 9:27–28).

For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil (2 Cor. 5:10).

For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done (Matt. 16:27).

. . . be sure your sin will find you out (Num. 32:23).

We cannot escape the fact that we have all failed to live as God intended and hence we are under his indictment. We all sense that we are living on borrowed time. Death stalks us. Judgment is just around the corner! Hence ‘Man lives in fear of death, not because he *has* to

die, but because he *deserves* to die'.<sup>5</sup> Could it be, then, that what some people call the 'fear of life' is in fact their fear of death?

*Matt was an intense, ambitious young man whose main concern was to earn enough money to make life secure for himself and his family. He had some knowledge of Christian beliefs but was generally indifferent. That is, until he was given a book to read by a young Catholic engineer who sat in the office opposite. The book concerned the conflict that was coming at the end of the world. As he read this make-believe account, Matt was shaken to the core. All his guilts as a fallen human being began to surface. He became more and more scared of what the future held as he faced the prospect of having to give an account of his life before a holy God. He began to read the Book of Revelation to see if these things were really predicted in the Bible. The more he read, the more afraid he became of death and dying. For over six months he grappled with these issues but was determined to get to the truth of the matter.*

*From reading the Book of Revelation, Matt turned to the Book of Acts. As he worked his way through this exciting account of the early church, he was struck by the reality of God's actions in the lives of those first century believers and began to wonder if any of this could happen today. Matt knew that I was a Christian, and although we had talked briefly from time to time about his quest for the truth, I was surprised by the urgency of his sudden questions one day: 'John, do you believe God still does the things he did in the Bible? Do miracles still happen? Do people get*

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Tillich, quoted by Geoff Bingham, *I, The Man!* p. 38.

*healed? Is all this true? I must know.'*

*I gave Matt a tape-recorded account of the 1960s revival in Pakistan. As he listened he suddenly knew it was all true. He knew God was real, and he knew that he believed. The Holy Spirit swept into his life at that instant and he was transformed. The moment I saw him next, I knew something had happened. The fear-filled thunderclouds which had loomed over him for six months were gone. His face beamed with delight! Matt's change of heart was very real. His fear of death and dying had gone entirely and there was now a new calm in his general demeanour. He could not read enough concerning the things of God. He spent every spare moment pressing me for answers to his incessant questions concerning faith, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, sin and death, heaven and hell, prayer and worship. He soon joined in with a lunchtime Bible study and became immersed in their studies of the Book of Romans.*

The Scriptures show very clearly that—like Matt—every human being is subject to lifelong bondage resulting from fear of death. Just how that bondage manifests itself is another matter. In this regard Geoffrey Bingham writes:

It would be interesting to calculate how much of our endeavour to gain security in life is motivated by the fear of death. By security we mean all kinds of security. It can mean security in relationships, security that we seek through success, through possessions, money, fulfilled ambition, fame, abilities or talents. For the most part this security is more imagined than real. For example, if we seek security through money we may then live in fear of losing the money. Security can only truly lie in God, and in our surrender to Him, as also in our continuing worship of

Him.<sup>6</sup>

Think carefully about the following verses in relation to death and our fear of what lies beyond the grave:

For the wages of sin is *death* (Rom. 6:23).

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so *death spread to all* because all have sinned (Rom. 5:12).

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he [Jesus] himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those *who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death* (Heb. 2:14–15).

The last *enemy* to be destroyed is death (1 Cor. 15:26).

Death is a very real enemy and it has a hold over each of us because we are guilty creatures. In other words, death is a stinging dread to us only because we are sinners and have failed to be the persons God designed us to be from the beginning. That failure has a terrible affect upon us when we are faced with the prospect of having to give an account to our Creator. Satan uses our dread of death to manipulate us and to force us into patterns of living that feed his agenda and not God's. The person who says 'death ends it all' does not in fact escape this fundamental guilt or fear, and the person who does not even believe in God is still the victim of this tyrant. Such ones are no less a part of this fallen race as are those who have a strong faith and a certainty of glory.

If we could be totally cleansed in our conscience from guilt, then death's sting would be removed. Satan would

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<sup>6</sup> Bingham, *I, The Man!*, p. 38.

lose his leverage over us. The elements of fear and bondage relating to what lies beyond the grave would be entirely gone. If we had never sinned then we would have no apprehension concerning death nor of suddenly being in the presence of the Great Judge. This is not saying we would be free from the distress of the *process* of dying. None of us want to go through the pain or suffering that is often associated with death. What I am saying is that even in the midst of weakness or pain or great suffering in dying, there can be a tranquillity of conscience and a peace of heart that flows from knowing we are in a right relationship with our Maker.

## **DELIVERED FROM THE FEAR OF DEATH**

Now we come to look at what Christ's death means for the believer. Later chapters will show that, in his extraordinary love, God has accredited righteousness to us because of Jesus Christ. As a result, he has taken away our dread of death by declaring us 'not guilty!' When Matt discovered that he had been forgiven by God his fear of death evaporated. A similar story relates to my own mother:

*My mother's health declined rapidly towards the end of her life. Following a failed hip operation she was never able to get about much unless one of us took her in a wheelchair. At 86 she was weak in body but alert in mind and bright in spirit. She loved the Lord and was anxious to depart and be with him. She couldn't wait to 'pop off' as she would put it. At one stage she became fed up with taking all the medication that had been prescribed for her. One day she asked the doctor*

*what would happen if she just stopped taking all her pills. He replied that she would go into a coma and they would rush her to hospital and revive her. ‘Do you mean to say that I am not permitted to die?’ ‘Oh no, dear, you are not allowed to just die!’*

*Towards the end I tried to visit her each day on my way to or from work. One morning when I called to see her she seemed uncharacteristically terse. I asked what was wrong. She replied that the previous evening she was sure she was ‘going’. ‘But I woke up this morning and I was still here.’ She was really quite disappointed!*

*In her desire to die, she was not wanting to escape from life—for she loved life and lived it to the full—but she knew that there was a time for this existence to end and she relished the prospect of being with her Lord and of seeing him face to face. Because she knew she was forgiven she had no fear of death whatever.*

*Of course we were sad to lose her, but her funeral (which she planned in every detail) was a joyous occasion—a rejoicing that she was now finally ‘home’ with the Father.*

My mother had absolutely no dread of death whatever because she too knew that God had accepted her in Christ. Like Matt, she had discovered the truth of the apostle John’s words when he spoke of the confidence we can have on the day of judgment—a confidence which flows out of how much God has loved us in and through his Son:

So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: *that we may have boldness on the day of judgment*, because as he is, so

are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love (1 John 4:16–18).

John tells us that we have no dread of judgment because God's perfect love for us has been demonstrated on the Cross in the death and resurrection of his Son. In that love he has taken our guilt and accepted us in Christ. John further tells us that as Christ is in this world so we are! He is blameless in God's eyes, so too are we! He is guiltless in God's eyes, so too are we! That means death can have no terror whatever for the believer. God's perfect love has dispatched any fear we might have had of death and what lies beyond—the impending judgment. As far as God is concerned, our judgment has passed!

By rising from the dead, Jesus has both declared and demonstrated that he is Lord over death. Because death could not hold Jesus, it cannot hold those who belong to him. We *already* have eternal life and therefore cannot die! Thus for Christians, physical death is now a transition:

*A lady once asked Mr. Wesley, ‘Suppose that you knew you were to die at 12 o’clock tomorrow night. How would you spend the intervening time?’*

*‘Why, just as I intend to spend it now,’ he replied. ‘I should preach this evening at Gloucester, and again at five tomorrow morning. After that I should ride to Tewkesbury, preach in the afternoon, and meet the society in the evening. I should then repair to friend Martin’s house, who expects to entertain me. I should converse and pray with the family as usual, retire to my room at 10 o’clock, commend myself to my heavenly Father, lie down and rest, and wake up in*

*glory.*<sup>7</sup>

My dear friend Laurel Bingham was going through a rough time of ill-health and much pain. I rang one day to ask how she was managing. In her characteristically blunt but realistic way she replied: ‘I’m OK. It’s nothing that two seconds in heaven won’t fix.’

Think through the following Scriptures relating to death:

. . . our Savior Christ Jesus, *who abolished death* and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel (2 Tim. 1:10).

We know that we *have passed* from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death (1 John 3:14).

For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death (Rom. 8:2).

When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’ ‘Where, O death, is your victory? *Where, O death, is your sting?*’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law (1 Cor. 15:54–56).

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death *he might destroy the one who has the power of death*, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death (Heb. 2:14–15).

Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, *even though they die, will live*’ (John 11:25).

## QUESTIONS

1. Why does the Bible say we all fear death? What

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<sup>7</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon at His Best*, p. 51, no. 280.

about those who say they have no dread of death?

2. What impact does the fear of death have upon us in daily life?
3. How does Satan use the fact of death to manipulate us?
4. What do you think is the relationship between our fear of death and the following: the insurance industry, ambition, cosmetics, the desire for fame, health foods, the accumulation of wealth?
5. How does the fear of death impose inhibitions on our lives?
6. How has Christ defeated this enemy we call death?
7. Should Christians fear death? Is there a difference between being afraid of the experience of dying, and fearing what lies beyond death? What does it mean to say that 'the sting of death' has been taken away by Christ? Is it true for you?

# 8

## Keep the Rules—*Or Else!*

The Bible is quite clear in teaching that God has built ‘law’ into every aspect of his creation and thus we live in a universe of rules and ordered structure. They are there for the benefit of creation and not just to regiment it. There are also moral ‘laws’ outside of us that are there to govern the way we humans ought to behave. This sense of ‘oughtness’ is therefore built into all of us. We instinctively have an awareness of how we all *should* behave—even if we don’t always do so ourselves! Though very few thinking people would deny that this is how things are, Christians believe these laws are derived from, and set by, God Himself. The moral laws are in fact a reflection of his character. They are what he is like and therefore tell us what we should be like.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, because of the Fall we don’t take too kindly to laws and rules. We don’t like the idea of anyone telling us what’s what! In our fundamental rebellion against God we basically resist order and authority because we see law

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<sup>1</sup> Several books open up this theme: C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Fount, Glasgow, 1997) and Geoffrey Bingham, *Tall Grow the Tallow-Woods* (Troubadour Press, Blackwood, 2000).

as restrictive and inhibiting. We see law as something that prohibits us from being really free!

## WE ARE CREATURES OF LAW

If we didn't have any laws, we'd make them up! *We are creatures of law.* We are made to live in an ordered way and in accordance with certain structures. Children make up laws when they play together. Remember walking along the footpath and 'not being allowed' to tread on the cracks in the concrete? What about the housewife who burdens herself with the 'rule' that she has to have certain tasks done by 10 a.m.? The reality is that, for the most part, laws are very helpful guidelines to living. They actually ensure a life of freedom and order. For example, the marked lanes on the highway are extremely helpful and we know how insecure we feel when they are not there!

God's moral laws are no less good, practical and functional. As I said, they are the reflection of his character. This means that law and authority go together. God is the 'Author of Life' and therefore has a rightful 'author-ity' over us. Unfortunately, as rebels, we can't accept this matter of his authority in an objective and rational manner and we have great difficulty in seeing that his authority and laws belong to the original order of things. As a result, we see God's authority and his good laws through the coloured lens of our guilts and therefore suffer from a sense of tyranny when we fail to obey and live within the bounds he has set. The truth is, we are impotent to obey him. Because we know we *ought* to obey, and yet *can't* (or more to the point *won't*), we are

paralysed by guilt and nagged by our conscience. Because we are sinners and refuse to obey God's good law, the 'curse of the law'—the indictment of the law—hangs over us (Gal. 3:10). This means that so long as we resist grace, law will always condemn us.

### **LAW IS A TYRANT TO THE GUILTY**

In practical daily living, the moral law can be a monster and a tyrant to the sinner. That gracious law which was for our good has become a threat to us at every turn. In real life, the individual who is under law—trying by his own efforts to obey—is probably the most lawless person of all. When we have the pressure of law on us we will always be wanting to break it and will do so as often as we can if there is no risk of getting hurt—or caught! As a result our guilt only increases!

*In a small factory in Sydney there was a store from which employees were allowed to take items home for their personal use. Permission was conditional on them reporting to the manager details of what they had taken so that the stock list could be kept in order. Each year, several thousand dollars worth of goods were taken under this agreement. But as the business grew in size, a factory manager had to be appointed. One of his first actions was to lock the store. That year, more than ten times the amount of goods were taken by the employees. They were not just freely taken and reported as before, but stolen. Law had turned the employees into thieves.*

The problem with law is that instead of making us

good, it has the opposite outcome. The sign says, ‘Wet paint, don’t touch’, but you and I know what happens! Law tells us what we should or should not do. ‘Keep off the lawn’, ‘No trespassing’, ‘Transit lane—Buses only’. Whenever law appears there is something perverse in us that wants to go against it if we can. We want to break into the locked store! Thus law can never give us a sense of freedom. And it is law that *increases* our sense of God’s wrath. That’s why Martin Luther included law and God’s wrath in his list of ‘tyrants’ that dominate us. Law tells us how we should live in God’s order of things but gives us no help to do so—and further, it warns us what will happen if we don’t obey!

### **LAW MAKES US HYPOCRITES**

The law may express or declare sin, but cannot *suppress* it. Because of our perverse, sinful rebellion we won’t obey. Therefore, as long as we are unforgiven, law only serves to increase our sense of failure, our rage, our guilt and our self-righteousness. Law stimulates us to hypocrisy. It forces us to wear a mask so that others will think we are behaving well, when in actual fact we are not! That’s what a hypocrite is, someone who plays a part like an actor. It’s not long before we begin to really believe in the part we are playing and so we begin to trust in ourselves. We say, ‘I’m a good person, I’m doing good things, God will be pleased with me!’ We may be ‘toeing the line’ but are not really obeying from the heart.

In Luke 18 Jesus told the story of two men who came into the temple to pray, one a common tax-collector, the other a Pharisee—a religious leader:

The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted (Luke 18:11–14).

The Pharisee prided himself that he was ‘better’ than the tax-collector and therefore obviously more acceptable to God. Spiritual pride had made a hypocrite of the man. We too can fall into a similar spiritual pride if we are not careful—a pride which will be a source of further guilt and bondage. In reality, transgression against the law is transgression against God. Every failure to obey on our part will need an excuse or some self-justification—an action that only further increases our sense of duplicity. Thus, because of the law, we deceive ourselves into thinking we are something which we are not—an innately *good* person.

Some people live by law. They think God accepts them only if they obey his commands and observe all the rules and regulations of the Church. They never miss worship. They drive themselves relentlessly to please him in the hope that it will be enough to stave off his judgment in the end. They do ‘good’ things for others. They are always very precise in their view of life. But in reality they are legalists. They see everything through the lens of law and have no perception of God’s grace. They see life as a chore—always trying to keep in step with God’s demands (or what they *think* are his demands). Since it is impossible for any of us to fully obey, such legalists are always hypocrites. They require of

themselves (and others) certain behaviour even though they are incapable of meeting those standards themselves. Such people are very hard to live with! They make unrealistic demands on those around them and often insist on being ‘moral policemen’ in their commentary on the words and actions of others. They have no concept of the power that law has over them. They don’t realise they are slaves to law. This same legalism can be present in the life of many believers:

*My friend Janet drove herself relentlessly in her desire to please God. She was a conscientious believer and genuinely loved the Lord. She was very active in her church and always took the lead in promoting social justice issues—pressing others into being involved with her. She made huge demands on her fellow-believers, so much so that they avoided her whenever they saw her coming! She could not see that her primary drive to ‘do the work of the Lord’ was legalistic. It was as if some law demanded she behave in this way if she was to be a genuine Christian. Unfortunately, the unbelieving members of her family had a particularly hard time because she never let up in her attempts to convert them to Christ. She felt sure this was her role. All she did was drive them further and further away from him.*

The following passages show something of the power law has over us:

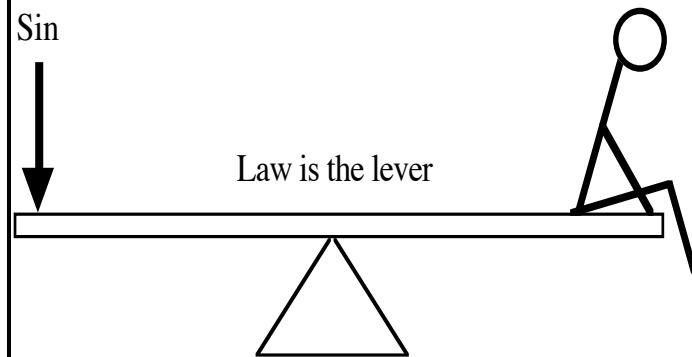
The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law (1 Cor. 15:56).

Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the

whole world may be held accountable to God. For ‘no human being will be justified in his sight’ by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:19–20).

For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation (Rom. 4:15).

We need to understand that law could have nothing to say to us if we were not guilty in the first place. No accusation or condemnation could be levelled at us if we were without guilt. No indictment could be served upon us ~~by the law if we were blameless. Guilt is the fulcrum~~ and law the lever by which Satan and sin and death and God’s wrath have this command over us to accuse. We could therefore modify our previous little diagram by saying that law is the ‘lever’ by which sin and guilt have power over us:



### **DISCHARGED FROM LAW'S CONDEMNATION!**

What then is the Christian’s relationship to God’s law?

Notice that the heading does not say: DISCHARGED FROM LAW! No, believers have been discharged from the *condemnation* side of the law, not from law itself. God's good law never changes, nor does it ever cease to be. But its power to damn and bring us into bondage is another matter altogether. Only through Christ is that power broken as our guilt is taken by him and removed forever.

Before we came to know Christ the law held us in awful bondage by constantly threatening us with death if we didn't fully obey—'The person who sins shall die' (Ezek. 18:20). But Christ has fulfilled the law on our behalf. We are no longer guilty of transgression in the eyes of the law—though we still do transgress. The law cannot now bring an accusation or judgment against us. We are free from its curse and condemnation. We have been released from the bondage (due to our guilt) with which the law held us captive. The threatening storm clouds of law are no longer over us. We now live in the fresh sunshine of God's grace. *We are now free to obey the law.* We are also free to 'go down'—that is, we are free to fail (as we are sure to do from time to time). Grace still stands. We are still forgiven. There is no guilt. There is no condemnation!

*Janet (spoken of above) had no idea how much law had held her in bondage all those years. But one day God's grace broke into her life. Suddenly she saw that she didn't have to do anything to please him in order to be accepted by him. She discovered his sovereignty—even in the matter of the conversion of her loved ones. A great peace settled over Janet and the legalistic intensity in her Christian activities began to subside. Gradually she came to rest in her total acceptance by God and a new sweetness and*

*gentleness was evidenced in her life. The reality of his total forgiveness flooded into her life—perhaps for the first time in that way. She came to see—in contrast to all her frenzied activities in the past—that nothing could be accomplished outside God's grace or timing. All her family have since come to faith.*

Think through how the following passages relate to law:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death (Rom. 8:1–2).

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us . . . (Gal. 3:13).

But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit (Rom. 7:6).

For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law (Rom. 3:28).

. . . we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ . . . For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:16, 19–20).

### **AS LAW-BREAKERS, GOD'S WRATH IS UPON US**

How then does God's good law relate to his authority over us human beings? What happens when fallen humans refuse to obey or live by his law? What is the outcome of us determining not to be the persons he

created us to be? The Bible gives us a very blunt answer:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth (Rom. 1:18).

God is a righteous judge, and a God who has indignation [wrath] every day (Ps. 7:11).

Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves . . . Your wrath has swept over me; your dread assaults destroy me . . . How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire? (Ps. 88:7, 16; 89:46).

Look, the storm of the LORD! Wrath has gone forth, a whirling tempest; it will burst upon the head of the wicked (Jer. 23:19).

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath (John 3:36).

But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed . . . for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury (Rom. 2:5, 8).

Then the kings of the earth and the magnates and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?' (Rev. 6:15–17).

To modern ears, the idea of God being angry is almost totally rejected. We have become so weak in our understanding of God's holiness that we can't accept the notion of him being wrathful. A God of love, yes—but a God who is angry with Mankind's misdemeanours,

absolutely not!

We have to face that fact that the Scriptures are constantly telling us, that God is holy and that he will not allow sin to remain unpunished. ‘Your eyes are too pure to behold evil, and you cannot look on wrongdoing’ (Hab. 1:13). In other words, God cannot look on our sin without it being judged. Because of his holiness he will not permit his creation to go on being polluted by Man’s evil. No wonder his wrath and anger against our sin and rebellion is mentioned some 200 times in the Bible. However, what we need to understand is that his wrath against our evil is really the outworking of his love. If he didn’t love us he wouldn’t bother to do anything about our sin and rebellion. The fact is, ‘God is angry and brings His wrath upon those who seek to subvert His creation, and the laws by which it works’.<sup>2</sup> It is not that he is capricious and vengeful, but rather that his wrath is *provoked* by our evil:

Remember and do not forget how you provoked the LORD your God to wrath in the wilderness; you have been rebellious against the LORD from the day you came out of the land of Egypt until you came to this place (Deut. 9:7).

Because they have forsaken me and have made offerings to other gods, so that they have provoked me to anger with all the works of their hands, my wrath will be poured out on this place and will not be quenched (2 Chron. 34:25).

We experience God’s wrath in our conscience as the effects of our sin pile up upon us. ‘This is felt in guilt, in fear, in loneliness, alienation, pollution and defilement, separation, frustration, confusion, pain, shame, and

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<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *The Things We Firmly Believe*, 2nd edn, NCPI, Blackwood, 1992, pp. 93–4.

wounding.<sup>3</sup> Romans chapter 1 gives us an insight into how this wrath of God impacts our lives. It says God gives us up to our sin. He lets us go on in our evil. Instead of restraining us he leaves us to experience the awful backlash of our rebellion.

Men and women the world over fear the anger of God. Saint Augustine once said: ‘Every person carries about in his body daily, the testimony in his conscience to the wrath of God’. We instinctively know we have failed to be all that he created us to be. As a result, many of us try to

buy God off. We only have to witness the efforts of ‘religious’ followers in every nation, who by their man-made ceremonies seek to placate an angry god and so atone for their sins. Our fear of God’s wrath lies behind our fear of death. This sense of God’s wrath means that we instinctively dread that hour when we will face him and have to give an account. Even atheists have this fear—though they may never recognise it or acknowledge it. This fear of impending divine judgment is due entirely to the fact that we are guilty creatures. As we have already seen, we go to great lengths in our attempts to insulate ourselves from even thinking about this coming encounter.

Examine these verses and look at what the Bible is saying about God’s wrath and its impact upon us:

O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger,  
or discipline me in your wrath.  
For your arrows have sunk into me,  
and your hand has come down on me.  
There is no soundness in my flesh  
because of your indignation;  
there is no health in my bones

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<sup>3</sup> Bingham, *The Things We Firmly Believe*, p. 95.

because of my sin.  
 For my iniquities have gone over my head;  
 they weigh like a burden too heavy for me.  
 My wounds grow foul and fester  
 because of my foolishness;  
 I am utterly bowed down and prostrate;  
 all day long I go around mourning.  
 For my loins are filled with burning,  
 and there is no soundness in my flesh.  
 I am utterly spent and crushed;  
 I groan because of the tumult of my heart (Ps. 38:1–8).

God says to his wayward people:

Soon now I will pour out my wrath upon you;  
 I will spend my anger against you.  
 I will judge you according to your ways,  
 and punish you for all your abominations.  
 My eye will not spare; I will have no pity.  
 I will punish you according to your ways,  
 while your abominations are among you.  
 Then you shall know that it is I the LORD who strike  
 (Ezek. 7:8–9).

But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed . . . while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury (Rom. 2:5, 8).

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient (Eph. 5:6).

When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient (Col. 3:4–6).

## FREEDOM FROM GOD'S WRATH

If we were guiltless, God's wrath would hold no terror for us. Our conscience would be at rest on the matter. There would be no inner accusations, no dread of the future and no fear of facing our Lord. We would not know the dreadful bondage which results from God giving us up to our sin.

*I had known Ralph for over 30 years. He and his wife had often put me up for the night when I was in their city and I always enjoyed my visits to their home. But unlike his wife, Ralph did not give any evidence of believing in God nor could I ever engage him in conversation on the subject. He would always joke and make light of the matter. In fact, he seemed to treat the whole of life very much as a joke and it was hard to ever have a serious conversation with him about anything. On the other side of the coin he was a legalist of the first order! Everything had to be done by the book—his book of course! There were rules for everything and he would drive people crazy with his strict and inflexible routines. For all his legalism, he was a consistent law-breaker. For example, he would flatly refuse to obey common laws such as wearing a seat belt when driving his car.*

*I knew Ralph was a deeply guilty man and had God very much at arm's length. He greatly feared anything that might confront him with the issues of eternity. I knew he was terrified of death and of the wrath of God which lay beyond. Little did he realise that this very wrath was working out in his life, driving him forward in his guilt as a legalist and a hypocrite.*

*One evening I had a phone call to say that Ralph*

*was very ill and in hospital. His wife had died some years before and his children were grown up and married with families of their own. Now he was struggling with the sudden and unexpected discovery that he had terminal cancer. It was reckoned that he only had a short time to live. The news of his condition weighed heavily on me. I felt an immense sadness for Ralph. Cancer was no joke—nor, for that matter, was death. I knew I had to speak very directly to him about his impending encounter with his Maker and about his urgent need of God's forgiveness.*

*For the first time since I had known him Ralph listened to what I had to say. A week or so later, as he deteriorated further, his daughter rang to say that she thought he was still disturbed by something. She believed that something was 'not yet settled'—to use her words. I suggested she return to the hospital right then and simply ask her father: 'Dad have you ever received Christ's forgiveness?' She considered he was much too private a person to respond to such a question. Nevertheless, I urged her to ask it anyway and then to say: 'Dad, you know what John has said about Jesus dying on the Cross so that you might be forgiven; if you have never received his forgiveness, then do so just now. Just thank him for what he has done.' She returned to the hospital that night and repeated those exact words. The next day she rang to say that a great peace had come over him, though he was too weak to express in words what appeared to be a new reality that had come to him of God's love and grace. The following morning he died.*

Death and God's wrath are serious matters. Like Ralph, many of us use every means we can to insulate

ourselves from even thinking about such issues—let alone facing them honestly. And yet God speaks to us in the Scriptures simply and plainly about our guilt and about his gift of forgiveness.

I have long ago come to see that there is no such thing as a ‘psychology’ of forgiveness. God declares to us what he has done through his Son, and his forgiveness comes to us as a gift of his grace. It comes to us as a reality as we hear that word of the Cross and believe it. It comes to us as a result of the sovereign operation of the Spirit. The realisation of God’s forgiveness breaks open to us as a *revelation*. It is not primarily a matter of intellect; it is not primarily a matter of knowledge; it is not primarily a matter of emotion. *It is primarily a matter of faith.*

Of course Ralph’s story also shows us the danger of waiting until our deathbed to come to Christ and receive his forgiveness. The Scriptures tell us that *today* is the day of salvation! Today—if we hear his voice—we dare not harden our hearts as did the Israelites when God spoke to them. No, when God speaks to us he expects us to listen. And he expects us to believe his word the moment we hear it. God’s wrath against us—due to our sinful rebellion and disobedience—has been taken and absorbed by Christ on the Cross. The Bible uses an important word to describe what Christ did on the Cross—it says he became the *propitiation* for our sins. It means he became the one who diverts or averts God’s wrath. In other words, he bore God’s wrath on our account:

[Christ] Whom God hath set forth [to be] a propitiation through faith in his blood (Rom. 3:25, AV).

And he [Jesus] is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours

only, but also for [the sins of] the whole world (1 John 2:2, AV).

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

Where faith is operative we can be sure that we are no longer guilty in God's sight and his wrath is no longer against us. We have been reconciled to him through Christ. We now have peace with God. The enmity has entirely gone. We have been delivered from God's wrath:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ . . . Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God (Rom. 5:1, 9).

All of us once lived among them [the ungodly] in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else (Eph 2:3).

For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming (1 Thess. 1:9–10).

For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him (1 Thess. 5:9–10).

## QUESTIONS

1. In what ways are laws 'helpful guidelines to living'?
2. How do you view the Ten Commandments? Why do some people think they are negative and restrictive? What is their relevance today? What do they tell us

about the character of God?

3. How is it that the moral law can turn people into hypocrites? What is their problem?
4. How should men and women view God's laws?
5. If Christ has fulfilled the demands of the law on my behalf, what is now my relationship to the law? What is its function in my life as a believer? How is it that Paul says he 'delights in the law'?
6. How is God's wrath revealed in the lives of men and women?
7. How is our fear of God's wrath related to guilt, law, sin, conscience, death and Satan?
8. What does the Cross of Christ tell us about God's wrath?
9. If God's wrath has been taken away, is it ever right for a Christian to be afraid of God? What does the Scripture mean when it tells us to fear God? Can you explain the difference between having this sort of fear and at the same time not being under his wrath?

# 9

## Satan?—Surely He's Just a Joke!

Prominent on Martin Luther's list of the 'tyrants' which have Mankind in their grip are Satan and his minions—the devil and his demonic angelic powers. In fact, Satan is Man's deepest enemy. Nevertheless, these days our Western society doesn't take too seriously a belief in the existence of the *person* of the devil or of evil forces. Satan is considered to be a joke and is often caricatured as someone in red tights with horns and a pitchfork—an image I'm sure *he* originated and continues to foster!

*During a teaching mission in Darwin in 1972 I was recording the speaker's message about the reality of Satan and his powers. During that session almost everyone in the congregation went to sleep! I myself was struggling to keep awake and had to really concentrate on the tape recording levels which I was supposed to be monitoring. Suddenly the speaker rebuked Satan in the name of Christ and commanded him to leave the building. Instantly everyone was awake, alert and listening.*

*Weeks later I was going through all the master tapes and editing out any local references that other listeners would not understand. I came to that session on Satan. Just at the point where the speaker was talking in very serious terms about the reality of Satan, the message was interrupted by a very funny 20-second segment of the 'Goon Show' in which Peter Sellers was caricaturing Satan. I have no idea how that could have happened on that otherwise brand new tape, but if I had not decided to edit the tapes that message would have gone around the world with that comedy segment countering the truth of what the preacher was saying.*

Sadly, even some leaders of the Christian church are 'embarrassed' these days by the doctrine of the devil and have disowned any belief in him. Yet in spite of this general disregard of Satan, our modern culture has a growing fascination with the supernatural, the occult and that which some call the 'para-normal'. This is borne out by the high ratings of TV programs such as 'The X-files'. Is this because we were never intended to be creatures only of time, space, the three dimensions and the five senses? Do we therefore have an innate drive to know that which is more than just the 'natural'? If so, then the Bible is the only reliable source of such knowledge since it speaks from outside of us, and gives us an objective, absolute view of things as they really are—both human and divine, natural and supernatural.

*I was teaching a class of year-12 students in a Christian school discussing with them what 'world view' means. I was trying to show them how we all have a world view of one sort or another—whether we*

*recognise it or not. We all ‘see’ the world around us in a certain way, and that may differ widely from how the person next to us sees it. About 30% of the students were from South East Asia and from a non-Caucasian background. Many had been brought up in homes where the spirits were believed in if not actively worshiped. I asked the students to put up their hands if they believed the classroom was being bombarded there and then with radio waves, UHF TV signals and other electronic communication influences. Everyone put up their hands. I asked how they knew. They gave various compelling arguments as to how they knew this was happening. I then asked how many students believed this same room was currently being visited by benevolent and malevolent spirit forces? About half the class responded, but all the Asian students put up their hands. They knew! Some had come from spiritist environments and knew only too well the power such forces wielded among their countrymen. They had all come from a background where there was a world view which took in the spirit dimension.*

This simple example illustrates how we in the West—generally speaking—do not take seriously the presence and power of the demonic. We have a world view that ignores these realities. We tend to rationalise our disbelief in such forces and are ignorant of their influence on us or their dominion over us. We think such notions are absurd and so brush them aside as irrelevant.

### **THE FALL OF SATAN**

The fact is, the Bible has a lot to say about the demonic.

It treats the subject very seriously. It refers many times to ‘Satan’, the ‘Devil’, ‘Lucifer’, the ‘Dragon’, the ‘Serpent’ and other malevolent evil forces as being operative in this world. Satan (meaning ‘adversary’) was once a glorious angelic being occupying a significant place of authority in God’s Creation (one of his names is Lucifer meaning ‘light-bearer’). It was to this powerful, once upright being that God assigned authority to rule in this world of ours. But he rebelled against the Creator prior to Man’s arrival on the scene and is now the chief antagonist of both God and us humans. When he defected he took a third of the other angelic creatures with him (Rev. 12:4) and was subsequently cast out of heaven (Rev. 12:7–8). Thus the Bible portrays Satan as having set himself up in opposition to God and as seeking to fulfil his own plan in contrast to that which God initiated from the beginning.

Two passages in the Old Testament speak of the fall of the king of Babylon and the king of Tyre respectively, but behind these descriptions is the real issue of Satan’s fall:

How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit on the mount of assembly on the heights of Zaphon; I will ascend to the tops of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High’ (Isa. 14:12–14).

Thus says the Lord GOD: You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering, carnelian, chrysolite, and moonstone, beryl, onyx, and jasper, sapphire, turquoise, and emerald; and worked in gold were your settings and your engravings. On the day that you were created they were prepared. With an anointed cherub as guardian I placed you; you

were on the holy mountain of God; you walked among the stones of fire. You were blameless in your ways from the day that you were created, until iniquity was found in you (Ezek. 28:12b–15).

Whatever we may understand of Satan and his authority, we must constantly keep in mind that he is still only a creature like us. Incredibly powerful, yes, but a creature under the Creator's sovereign control nevertheless. What he and his evil angelic assistants are relentlessly and cunningly seeking to do is keep Man thoroughly insulated from a knowledge of the true and living God. They are hostile to God and are always working to overthrow his purposes. They are hell-bent on dominating Man for their own ends. This cosmic warfare is beyond our ability to understand, but we nevertheless live each day in the backlash of these dreadful events. The Bible tells us that Satan is 'the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient' (Eph. 2:2). He is spoken of as the 'god of this world' (2 Cor. 4:4) who is permitted to influence and control the lives of men and women, who unwittingly but, nonetheless willingly, serve under him. Since God has never rescinded Satan's role on this earth we live in enemy territory as far as the Lord is concerned!<sup>11</sup> Satan is still in charge, permitted by God to continue to function as its ruler. Thus John says: 'the whole world lies under the power [under the influence and domination] of the evil one' (1 John 5:19). We are told that we battle each day, not against flesh and blood, 'but against the rulers,

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<sup>11</sup> It is worth pondering such passages as Matthew 4:1–11. Satan offered to give the kingdoms of this world and their glory to Christ, if he would but worship him. They were Satan's to offer, and Christ did not dispute it. It is these very kingdoms that Christ has won back through the Cross. Hence Revelation 11:15b, 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever'.

against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places' (Eph. 6:12). Jesus described Satan as an evil creature whose only intent is to steal and kill and destroy (John 10:10).

## **OUR WILL ENSLAVED TO SATAN'S WILL**

Sadly, as fallen human beings, we have long since surrendered and serve meekly and passively on the enemy's side. Without realising it we have allowed ourselves to be hoodwinked into thinking we act entirely out of our own free will in our day-to-day affairs. The reality is, as fallen creatures *we have an enslaved will*. Outside of Christ everyone has a will that has been captured by Satan and his hosts to do their bidding. Their operations upon humanity are so subtle as to be beyond our detecting—and if the Bible did not tell us these things we wouldn't have a clue! For example, Paul instructs Timothy to be an apt teacher of the truth so that 'God may perhaps grant that they [unbelievers] will repent and come to know the truth, and that they may escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will' (2 Tim. 2:25–26). On one occasion Jesus said to the disbelieving Jews who gathered to hear him:

You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44).

In the Old Testament we learn that Satan's power extends to his influence over whole nations—as the

remarkable account in Daniel 10 attests. God permits him to exercise power even over the lives of believers—as the first two chapters of the Book of Job reveal. Although there are other references in the Old Testament to Satan and his activity, it is the Gospels which provide us with valuable insights into who Satan is and how he and his demons operate. A striking example is found in Mark 5:2–16:

And when he [Jesus] had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; and he shouted at the top of his voice, ‘What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.’ For he had said to him, ‘Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!’ Then Jesus asked him, ‘What is your name?’ He replied, ‘My name is Legion; for we are many.’ He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; and the unclean spirits begged him, ‘Send us into the swine; let us enter them.’ So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea. The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it.

In the Book of Acts the activity of the demonic was no less evident than in the days of Jesus. Luke reported one

incident:

One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, ‘These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.’ She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, ‘I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.’ And it came out that very hour (Acts 16:16–18).

On another occasion, Luke records how some of the Jews tried to copy Paul’s exorcism of the demonic:

Then some itinerant Jewish exorcists tried to use the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, ‘I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.’ Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. But the evil spirit said to them in reply, ‘Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?’ Then the man with the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered them all, and so overpowered them that they fled out of the house naked and wounded. When this became known to all residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks, everyone was awestruck; and the name of the Lord Jesus was praised (Acts 19:13–17).

We in the West tend to think such incidents as these are fanciful and that they certainly don’t happen in our society. But they most certainly do! It’s just that Satan is much more sophisticated in the ways in which he operates. He masks his operations and is not as overt as he is in other cultures or as he has been at other times in our human history.

### **WE ARE NOT MORALLY NEUTRAL**

The trouble is, when you and I entered this world it was

not as morally neutral beings. Satan knows that we were born guilty because of our participation in Adam's rebellion and he can therefore rightly hold that over us from the instant of our birth. This means we are not only caught in the snare of our own sin and failure but we are also under the domination and power of this vicious and evil dictator. We have been born into a slavery under Satan and his hosts. This is not a pleasant picture and little do we realise that we are slaves to these same malevolent forces. Speaking about this dreadful state of man Geoffrey Bingham says:

This beautiful creature—man . . . is the object of powers which know how to manipulate him . . . Grovelling before death, subject to evil spiritual powers, and the abject slave of sin—where then is the once glorious creature God created?<sup>2</sup>

Make no mistake about it, Satan is a dreadful foe. He is incessant in his attacks upon us whether we be conscious of him or not and whether we believe in him or not. In his subtlety Satan conceals his identity to many, but his dominion over us is nonetheless real. He is the *manipulating force* behind much of sinful man's evil. Satan's main power over us lies in the fact that he knows we are guilty before God and therefore has just grounds upon which he may accuse us. Thus, 'The world system of Satan and his powers keeps man in bondage by reason of his guilt'.<sup>3</sup>

Being a master of deception and a professional liar he is able to convince us that God is not genuine in his threats, that sin does not matter and that hell is a myth. In

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<sup>2</sup> Bingham, *I, The Man!* p. 44.

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *The Splendour of Holiness*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1985, p. 95.

other words, Satan uses our own guilt to force us into having to believe a lie rather than the truth. He knows we can't afford to believe the truth about ourselves or about God *as he really is*. In so doing, Satan ensnares us so that we are blind to our bondage under him. He is able to alarm us, keep us in fear, play upon our emotions and manipulate us in sin and rebellion. In the Scriptures Satan is spoken of as 'deceiving, as threatening, as seducing, and as giving blindness to men lest they see the truth. He and his powers hold man in thrall.'<sup>4</sup> One writer has said: 'It is a fundamental law of life that where guilt is, there is also bondage. Where sin accuses, Satan has his hold and his rights.'<sup>5</sup> He goes on to say: 'If we do not seek the forgiveness of sin at once and turn from it, the guilt remains as an unpardonable burden on life, and gives the demons new cause and new opportunity to forge our fetters'.<sup>6</sup> I believe it was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who said: 'Satan tempts where there is innocence. Where guilt is, Satan has already gained power.'

There are many passages of Scripture indicating the power Satan wields and the hold he has over fallen humanity. For example, Paul speaks of the impossibility of ungodly men and women seeing the truth: 'In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God' (2 Cor. 4:4). He goes on to describe Satan as masquerading as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). When writing to the believers in Ephesus Paul describes the state they

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<sup>4</sup> Bingham, *I, The Man!* p. 42.

<sup>5</sup> Adolf Köberle, *The Quest for Holiness: A Biblical, Historical and Systematic Investigation*, Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, 1964, p. 82.

<sup>6</sup> Köberle, *The Quest for Holiness*, p. 220.

were in under Satan's leadership before they came to faith in Christ:

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient [that is, in all unbelievers] (Eph. 2:1–2).

Peter warns his Christian readers about the danger of taking lightly the devil—their ‘adversary’—and of not being constantly alert to his presence and ferocious power:

Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering (1 Pet. 5:8–9).

John describes how Satan has been ‘sinning from the beginning’ and that by discerning his followers we can distinguish between those who believe in Christ and those who do not:

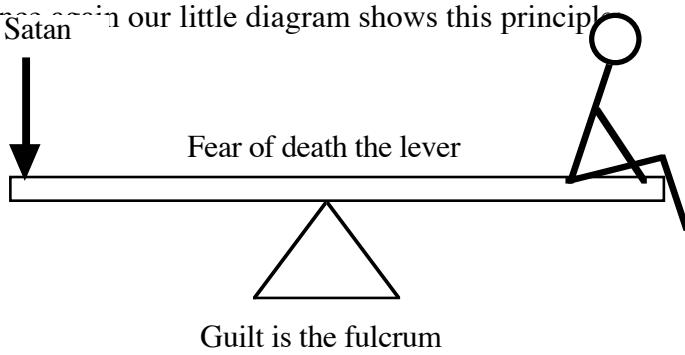
Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. ... The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters (1 John 3:8, 10).

In the Book of Revelation John nominates Satan as the ‘deceiver of the whole world’. He describes his end:

The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him (Rev. 12:9).

Satan and his cohorts are of course as active today as ever they were. But they know their time is running out (Rev. 12:12). As with all the other tyrants, guilt is the fulcrum by which the demonic powers gain a stranglehold over us. It is only because we are guilty creatures that they have a right to hold us in their grip.

Our little diagram shows this principle:



### **ESCAPE FROM SATAN'S SNARE**

What now is the relationship between Christians and Satan? Does he still have a hold over believers? We need to be clear about this as there is a lot of false and muddled teaching around these days. We must know where we stand.

Just prior to his death Jesus spoke to his disciples about Satan not having any power over him. The devil had no hold over Jesus since there was no guilt or failure in his life. He was without sin:

I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me . . . (John 14:30).

If we were guiltless and without sin, then Satan and his evil forces would have no right whatever to accuse us.

Nor could they manipulate us into doing their bidding. We would know a simple but powerful freedom from our enemy and could rightfully stand our ground against him whenever he set out to accuse us or tempt us to evil. But in fact, that is exactly the position of the Christian! Since Christ has taken our guilt on the Cross this release from Satan is now a wonderful reality:

The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8b).

That means Satan no longer has the right to manipulate Christians because God has now declared us to be acquitted of our guilt. We are now free from Satan's power! Satan may trouble us, but he cannot touch us. He may continue to accuse us, but he cannot bring us back into condemnation. Because of Christ's victory we may now stand our ground against Satan and his cohorts. Though we must never underestimate Satan's power, we must also recognise that he is a defeated foe. Martin Luther used to say, 'I often laugh at Satan, and there is nothing that makes him so angry as when I attack him to his face, and tell him that through God I am more than a match for him'.<sup>7</sup> Through Christ we are truly conquerors.

I quoted above the first part of a sentence from Adolf Köberle, 'It is a fundamental law of life that where guilt is, there is also bondage. Where sin accuses, Satan has his hold and his rights.' But he goes on to say: 'But when there has been a judgment of grace and the indictment has been destroyed, there is deliverance and freedom from the power of the accuser'.<sup>8</sup> That's the great truth in which believers must learn to stand. There has been a

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted by Charles Spurgeon, *Spurgeon at His Best*, p. 58, no. 332.

<sup>8</sup> Köberle, *The Quest for Holiness*, pp. 82–3.

judgment of grace, and Satan has no grounds whatever for being able to get at our conscience to accuse us.

One of the prime ruses which Satan employs to keep believers in bondage is to go on accusing them of their sin. '*His power lies in stinging excruciating accusation, based on the guilt of man.*'<sup>9</sup> He wants to alarm us to the point

where we do not believe there has been this once-and-for-all judgment of grace. He does not want us to believe that we have been totally forgiven. He works on our failures and bleats into our ear that we are still guilty! He tries to intimidate us with his lies. He wants us to feel our guilt burning in our conscience once again. He never lets up with these vicious and untrue accusations—they go on night and day, not only to us, but also before God himself. Satan is constantly telling God that we are not genuine!

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming, 'Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God' (Rev. 12:10).

In contrast to Satan's false accusations against us, we need to be reminded of, and refreshed by, the Scriptures which tell us the truth about our standing with God:

Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us (Rom. 8:33–34).

Neither Satan nor anyone else can bring a legitimate

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<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *Christ's Cross over Man's Abyss*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1994, p. 35.

charge or accusation against those whom God himself has justified—against those whom he has declared to be righteous because of Christ. In opposition to Satan, Christ is at the right hand of God's throne interceding on our behalf and declaring that we are indeed genuine—not in our own right, but because of his finished work on the Cross. He died and was raised again—and we are in him. That's all we need to know!

As we saw in chapter 7, the second powerful way in which Satan seeks to dominate the hearts and minds of fallen human beings is to work on the fact that they fear death. He knows that we instinctively dread the thought of what lies beyond the grave. He uses our guilt to hold us in bondage. Jesus spoke of this in a wonderfully telling story recorded in Luke's Gospel:

When a strong man, fully armed, guards his castle, his property is safe. But when one stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his plunder (Luke 11:21–22).

Satan is the ‘strong man’ and the ‘armour’ in which he trusts is our very own guilt! So long as we remain guilty we are trapped and enslaved by him. But when the ‘stronger one’—Christ—comes and takes away the ‘armour’—Man’s guilt—the captives are set free! Christ has won the victory on our behalf by going down into death and defeating its power and taking away its sting:

Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out (John 12:31).

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he [Jesus] himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death (Heb. 2:14–15).

The great victory of the Cross is that Satan is a defeated ‘tyrant’. Of course he is still ‘out and about’ seeking to dominate our lives. But for the believer, his hold over us has been broken forever. We must learn to live in that great truth:

We know that those who are born of God do not sin, but the one who was born of God protects them, and the evil one does not touch them (1 John 5:18).

But they have conquered him [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death (Rev. 12:11).

Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering (1 Pet. 5:9).

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you (James 4:7).

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Eph. 6:10–17).

Right now we are sons and daughters of the one, true Father and have a new citizenship—heaven (Phil. 3:20)! The power of the Holy Spirit within us is greater than any of these demonic powers that are in the world. Thus we need to know that this is our position and learn to stand our ground against these evil ones:

He [God] has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col. 1:13–14).

He [Christ] disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it [the Cross] (Col. 2:15).

[Jesus Christ] who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him (1 Pet. 3:22).

So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world [the demonic forces]. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children (Gal. 4:3–5).

## QUESTIONS

1. Why does Satan try to conceal his identity? Has he concealed it to you?
2. What is Satan's main source of power over human beings? Does he have any right to hold fallen men and women hostage? Can they free themselves from his grip?
3. What does John 12:31–32, and 14:30 tell you about Satan's defeat and of our victory over him?
4. Is it true that Satan cannot touch a believer? What about Job? Does God *permit* Satan to do certain things in the life of Christians? In the long run, can Satan ever do us any harm?
5. What do you think is the correct biblical attitude for the believer to have towards the devil? Should we be afraid of demons? Are they still creatures over whom God is sovereign?
6. What are Satan and his demonic forces trying to achieve in their interaction in the affairs of men? What is their goal? What do they hope to gain in the

end?

7. Are you aware of being involved in a spiritual battle?  
If not, can you suggest reasons why this may be the case with you?

## The World Is Not What It Seems!

Martin Luther's list of 'tyrants' included two that we don't think much about these days—the 'world' and the 'flesh'. What did he mean? To what was he referring when he said the 'world' is an enemy to Mankind? What did he mean when he talked about the 'flesh' as an inner foe which keeps us fallen humans in bondage?

The Bible speaks about the 'world' in a number of ways but the primary meaning is not the physical world in which we live, but the anti-god, self-seeking, self-promoting *system* which governs our social, political and educational ways of living. Whether we realise it or not, this world system is basically opposed to God *as he really is*. It is manipulated and headed up by Satan himself—'the god of this world' (2 Cor. 4:4). Satan seeks to ensure that our surroundings are never conducive to us coming to know the one true God. Instead, he wants us to unwittingly worship *him*.

The world's standards, fashions, value systems and taboos all have their powerful influence on our lives. Satan skilfully manipulates the media, advertising, music, entertainment, censorship, political forces, educational

systems as well as many ‘religious’ structures and groups in order to ensure that men, women and youth (including boys and girls) are moving through life independently of the Living God. He works on our sense of inferiority (as sinners) and plays on our emotions (as those afraid of God) in order to achieve his ends. Satan uses every technique he can to encourage us to insulate ourselves from the truth—from the fact of sin and judgment, and from God the true Father. Satan is quite content if we feel ‘secure’ in our possessions. He is delighted if we are so materialistic as to not care for one moment about God and his Son, Jesus Christ! To achieve this end he uses the world system in which we live to divert our attention from the things that really matter in life. Thus, we become obsessed with the acquisition of money and ‘things’, with pleasure, with sex, or of arriving somewhere on the social, academic or business scale. He does not mind us being ambitious so long as it is directed towards our own goals and not God’s.

Once again, it is our guilt which prohibits us from living independently from the world system as we know it or of successfully resisting these many seductive temptations in life. Whether we like it or not, we find ourselves inextricably bound by this world system to do and be all that it dictates. Generally speaking, we are happy to go with the tide.

Consider the following Scriptures and ponder what they teach about the world—this ‘age’ in which we live—and see how it impacts our lives. For example, Jesus taught a parable about God’s word being like a seed that is sown in the heart. Concerning one of the types of ‘soil’ in the story he said:

As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing (Matt. 13:22).

Again Jesus spoke of those who spend all their life trying to gain ‘things’ here and now. He pointed to the futility of what the world offers in comparison to the primary need that a Man’s soul should be right with God:

For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? (Matt. 16:26).

On another occasion Jesus warned about what could happen if we are so taken up by the pleasures of this world that we miss the signs of his second coming:

Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly (Luke 21:34).

On the day of Pentecost as the crowds gathered around to hear what Peter had to say, he warned them of the perverse generation in which they lived. Nothing has changed because his words are as applicable to us today as they were back then:

And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation’ (Acts 2:40).

Paul wrote of the so-called ‘wisdom’ of this world as being of no account in God’s eyes:

For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, ‘He catches the wise in their craftiness’ (1 Cor. 3:19).

This world system and all who belong to it are doomed in the end. Its days are numbered! ‘For the present form of this world is passing away’ (1 Cor.

7:31b). That means we ought to take great care that we are not caught in its ways—especially since the Lord graciously disciplines us so that we will not end up being condemned with it: ‘But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world’ (1 Cor. 11:32).

## **THE FLESH—THE ENEMY WITHIN**

Allied closely with the ‘world’ is the ‘flesh’. But what does this mean? What is the ‘flesh’? The Scriptures teach that all human beings are born devoid of the Holy Spirit (Jude 1:19). Though we may never have realised it all our ‘natural’ instincts and drives are therefore opposed to God and his intentions for us. As fallen creatures we live according to these distorted and self-indulgent desires. The Bible calls this ‘to live according to the flesh’ (Rom. 8:12–13). It also says that those who are ‘in the flesh’ cannot please God (Rom. 8:8). The flesh is that ‘inner enemy’ of our fallen humanity as has been derived from Adam. It is what all humans are, as those who are ‘in Adam’. It is that independent ‘I’ spirit in all of us that is opposed to God and insists on going its own way. It is that proud, egotistical spirit in Man that says, ‘*I* am important. *I* am going to do what *I* want in life. *I* am in charge of my life.’ It is all that we are as human beings that is conditioned by sin—rather than by God and his Spirit. Those who are not born again fail to see that they automatically go along the path dictated by the flesh. They think they are doing exactly what *they* want to do and don’t realise their fallen nature is manipulating them every moment of the day.

Because we are fallen we allow ourselves to indulge in

attitudes, activities and experiences which are completely contrary to all that God would have of us. For example (according to Rom. 1:27), those who engage in homosexuality do so, not primarily because they have a biological ‘bias’ that way, nor because it is just a matter of personal preference for an alternate lifestyle, nor because it is just a mistake on their part. The Bible calls it *deliberate error*. It is a matter of the will—it is a matter of the flesh. It is a chosen defiance of God’s design for us. As a result, the homosexual suffers the effects of having followed his/her sensual desires rather than knowing the blessing of living according to God’s norm. The same principle is true of all our wrong habits, such as when a person is habitually angry or is an alcoholic, a glutton, or always envious of others, or perpetually engaged in pornography, and so on. No wonder the world system has a hold over us! As fallen humans who are given to always going the way of the flesh, the world’s way of doing things has great appeal. Thus we are trapped by this twofold tyranny.

These internal dislocations produce an intolerable pressure on our inmost personalities. They create in some people a deep anguish and pain to the conscience from which—humanly speaking—they have no hope of relief. Some people experience huge and apparently inexplicable mood-swings as a result. They are trapped in the cycle of their failures and have no way of escape, *though they may never understand the real cause*. A good illustration of this is the story of Ginger:

*I had been attending a hectic week-long conference and was glad to be back in the hotel with a chance to relax. I was looking forward to meeting up with my friends the next day and spending a week’s holiday*

*with them. It had been seventeen years since I was last in their country and many years since they had visited me*

*in Australia. I would also get to meet their younger children for the first time. I began to pray, quietly committing to the Lord this happy reunion. As I thought about this fine family an unpleasant vision came over me. I call it a vision, though quite what it was I don't rightly know. I felt that one of their daughters was in deep trouble. As I prayed for more understanding, a clear insight came into my mind of rebellion, mood-swings, drugs, illicit sex, mental turmoil and thoughts of suicide. In my mind's eye I could 'see' what had been happening in this young person's life. At first I was shocked, but then felt this insight had to be from the Lord in preparation for the week ahead.*

*During our first evening together my friends confided in me their anguish for one of their teenagers. I listened in amazement as they described all the events that I had 'seen' in my mind the evening before in my hotel room. When I revealed to them that I already knew of these things they were incredulous. Few outside their family knew the details of their domestic tragedy so how could I have known? I said I believed the Lord had shown me directly but I had no idea how or why.*

*My week passed without having even set eyes on their troubled teenager. I was puzzled. Why had I been shown those details if not to offer some form of help? Within only hours of leaving for the airport the two of us had a sudden and unexpected encounter. There was no time to waste and certainly no time to be polite. I quickly introduced myself and immediately stated that*

*I knew what had taken place in her life over the past year or more, why it had happened and what the solution was. I listed the things that I had 'seen' in her life and affirmed that this information had come directly from the Lord while I was in the hotel the week before and not from her parents. I stated very firmly that God could see all these things and nothing was hidden from his all-seeing eye. But wonderfully he had also provided the total solution! Without in any way being judgmental, I spoke as directly as I could about guilt and what it does to a human being. Only God's Cross could bring relief. As far as he was concerned the person who truly believes in Christ and receives his forgiveness has no past. It is all gone. It is entirely cleansed and forgotten by him. I then spoke directly to her and said: 'Ginger, believe that Christ died for you. Trust him and you will have no past as far as God is concerned.'*

*Not a word was spoken by my young friend as I conveyed this hurried and impromptu message. It was not long before I was on my way to the airport and heading out of the country. Months later I had a phone call. Her parents had suddenly realised they'd never told me what had happened. I was delighted and deeply humbled by what I was told. I learned that a great change had come over their daughter from that very day. She had turned a corner for the better and now there were clear signs that a complete recovery could be expected. She still had grave doubts concerning God's love and forgiveness and at such times would remind herself that 'John Dunn said I have no past'!*

*Many years have elapsed and all has not been plain sailing. There have been many dark days and deep*

*waters on the path to recovery and faith. The parents have suffered—as have the rest of the family. But God in his grace had a purpose in those awful events and that once distressed and guilt-ridden teenager is today a mature adult and a Christian with a growing faith. I have been back to their home several times since and there is something very special in the relationship between Ginger and myself.*

## **WE REAP WHAT WE SOW**

Whether we realise it or not, the allurements of the ‘world’ and the ‘works of the flesh’ bring their own deteriorating impact upon each one of us. We may not have been trapped to the extent Ginger was, but the principle of Galatians chapter 6 is as true for us as it was for her: ‘Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow’ (Gal. 6:7). In other words, if all our efforts and energies are concentrated on putting into life that which is sensual, pleasure-orientated, self-promoting, self-satisfying, self-sustaining, self-preserving, then we will reap the consequences. We will reap a life that will have nothing of eternal value to show for it. That’s why the Bible teaches that all we do and say and think each day is a sowing:

If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up (Gal. 6:8–9).

In the case of believers, we are either sowing to the flesh or sowing to the Spirit. If we sow to the flesh we will

reap corruption in the end—that is, a life that is not alive to God and which ends in spiritual death. On the other hand, if we sow to the Spirit, then our life will issue in that which has eternal value in the end. William James once put it this way: ‘Sow a thought and you reap an action; sow an action and you reap a habit; sow a habit and you reap a character; sow a character and you reap a destiny’.

Think over these passages regarding the contrast between living flesh-way and living Spirit-way:

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:16–21).

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else (Eph. 2:1–3).

. . . for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world (1 John 2:16).

## **EMANCIPATED FROM THE WORLD AND THE FLESH**

The pressurising of the world would have no impact upon us if we were not guilty creatures. If we were guiltless we would be secure in our God and able to rest in him to supply all our needs according to his riches in glory. As such, the seductions of the world, the flesh and the devil would have no fascination for us and we would be content to live ‘in’ the world but not be ‘of it’.

Since Satan heads up the present world systems he is therefore able to manipulate guilty men and women to do his will. However, Christians are no longer bound to serve Satan or his system. God has ‘rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us *into the kingdom of his beloved Son*’ (Col. 1:13). We have been set free from having to conform to this ‘present evil age’ and can now live in true freedom even though we are still ‘in the world’. Of course, we will continue to experience its tempting seductions because the allurement of that which the world seeks to offer us always seems attractive to the flesh.

Nevertheless, for the Christian, once guilt is removed through Christ on the Cross, the flesh with its attendant passions and desires can be held in check by the Spirit’s power. In other words, we can say ‘no’ to the dictates of the flesh.

Before we came to know the Lord, our guilt compelled us to follow the demands of our human nature as conditioned by sin. Ginger, in the story above, had no power of her own to resist its appetites. She may have known they were wrong, but went down that path anyway. Basically, we are all like that. We don’t have the will to stand against the powerful—and often sensual—dictates of the

flesh. Not all go to the depths Ginger did. But all of us—in our pride—have refused Christ’s Lordship over us. Our minds have been set on the flesh and we have been hostile to God. We have lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind (Eph. 2:3).

But now that we have come to Christ and are free from guilt, we are free to live holy lives. The flesh has been crucified with Christ. In other words, it no longer has the power to manipulate us and dictate how we live. Of course, the desires and temptations are all still there, but the power of the Holy Spirit within us enables us to subdue and keep in check the corrupt pressures of the flesh. If we are so foolish as to reject the Spirit’s enabling power, then of course we will go under as before. If we are *determined* to go the way of our fleshly, worldly desires, then we will be showing contempt for God’s grace in our lives—we are being deliberately disobedient and bringing disrepute to God’s name. Such defeats are a contradiction of all that God has now made us to be through his Son.

Think through the following verses. They tell us who and what we now are as believers, and how we should behave in respect to the flesh:

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you. So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God (Rom. 8:9–14).

. . . put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires (Rom. 13:14).

. . . those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (Gal. 5:24).

You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:22–24).

But fornication and impurity of any kind, or greed, must not even be mentioned among you, as is proper among saints. Entirely out of place is obscene, silly, and vulgar talk; but instead, let there be thanksgiving. Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure person, or one who is greedy (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God (Eph. 5:3–5).

But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator (Col. 3:8–10).

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same intention (for whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin), so as to live for the rest of your earthly life no longer by human desires but by the will of God (1 Pet. 4:1–2).

In the light of all that God has done for us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Paul appeals to us, by the mercies of God, to present our bodies to him as a living sacrifice. This is true worship:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship (Rom. 12:1).

He then goes on to exhort us:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom. 12:2).

It is in the very face of all that the world offers us in its so-called ‘wisdom’ that God intervenes and saves us. If he had not done so, we would have gone on in our love affair with the world and the flesh:

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe (1 Cor. 1:21).

Peter reminds us of the fact that God has rescued us from the dreadful consequences of belonging to this world system headed up by the evil one. More than that, he has wonderfully made us participators in his very own nature:

Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4).

In Galatians Paul speaks about our release from the world’s domination as one of the prime objectives of Jesus Christ dying on the Cross on our behalf:

[Christ] who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father (Gal. 1:4).

Later in the same letter Paul wrote:

May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the

world (Gal. 6:14).

John urges his Christian readers to have a correct perspective on life. He says:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever (1 John 2:15–17).

John goes on to warn us concerning the world: ‘Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you’ (1 John 3:13). And later in his same letter he adds: ‘We know that we are God’s children, and that the whole world lies under the power of the evil one’ (1 John 5:19).

In the end, this world system will pass away—dissolved in the moral fire of God’s final judgment on all the evil that has polluted his beautiful creation. Peter speaks of this event:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed. Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home (2 Pet. 3:10–13).

The great victory of the Cross will be finally seen as the kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of Christ—for him to rule in righteousness:

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom of the world has become

the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever' (Rev. 11:15).

## **QUESTIONS**

1. What does it mean when the Bible says Satan is the 'god of this world'? What are the implications? How should this change our view of the present world system?
2. In what ways do we get 'sucked in' by the world and its anti-God values? Why do we allow this to happen? What is our point of weakness?
3. What provision has the Lord made for us to be able to withstand the pressures and seductions of this world system headed up by Satan?
4. What is the awful danger we face if we are tempted to love the world? What should our perspective be? Wherein lies our strength to combat the world's enticements?
5. What does our guilt before God have to do with our fascination with the 'things of the flesh'?
6. Why are we obsessed with looking after 'number one'? Who of all creatures in the universe is obsessed in this way? Why is it so?
7. Why is the flesh always opposed to God? What does Romans 8:3–8 teach in regard to the flesh?
8. How should we act on the Scripture which says: 'make no provision for the flesh'?

9. If we are not secure in Christ and confident of his forgiveness, how does this promote living in the flesh? Where should we turn when we see that we are gravitating back to the things of the flesh?

## II

# Idolatry and the Conscience

The last of the ‘tyrants’ that we need to consider are these two: *idols* and the *human conscience*. Both have the power to hold us in terrible bondage because of our fallen state and because of our condition of guilt before a holy God.

### **THE MADNESS OF IDOLATRY**

Our sophisticated, Western society does not think in terms of idols. It’s an old-fashioned concept and the whole idea of us being idolatrous is considered ridiculous. We are perhaps ready to concede that ‘pagan savages’ in some remote jungle may have idols which they worship out of sheer ignorance, but yet fail to see that we can be as deeply involved in idolatry as they may be. We do not see that our idols are far more sophisticated these days: they may be chrome-plated, or be in the form of the latest electronic marvel or perhaps come with a fine garden and swimming pool!

The Bible is very clear in showing us that God has

designed us to worship and serve him as an absolute priority:

[He commands] you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God . . . (Exod. 20:3–5).

We are only ever complete persons when the ‘God-shaped blank’ within us is filled by him. *An idol is therefore anyone or anything that we worship in place of God.* It is anyone or anything to which we attach ‘worth’ that should rightly be given to God himself. Consciously or otherwise, we have all attached ourselves to our idols—our modern-day surrogate gods. Our idol may be ourself, or some other object, talent or person. It may be our fascination with wealth, sex, possessions, vocation, ambition, fine food, sport, music, fashion and so on. Our idols occupy our attention to the exclusion of God. In that sense, we don’t possess them—they possess us! They dominate our lives. They create and dictate our priorities. We willingly devote our time and effort to the pursuit of our idols and, though we don’t realise it, they are our ‘god’.

Idolatry has a terrible impact on our lives. As a result of our devotion we are ‘joined to our idols’ and are in bondage to them—as Hosea 4:17 indicates. Our idols draw us into a slave routine from which we can’t extricate ourselves. That’s because we serve what we worship. This means they rule us, we don’t rule them! We think we are free to indulge in the worship of our private gods and that *we* are calling the tune! But the fact is, we are fooling ourselves. In this regard Geoffrey

Bingham writes:

Idols have a way of possessing their worshippers. They have a way of bringing emptiness and not fulfilment: slavery and not freedom. Idols bring bitterness and anger and frustrating disappointment. The blank [within us] is not filled with reality, but barren fantasy.<sup>1</sup>

He says in another place:

In choosing to refuse God, he [Man] has distorted his own functional operations. To love the creation more than the Creator is a contradiction in terms. In fact it cannot essentially be. One of the reasons God commands man to love Him is that only in this way can man reach his fulness of being.<sup>2</sup>

Idolatry has a fascination for us only because we are guilty creatures. Because we have substituted our idols for the reality of the true God, we have lost our freedom. In our guilt we dare not come to God and worship him as he really is, and so we have to create these gods of our own liking. Geoffrey Bingham continues:

The stupidity of idols is that they are not essentially true. They are, by nature of the case, false. Hence man is being false to himself in worshipping them. It is, however, his rebellion which gives the illicit an attraction which is irresistible. Idols are for the most part that which man projects from himself, and that which he wishes to have.<sup>3</sup>

The Bible has a great deal to say about idolatry. In the Old Testament, the Lord constantly remonstrated with his people for their incessant desire for the worthless idols of their pagan neighbours. His wrath often came on Israel for their idolatrous worship of these pathetic (and often

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *Oh, Father! Our Father*, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Bingham, *Christ's Cross over Man's Abyss*, p. 175.

<sup>3</sup> Bingham, *Christ's Cross over Man's Abyss*, p. 175.

obscene) gods of wood and stone:

You hate those who pay regard to worthless idols, but I trust in the LORD (Ps. 31:6).

For they provoked him to anger with their high places; they moved him to jealousy with their idols (Ps. 78:58).

For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens (Ps. 96:5).

All worshipers of images are put to shame, those who make their boast in worthless idols; all gods bow down before him (Ps. 97:7).

All who make idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit; their witnesses neither see nor know. And so they will be put to shame (Isa. 44:9).

Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, nor is it in them to do good (Jer. 10:5).

Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: Repent and turn away from your idols; and turn away your faces from all your abominations (Ezek. 14:6).

In the New Testament there is the constant warning to believers not to be caught up with idolatry. For example, in Romans chapter 1, Paul shows graphically the depths of man's idolatry and the terrible consequence of God giving such worshippers over to their idols as the outworking of his wrath on them:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth . . . Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves

... For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions ... And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done (Rom. 1:18, 22–24, 26, 28).

On another occasion when writing to the Christians at Corinth, Paul linked their idolatry with the demonic and warned of the terrible contradiction and danger of such divided loyalties:

Therefore, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols. I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say ... Consider the people of Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices partners in the altar? What do I imply then? That food sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Or are we provoking the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he? (1 Cor. 10:14–15, 18–22).

### **BREAKING FROM OUR WRETCHED IDOLS**

If we could be free of our guilts, and if we knew God's loving forgiveness, then our idols would lose their lustre. They would look tatty and pathetic by comparison with his glory. Our 'dear darling idols' can never satisfy the human heart.<sup>4</sup> Their promise of satisfaction is an illusion. Idols can never be a substitute for a living relationship with the Almighty. Thus it is only through Christ that we can be free of our false gods and so be at liberty to serve the Lord with a pure and unsullied devotion.

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<sup>4</sup> See Geoffrey Bingham's *Dear Darling Idols: Lords and Gods Piffing and Apalling*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1981.

As we have seen, God has built us to worship him and him alone. Before we were Christians our guilty past was full of substitute gods which we worshipped instead of him. Our wretched guilt prevented us from coming to God *as he is* and adoring him. But now, through Christ, our guilt before this holy and righteous God has been entirely purged. We can now come to him in freedom and with a clear heart of love. Our old idols are done with. God has cleansed us from their power over us and has liberated us to worship him as the one and only, true, living God. Because of what Christ has done we should steer well clear of all forms of idolatry. We need to now abandon any attachments that we may have had to these false gods.

Think through the following verses:

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you (Ezek. 36:25).

Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they [Israel] did. Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, ‘The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play’ . . . Therefore, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols (1 Cor. 10:6–7, 14).

Little children, keep yourselves from idols (1 John 5:21).

In his first letter to the believers at Thessalonica Paul reminded them that they had once been idolaters:

For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming (1 Thess. 1:9–10).

## THE INNER ENEMY OF THE CONSCIENCE

Finally, we need to think about the matter of the human conscience. How can that be a ‘tyrant’? How can our conscience be something that brings us into bondage?

It has been said that ‘a guilty conscience is the seasoning of our daily life’.<sup>5</sup> It is our conscience which provides us with a perpetual commentary on our activities, attitudes and responses in life. Of course a multitude of factors will dictate whether or not that commentary is correct. Thus our conscience can be a most valuable monitor, or it can be a terrible tyrant—as the following examples demonstrate:

### *Example 1*

A respected, well-to-do man lived in a permanent state of anxiety because he was under the constant threat of some cock-crow which would plunge him into embarrassment. He feared constantly that someone would take the lid off the pot and find out what he was *really* like! His ‘skeletons in the cupboard’ prevented him from ever being able to conduct his business with any degree of integrity and the tension finally led to a serious breakdown.

### *Example 2*

Out of some neurotic impulse the parents of a young boy always made him feel guilty in his friendships. He was left the choice of deciding between two guilts: that towards his parents if he was faithful to his friends or guilt towards his friends if he submitted to his parents. If he kept up the friendship secretly, then further guilt

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<sup>5</sup> Dr Paul Tournier, *Guilt and Grace*, p. 10.

would result from that very secrecy.<sup>6</sup>

*Example 3*

For years a man kept secret a personal habit of which he was deeply ashamed. Fearing his chronic ill-health was caused by his secret sin, his guilty conscience prohibited him from ever being honest with his doctor. Not until he was released from his guilt and his conscience was at rest on the matter through the forgiveness of the Cross could he be open and truthful. A speedy solution was found to his illness which proved to be unrelated to his previous habit.

*Example 4*

A motorist on the open highway failed to see the speed-restricting sign on the outskirts of town. Legally he was guilty of a breach of the law, but his conscience had nothing to say on the matter. Contrast the motorist who is unaware that he is driving on a stretch of road with no legal speed limit. He exceeds what he *believes* is the limit, and experiences pangs of conscience. Here he is under a *false* guilt, because technically he is not at fault as far as the law is concerned.

These examples illustrate the ways in which our conscience can manipulate us into various bondages and fears, some right, some wrong. In all cases however, the *feelings* are nevertheless real. Often our conscience bugs us over issues where the real fault lies with someone else and we suffer from their projected guilts. The false guilt which we experience as a result leads us into situations of genuine error of our own.

Far more serious is the bondage which results from

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<sup>6</sup> Illustration from Tournier, *Guilt and Grace*, p. 12.

true moral guilt. ‘... our guilt unseats us: we lose confidence because we have offended the law, evoked God’s wrath, and so feel the curse of God in our consciences.’<sup>7</sup> Thus William Shakespeare’s saying is true that ‘conscience does make cowards of us all’.<sup>8</sup>

Our guilty conscience often prohibits us from being honest with one another and forces us into compromising situations where we can’t afford to own up to the truth. Because of our moral guilt we hide our true feelings even from those who are our closest friends. Is it any wonder that marriages break up?

Our conscience, though it may be ignored, cannot be silenced. Though our conscience may be dulled, it cannot be stopped. When we are guilty, our conscience testifies against us and keeps us in a constant state of dis-ease. On the day of judgment it will be our rehabilitated conscience that will accuse or excuse us:

They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all (Rom. 2:15–16).

What we desperately need is for God to act on our behalf to cleanse our conscience from evil. Only he can bring peace to our troubled conscience. Puritan preacher William Gurnell once said: ‘Conscience demands as much to satisfy it as God Himself does to satisfy Him for the wrong that we have done Him. Nothing can take off the

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<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *The Splendour of Holiness*, p. 96.

<sup>8</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Spring Books, London, act III, scene 1, line 83. In the context Hamlet says that it is ‘the dread of something after death’ (line 78) which causes conscience to act as it does.

conscience from accusing but that which takes off God from threatening.' If we were not guilty creatures our conscience would have nothing to say to us. We would enjoy a beautiful tranquillity and peace.

Without that cleansing God views all our endeavours as impure, and the commentary which our conscience gives is therefore an 'evil report' as far as God is concerned. That's why it is dangerous for someone to say that they just 'follow their conscience'! The human conscience is not a good guide for us in assessing whether we are on the right track or not. The conscience that has been consistently ignored becomes dull and that person no longer 'hears' what it is saying. Paul warned of those who had made shipwreck of their faith by ignoring their conscience, and of yet others whose consciences were 'seared' (1 Tim. 4:2).

The Psalmists had great insight into the workings of conscience and often spoke of their own sufferings as the result of their guilt:

While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer (Ps. 32:3–4).

## **FREED FROM AN EVIL CONSCIENCE**

God's threatening wrath (which once alarmed our conscience because of our just liability for judgment) has been taken away. His threatening has ceased. Because we are now in Christ we can have peace at the level of our conscience. Our guilt has been taken by Christ and our conscience can now be at complete rest as far as future

judgment is concerned. Our consciousness of evil's hold over us has gone. We are at peace. I think it was P. T. Forsyth who said: 'Nothing will satisfy the conscience of man which does not first satisfy the conscience of God'. The wonderful truth is that God's 'conscience'—as far as our sin and guilt is concerned—has been satisfied entirely by his Son's sacrifice on the Cross. Therefore *our* conscience *must* be satisfied. Because we now have a conscience that has been cleansed we need to make every effort to keep it clear. We do so by avoiding evil, by obeying our Lord, and by living with others in a manner that honours God.

Peter instructed his readers with these blunt words: 'Keep your conscience clear' (1 Pet. 3:16). Paul taught his young friend Timothy to take great care to maintain a 'clear conscience' (1 Tim. 3:9). As such Paul was able to quote from his own experience: 'Brothers, up to this day I have lived my life with a clear conscience before God' (Acts 23:1). 'Therefore I do my best always to have a clear conscience toward God and all people' (Acts 24:16).

The writer of Hebrews says of the death of Jesus:

... how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God! ... let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water (Heb. 9:14; 10:22).

Think through these passages:

Therefore one must be subject [to governing authorities], not only because of wrath but also because of conscience (Rom. 13:5).

But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith (1 Tim. 1:5).

. . . having faith and a good conscience. By rejecting conscience, certain persons have suffered shipwreck in the faith (1 Tim. 1:19).

I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day (2 Tim. 1:3).

## **QUESTIONS**

1. Why do all humans have a passion for idols? Why do we worship these in place of the worship of God himself? What is the result of our idol worship?
2. What form do modern idols take? Do people see them as idols? If not, why not?
3. Who or what occupies most of your time and attention in life? If it is not God, could it be said that this is your idol? Do you think you *worship* this idol? What might be the consequences of this devotion?
4. What steps should we take to ensure that we do not allow idols to capture our devotion? What do idols do to our worship of the Living God? What is God's attitude to us if we deliberately entertain idols—in other words, anything that occupies that place in our heart that rightfully belongs to him? Is it possible that other 'lords' could have lordship over you besides **THE LORD**? How can this be broken?

5. Why is the conscience either a wonderful gift or an awful tyrant?
6. What is the function of the conscience? Does it always act correctly? If not, why not?
7. Can the conscience be ignored, dulled, silenced? Under what circumstances might each of these take place?
8. In what sense is conscience the ‘voice of God’ within us?
9. Why is a clear conscience such a valuable blessing? How can we know a daily experience of a conscience that is void of offence before God and man? In what ways are we responsible to keep our conscience clear?

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#### **POSTSCRIPT TO CHAPTERS 6 – 11**

Each one of these enemies of the soul holds fallen men and women in their power by one thing only—**GUILT**. This is our existential guilt before God for not being the creatures he designed us to be; our guilt for having rebelled against him; our guilt for having given ourselves over to sin, to idols, to Satanic powers, to serving the flesh and the things of the world.

Could our guilt be erased, then the power of these tyrants would be broken. Nothing would have the right to dominate our conscience. None of these powers would be

able to blackmail us and hold us to ransom. None of these forces would be able to seduce us into serving them. Nor would they be able to manipulate us into worshipping them in place of the one true God.

Through Christ's victory on the Cross, we Christians have been released from all these great powers which once held us in their grip. There is now no bondage to which we have been, or could still be, subjected which Christ has not actually broken as a result of his death and resurrection. We should never say that God has not done enough, or that what he has done is insufficient for our particular needs. That is not true. Nor should we ever say that God has only partly done what needs to be done. That is not true either. Rather, we should realise that we may only *partly see* what God has wholly done. We may not yet understand the full implication of what he has accomplished, nor may we be able to grasp clearly just how we have been totally set free. But the Scriptures declare that *God has done all that is needful for our complete release and victory*, and in faith we need to stand our ground on that fact. We need to know that there is now no tyrant, no power, no evil authority that has any right or title to reign over us or to dominate our lives, even though we will be constantly tempted to think otherwise.

The chapters which follow will show that God has entirely dealt with the guilt of our sin and so too with the power of these enemies. Take the time to work through the Scriptures quoted in each section in order to see as clearly as possible the wonderful liberty that Christ has won on the Cross on our behalf.

FOR FREEDOM CHRIST HAS SET US FREE. STAND  
FIRM, THEREFORE, AND DO NOT SUBMIT AGAIN

TO A YOKE OF SLAVERY (GAL. 5:1).

## I2

# What Do We Do with Our Guilt?

If human guilt is so serious and so widespread that it exposes every one of us to these ‘tyrants’ and their manipulating power, then what can we do about it? How can we deal with our guilt? How can we be rid of it? How can we be free of these bondages? It seems to me that

a number of things happen—almost automatically—in human beings as a result of existential guilt. One of these is that we try to off-load it. We attempt to get rid of it by various means.

Everyone experiences temptation. We are all constantly being enticed to behave in ways other than as God intended. However, temptation itself is not sin. The proof of this is that Christ himself was tempted yet ‘without sin’ (Heb. 4:15). I believe it was Martin Luther who said: ‘We cannot prevent the birds from flying over our head, but we *can* prevent them from building their nests in our hair!’ It is our *response* to temptation that is the crucial issue. We resist or we yield. We stand our ground or we submit. In every temptation we make a decision of the will to act in a certain way—for good or

for bad. When we yield to temptation we sin—there is a sin response. To put it another way, we break God's law. In so doing we become 'in debt' to those laws. We become in debt to God, to others and to ourselves. Our transgressions become like debts that we owe.

The words 'ought' and 'owe' have the same root idea. We say 'I ought to do this' or 'I ought not to do that'. This is the same as saying 'I owe it to God, to others and to myself to do this' and 'I owe it to God, to others and to myself not to do that'. So then, when we sin against God and others, we fail to give what we 'ought' and 'owe' to them. We become 'in debt' to them. Remember, the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:12 says: 'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors'. One preacher puts it this way:

This law has been built into our human personalities, into our bodies, into our minds, into our emotions, into relationships with others—this sense of 'oughtness'—of owing a debt when we sin. So the moment we do wrong; the moment we even omit to do what we know we should, this in-built debt collector goes to work! Deep down inside we begin to seek a way of atoning for our wrong. We begin to try and find a way of paying back the debt. We have a built-in sense of atonement. We get an inner sense of anger at ourselves. The feeling is: 'I must pay in full. I have done wrong. I must pay for it. I owe a debt.' This principle is at work in us all the time. It began in our earliest childhood, and has been working itself out in our personalities ever since. Hence we seek to find a way of paying the debt, of off-loading or expiating our guilt, or of somehow bearing our guilt and sin and failure.<sup>1</sup>

If we choose to ignore God's way of forgiveness and release from moral debt (which he has provided through the Cross), then we are left with at least five basic ways

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<sup>1</sup> Dr David Seamands, sermon on tape.

of trying to deal with the problem of our guilt:

1. We bear our own guilt and failure in our bodies, our emotions and our personalities.
2. We project our guilt onto others (often those nearest and dearest to us) and, of course, onto God himself.
3. We occupy ourselves in ‘doing things’ to make up for our guilt. We do things for others and we do things for God. We try to balance the scales.
4. We blame our failures on our heredity, our parental upbringing, our environment or our circumstances.
5. We rationalise our position and explain away our failures to others and to ourselves.

We often see guilt worked out in physical and mental illness. Doctors are now saying that 50–75% of people who are physically ill have illnesses that are emotionally rooted. Their sickness, their pain, their distresses are all real, but have a non-physical cause. Dr David Seamands says:

These patients are punishing themselves with their illnesses. Their physical symptoms and their neurotic breakdowns are their involuntary confessions of guilt. It is as if our nerves, our organs of the body are saying: ‘You are guilty. You will not face your guilt. You will not confess it. You will not let Christ bear it in His body on the Cross, so we, your body, will have to bear it for you’.<sup>2</sup>

We end up in a state of dis-ease. There is a disjointing of our inner ease and peace, placing a whole new load of stress on the body—for which God never designed it. Because of our unresolved guilts we get angry with our-

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<sup>2</sup> Seamands, sermon on tape.

selves and wonder why. In so doing we are probably punishing ourselves for our wrongs. We are employing a do-it-yourself guilt-disposal process! And the outcome is often physical illness.

In children, this sense of guilt and the need for punishment (or atonement) is often very marked. For example, the child, who deliberately sets out to do wrong in an effort to fail, could well do so in order to be punished for his deeply buried sense of guilt. Is it that he *wants* to be punished? The child is aware of its guilt and will be forced to get rid of it some other way. This could explain why many children (and some adults too!) are 'trouble prone'. They are accident prone. They are disaster or failure prone. Others manoeuvre themselves into failure and into being rejected as an atonement and punishment for their hidden and probably undefined guilts. Andy was like that:

*This 19 year old turned up on my doorstep one evening dressed only in a dirty T-shirt, shorts and thongs. He was distressed and apparently destitute. Andy had migrated to Australia some years before with high hopes of making a go of it in a new country. He had no skills, a poor education and no relatives here. Money came from the odd jobs he was able to pick up from time to time, but generally things had not worked out as he had hoped. He had fallen in love with a much older married woman and the sordid, tempestuous affair had dragged on for twelve months or so. At one stage she left Australia and he had followed her back to their home country. They had eventually returned together. Now she had left him again and disappeared. He had no money to follow her the second time and wanted to end his life.*

*In some respects he was a very determined young man, and yet, at the same time, hopelessly inept. He had a dreadful inferiority complex and could do nothing with any degree of confidence. He was so clumsy that he would often break the crockery while washing up and regularly had other such ‘accidents’ around the house. He was ‘failure prone’ and could never tackle any task without mucking it up! He tried my patience to the limit! A local job helped, and gradually he was able to gain a little self-respect and so face some of the important issues of life. He knew virtually nothing about the Gospel and was ignorant of even the basics of Christianity. Day after day I shared with him by word and action the reality of Christ.*

*It soon became clear that he was always blaming others for his lot in life. If it was not ‘that woman’ then it was his parents who were to blame for the plight he was in. He considered his parents had never taught him the fundamentals of life. True though that may have been, he nevertheless blamed them far too much. Though he didn’t recognise it at the time, he was deep in guilt but would not accept that he was in any way responsible for his woes. His guilt had so worked on him that he was oblivious of his own faults. He could not see how irresponsible he had been. He would get very angry if I suggested that he was really the one to blame for the mess his life was in!*

*As the weeks rolled into months our evening talks over the dinner table unveiled the depths of his guilt before God. He gradually came to see what God had intended for him from the beginning, and of how far out of tune he was with his Creator. A deep conviction came over him as he began to see himself as God saw*

*him. This insight disturbed him greatly.*

*Later that year he came with me to a youth house-party at which I spoke about God's love and forgiveness. On the second day, while I was talking on the Cross, Andy's face suddenly lit up. Later he told me that while I was speaking a flash of understanding had burst in upon him. He saw what the Cross meant. He understood what Jesus had done for him. He knew that he was now forgiven. From that point onwards there was a huge change in his life and he made rapid progress in all areas of his personality. As he began to accept his responsibilities in life, his inferiority diminished markedly. He announced that he was going back to school so that he could get an education and a good job.*

*He studied furiously, passing his exams and finally being accepted by the armed forces as a trainee mechanic. He was eventually posted interstate and I lost touch with him for many years. When next our paths crossed, I discovered that he was married and had a family. Though he has not gone on strongly with the Lord, he nevertheless knows what God has done in his life and I believe is deeply grateful.*

The person who tries to off-load his or her guilt will usually be very critical of others—just as Andy was of his parents and those around him. We always criticise others in order to justify ourselves!

... when a husband feels aggressive towards his wife and annoyed with her, he can at once ask himself: 'What are my faults towards her?' With a little honesty, he will always find the answer. The same is also true of course, of a wife towards her husband, or of an employee towards his employer and vice-

versa.<sup>3</sup>

We constantly project our guilts on to others. We get annoyed with them over precisely the same faults that exist in ourselves. If we have a strong personality, then we will most likely try to free ourselves of our guilts by rousing guilt in those who are weaker.

If we refuse to face our responsibility for our guilt in respect to God then we may come to the point of saying that we don't believe in him. If we do happen to believe in him then we may be tempted to blame him for the mess the world is in—especially our part of it! Many people have their fist in God's face as a means of covering up their own un-pardoned guilt. That was certainly the case of Nick, of whom I spoke in chapter 5.

We often try to expiate our guilt by doing things for others or for God. These actions may be highly commendable in themselves, but the motive (even if not conscious) is to pay the debt we instinctively know we owe. Alternatively, we may decide to become 'religious' and by this means try to make it up to God by being very 'good'. We try to buy him off by our good works. In so doing *we try to cleanse our conscience by obedience*. Such is an impossible and fruitless endeavour and only leads us deeper into the quagmire of guilt and failure.

Yet another way by which we seek to off-load our guilt is to blame it all on someone or something else. We blame our parents for the way they 'brought us up'. Alternatively, we blame our heredity, our environment or our circumstances. Such an attitude only shows that we do not see ourselves as accountable and are refusing to take full responsibility for who we are and what we have

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<sup>3</sup> Tournier, *Guilt and Grace*, p. 14.

done. Even if our failures have resulted from certain conditioning influences we are still ultimately responsible for our response! When we refuse to accept responsibility for our own guilts we bring misery upon ourselves, upon our neighbours and upon the creation in which we live:

If we lay blame on others for those choices we have made, then we lock them into ourselves indefinitely. No wonder we go through chronic stages of remorse, never knowing pardon for what we claim needs no pardon! That is why we often live in the uneasiness which comes from unresolved guilt.<sup>4</sup>

Dr Paul Tournier suggests that though we may appeal to our ‘psychological complexes’ as a means of escaping from our guilt and our responsibilities, this can never free us from our guilty conscience. A patient asks him: ‘What can I do about it? I have a complex.’ Tournier says that this seems to exonerate us, but goes on: ‘Yet we feel clearly that this secret mechanism which defies our mastery over ourselves contradicts our claim to liberty. It is like an inner enemy which humiliates us by the defeats it inflicts upon us.’<sup>5</sup>

No matter who or what we blame, no matter how we may excuse ourselves and no matter what mechanism or rationalisation we may employ, we can never off-load our true guilt. *Feelings* of guilt may depart, but the actual, existential guilt before our holy God remains.

*I was invited to tea at the home of a businessman. Richard had been off work for some time following a bad breakdown. As we talked, he began telling me how well he was progressing and how helpful the group therapy had been which his psychiatrist had*

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<sup>4</sup> Bingham, *Oh, Father! Our Father!* p. 43.

<sup>5</sup> Tournier, *Guilt and Grace*, p. 45.

*prescribed for him. During the evening he explained how he had come to see that there was no such thing as guilt. All guilt is relative—so he said. He claimed that we had all been brought up by our parents according to certain rules and regulations. But times have changed and so too have standards. What our parents taught us as children may or may not have any relevance today. Because we have these built-in rules from our childhood we ‘feel guilty’ if we don’t comply. But since there is no such thing as guilt, these ‘feelings of guilt’ are not valid. He was pleased to announce he was now free from such debilitating strictures of conscience!*

*I was glad to see Richard so well, but also sad to hear him say there was ‘no such thing as guilt’. I could not let it pass and had to say to him that he had been fed a dreadful lie. He and his psychiatrist had left out the whole matter of the existence of God and our primary human guilt for not being the persons he created us to be. Human guilt was first and foremost to do with the vertical. Our horizontal ‘feelings of guilt’ cannot be brushed under the carpet just by denying their validity when in fact the real issue was in the vertical plane. Hard though it was, I had to say to him that his guilt was all still there! The moment I said it he flew into a rage. In those few moments all his guilt had indeed returned. He was furious with me and forbade me ever to speak to him of the subject again.*

*Many years passed and he resumed a healthy and productive life. Though he continued to respect me he still kept me at arm’s length, knowing in his conscience that what I said back then I still maintained. It was sad to see the fear in his eyes lest*

*some disaster should plunge him into mental turmoil once again. Meantime, I kept praying that God's glorious revelation would burst in on him and he would see that the Cross has taken all that guilt away!*

*That prayer was answered decades later when Richard was diagnosed with terminal cancer. I visited him regularly over several years. Gradually our conversations centred more and more on spiritual issues and the matters relating to eternity. It came to the point where I was able to freely share with him the great news of the grace of God, the forgiveness of Christ and our release from guilt on both the horizontal and vertical planes. Towards the end I sat with him as he was dying and I knew that he had come to know the goodness of God. He expressed it to me very simply by saying he was now very content and knew that he was going home to the Father.*

### **THE CYCLE OF GUILT**

At this point we need to think a little more about what guilt does to us and how we often seem to respond to its pressures. We have already seen that guilt is the common experience of all human beings, whether they believe in God or not. We are creatures who have been designed to live in God's presence, and—though we may never acknowledge it—are constantly under the burden of this existential guilt for not being the persons he designed us to be.

For the Christian, unless God's forgiveness is experienced and truly known, the struggle with guilt will grow all the more as one knows the truth. For the believer—whose conscience has been enlightened by the

Scriptures—guilt can become a terrible tyrant where there is no true understanding of grace and pardon. Such a one can become caught in a terrible cycle of guilt and failure. I know, that was my case during the early years of my Christian experience!

This ‘cycle of guilt’ is the treadmill we get ourselves onto when one failure leads to another. We experience the guilt and remorse of a particular occasion of sin, and instead of confessing it and being rid of it, we are paralysed. That very paralysis causes failure at the next point of temptation. Further guilt (and remorse due to our failure) is followed by more self-justifying works. For some, when they are caught in this spiral, there is a deepening hardness of heart and a decline in faith. They feel sure that it is inevitable they will fail again next time they are tempted—thus psychologically setting themselves up for failure! The cycle goes on, and so they eventually give up.

In this process our conscience may become more and more dulled, while at the same time there is a steady decline in faith. Gradually we may fall away from God altogether and enter a deep bondage. We may retreat from our friends. We may avoid those who seem to be still sailing along! An awful legalism and hypocrisy develops. There may be an abdication of responsibilities and even an apparent mental deterioration. This cycle of failure and guilt, and then more failure and more guilt, gets worse and worse. The chain of events seems to be impossible to break. ‘Guilt compounds sin, which in turn compounds guilt, and man is thus caught in the vortex of a perverse, persistent and dynamical guilt.’<sup>6</sup> A horrible discouragement and disillusionment sets in.

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<sup>6</sup> Bingham, *Christ's Cross over Man's Abyss*, p. 42.

*Pamela had come to know the Lord when she was in her late teens. She had grown strongly for the first few years but gradually became discouraged. She tried to maintain her daily devotions, church attendance and active participation in the youth fellowship, but was nevertheless under such a dark cloud that eventually she gave up and was ready to abandon it all. Her disillusionment was intense.*

*She eventually confided that there had been sexual failure in her life after she had become a believer. Deep guilt had come flooding back. Her conscience would give her no rest and she felt an awful hypocrisy in continuing to maintain her profession as a Christian. In her eyes her failure had 'ruined it all'. One failure now seemed only to lead to another and yet another. How could she go on? It gave her no comfort to be told by some of her peers that she was being 'too sensitive' and that 'times had changed'! She was too ashamed of her failure to share it with the wider fellowship of the church. She felt isolated and alone.*

*Thankfully, Pamela was directed by a trusted counsellor to look back to the Cross and know afresh her release from guilt. In time she came to see her total forgiveness by God in a way she had never known before. Her release from the cycle of guilt was both deep and thoroughly life-changing.*

I keep having to emphasise that the reason you and I yield to sin and get caught in the cycle of bondage is due to our incipient guilt—that primary guilt which has been there in all of us from the beginning. Guilt paralyses our will (that's why a guilty person has trouble obeying) and

guilt undermines faith (that's why a guilty person has trouble believing). Thus we spiral downwards, *away* from God.

There must be a total removal of guilt before we will know liberty and release. By that, I don't mean sweeping it under the carpet as Richard (spoken of above) had tried to do. Not at all. We must see our guilt as having been totally dealt with—judged and eradicated forever. Only God can do that.

Our conscience will never be at rest until such time as the debt we know we owe is fully and actually paid. Faith towards God can never be operative in fullness and freedom until we know there is no barrier between us and our Lord. We may intellectually appreciate what God has done, but unless we experientially know we have been delivered from guilt, we will be powerless to enter into the good of that freedom as a living reality in our lives. Thus our conscience must be free of guilt before faith will operate in appropriating all that God has done for us in his Son.

This means that our ability to resist at the point of temptation is related to a clear conscience. A clear conscience is related to what God has done on the Cross to our guilt. The declaration of Scripture is that *he has done something about our sin and our guilt*, and thus we need to enter by faith into a full, realised appropriation and awareness of all that he has accomplished. This should be the experience of every converted person, every believer, every Christian.

God has done everything needful in order to ensure our full and complete forgiveness and our complete freedom from bondage. **We need to realise this great fact as a personalised reality.** 'The Lord Jesus has undertaken everything that His people's souls require;

not only to deliver them from the *guilt* of their sins by His atoning death, but from the *dominion* of their sins, by placing in their hearts the Holy Spirit; not only to justify them, but also to sanctify them.<sup>7</sup> Jesus once said: ‘you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free . . . So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed’ (John 8:32, 36).

This freedom is known at the level of the conscience. One writer has put it this way: ‘No sin can be crucified either in heart or life, unless it be first pardoned in conscience . . . If it be not mortified [put to death] in its guilt, it cannot be subdued in its power.’<sup>8</sup> God’s forgiveness needs to be realised in our conscience as a daily practical reality so that we will begin to live in the good of all that we actually have in Christ. This will involve a daily appropriation of all that Christ has done for us and, by a constant exercise of the will, we will grow. As we grow, so we will be enabled to move out more and more in obedience to break with the vicious cycle of guilt and bondage. Instead of being paralysed, we will start living truly as his sons and daughters. *We must know true freedom*, and we must know a daily enjoyment of all that that freedom means. Jesus said: ‘The thief [Satan] comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly’ (John 10:10). On another occasion he exclaimed: ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water” ’ (John 7:37–38).

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<sup>7</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots*, James Clarke, London, 1956, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> William Romaine, quoted by Robert Haldane, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans*, Banner of Truth, London, 1960, pp. 253–4.

Pamela's story above illustrates the deep need we have within the Church to know *corporately* the great release which God's forgiveness brings to the conscience of the sinner. How little we seem to share at this level. Our faults are kept secret. We never let on that we are all failures. We don't admit that we've all got caught from time to time in this vicious cycle of defeat and guilt. Bonhoeffer once wrote about the defect in our Christian fellowship: 'He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone . . . The final break-through to fellowship does not occur, because, though they have fellowship with one another as believers and as devout people, they do not have fellowship as the undevout, as sinners. The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner.'<sup>9</sup>

The cycle of guilt can only be broken through the work of Christ on the Cross as our sin-bearer. Only as we see—by faith—our participation in that death-resurrection event will we be set free. Only as we are set free will our fellowship within the life of the Church come alive. Ian's story illustrates this fact:

*Ian was a very pleasant young man, quiet but strong in his convictions. Nevertheless his spiritual life always seemed to be up and down. He struggled with the problem of recurring failure and could not maintain any degree of equilibrium in his walk with the Lord. Though he was undoubtedly a converted man, he felt deep anguish over his incessant failures and berated himself for not being a consistent Christian. He would come to the Bible studies week after week, but would then suddenly be absent. It might be weeks before he would reappear. I knew*

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<sup>9</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, SCM Press, London, 1960, p. 100.

*what had happened. He'd plunged into guilt because of some failure or other, and everything had gone out of focus once again. His story is probably the story of many a young believer.*

*Then we had a teaching mission at our church. The speaker was an evangelist who had been greatly used of God in bringing the Gospel to men and women in our land as well as in many countries overseas. He spoke on the Cross and opened up the wonder of what God has done through his Son at Calvary. I can't recall why, but Ian didn't come to the meetings. Then many months after the evangelist had gone we played some of the tapes at our evening Bible studies at which Ian was present. On one occasion we listened to that particular study where the missioner had spoken directly about the crucifixion. He described the crowds as they milled around the foot of the Cross crying out for the blood of Jesus: 'Crucify Him, crucify Him!' Ian was transfixed. He seemed almost to be in a trance. His face was set like flint. Then tears came to his eyes as he listened on. Something happened to Ian that night and he was never the same.*

*It was a long time later that he told us his story. As he had been listening to the tape, he suddenly found himself at the foot of the Cross. 'I was actually there!' He immediately found himself joining in with the crowd demanding the death of Jesus. In a flash he realised that he was just as responsible for the death of the Son of God as they were. He was with them in that death. He was wanting to take part in the crucifixion, and he was as culpable as they were for that murder. This realisation shocked him to the core. He was stunned by what he had 'seen' and 'felt' that night. Gradually the great truth of Christ's*

*substitution for his sin swept over Ian. He knew that he was forgiven—‘Father, forgive them for they know not what they do’. Those were Jesus’ words to Ian as he realised the extent of his sin and as he acknowledged his part in the death of the Saviour.*

*The change in Ian was dramatic. His life took on a new stability and meaning. The cycle of guilt was broken. He no longer went up and down like a yoyo and he began to attend worship and the youth Bible studies with earnestness and regularity. He became an important part of the life of our church and accepted responsibility in several areas of the life of the congregation.*

## QUESTIONS

1. Is temptation ever a sin? Give reasons for your answer.
2. Do the mechanisms we use to pay the debts we owe actually free us from guilt? Explain what is taking place. Has anything happened to our real guilt when we employ these mechanisms?
3. If I no longer ‘feel’ guilty, is this a good indication that my efforts to off-load my guilt have been successful? If not, why not?
4. In what ways do our bodies react to our unconfessed guilts? Check your answer with Psalms 31:9–10, 32:3–4, and 38:1–8.
5. Why do we criticise and judge others? What has this

to do with our relationship with God?

6. Is it true that our circumstances in life, environment, heredity or parental upbringing are the cause of many of our faults? Who is to blame for our failures? Who then takes responsibility for our sin? Who should take the blame for our guilt?
7. Is it possible for a person to cleanse their conscience by obedience? What is the result of such efforts?
8. Why does a guilty person have trouble resisting temptation?
9. What is the cycle of guilt? How can this chain of events be broken?
10. Why is God's forgiveness so vital to our day-to-day living? What happens when we don't know his forgiveness and are not living in the good of what he has done?
11. What did Bonhoeffer mean when he said: 'The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner'?

## Does God Really Forgive Sin?

Many times in the past chapters I have referred to the fact that the only way we can be free of our guilt is for God to cleanse us. I have said that the only way we can be released from the ‘tyrants’ that grip and hold us in servitude is through the forgiveness that comes to us through Christ. But how can we be sure that God does in fact forgive? How can we be certain that his cleansing does come to fallen human beings? Is his forgiveness our right? Does it come to us automatically? We need to think through these questions very carefully. Two issues must be considered: God’s forgiveness must not be taken for granted and assumed, and secondly, he does *promise* forgiveness to the repentant.

What is clear from the Bible is that God knows everything about us. He knows what we think and say and do—as the following verses indicate:

And before him [the Lord] no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account (Heb. 4:13).

For my eyes [God says] are on all their ways; they are not hidden from my presence, nor is their iniquity concealed from my sight (Jer. 16:17).

[God says of Israel] I know the things that come into your mind (Ezek. 11:5b).

The LORD looks on the heart (1 Sam. 16:7).

Not only does God know the things that are in our mind and in our thoughts, but he takes those very thoughts for the deed!

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matt. 5:27–28).

Since God takes the thought for the deed, the private kingdom of the mind in which we entertain all sorts of unexpressed words and actions is exposed as far as the Lord is concerned. The ungodly fantasies we entertain within our mind are all known to him. Do we therefore presume that God is just going to forgive us? Don’t our evil thoughts bring just as much guilt as our evil words and actions? Just because we don’t do or say what we *think*, does that make us less culpable? Someone once asked Voltaire: ‘Don’t you know that God forgives sin?’ He replied: ‘So what? That’s His job. That’s what He’s there for.’ But is it inevitable that God will always forgive sin? Many people think so—Sam certainly did:

*Sam lives on a property in the vast outback of Australia. He and his wife are hard workers—year by year battling the harsh climate in order to make a living out of their farm. There was a time when God had no place in his life and he was fairly scathing of his ‘city’ relatives who believed in Christ and openly spoke of their faith in him. As for his wife, she was strongly opposed to Christianity and wouldn’t have a bar of it. Nevertheless, when Sam occasionally came*

*down to the ‘big smoke’ he would stay with these ‘religious’ relatives and there would be the inevitable discussions about God.*

*His brother had talked about his experience of coming to know Christ and of the great joy in knowing he was forgiven. But Sam just couldn’t understand it. ‘What’s this about forgiveness? Who needs to be forgiven? Certainly not me! How could us country folk be sinners when all we do is sit on our tractors—night and day working our butts off on our farms? If there is a God then surely he forgives everyone?’ The Gospel made no sense to him at all.*

A friend of mine declared to me one day: ‘How arrogant of us to think we can just go up to God and ask him to forgive us! We are un-forgivable!’ What he meant is that we have absolutely no claim on God to forgive us. We have no rights. We have no merit. We dare not presume on God that he will forgive. We have no ground to think we could ever expect him to just brush aside our sin and guilt and failure. No, our guilt is so deep that not even our own consciences will let us off the hook. So then, if nothing can stop our consciences from accusing us except that which takes away God’s threatening, *how can we know if God’s threatening has ceased?* How can we be sure that it will cease? Does it in fact cease? Does God forgive sin?

Time and again Israel arrogantly assumed God would pardon their evil. But consider the following:

Let us lift up our hearts as well as our hands to God in heaven.  
We have transgressed and rebelled, *and you have not forgiven*  
(Lam. 3:41–42).

*How can I pardon you?* Your children have forsaken me, and

have sworn by those who are no gods. When I fed them to the full, they committed adultery and trooped to the houses of prostitutes. They were well-fed lusty stallions, each neighing for his neighbor's wife. Shall I not punish them for these things? says the LORD; and *shall I not bring retribution on a nation such as this?* (Jer. 5:7–9).

Surely this came upon Judah at the command of the LORD, to remove them out of his sight, for the sins of Manasseh, for all that he had committed, and also for the innocent blood that he had shed; for he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and *the LORD was not willing to pardon* (2 Kings 24:3–4).

Sin is sin and God is holy. Because he is holy *he will not just forgive sin*. Habakkuk 1:13 says: ‘Your eyes are too pure to behold evil, and you cannot look on wrongdoing’. This means that God cannot look upon sin without punishing it—without his very holiness consuming it and destroying it. *Sin is inflammable in the presence of the naked flame of God's holiness.* Geoffrey Bingham writes:

God in His holiness may not forgive sin gratuitously. Even He does not have that right. Man for his part cannot cover his own sin, or morally compensate for it. In his fallen state he does not even wish to do so. He lacks the moral incentive and power to do so, were it even possible. Man, then, is in a dilemma.

So is God, so to speak. Because of His law and holiness He cannot, may not, must not, and dare not, forgive man. To forgive one man one sin is to be bound to forgive all sins for all men for all time, in which case His holiness has been dissipated, His law been made foolishness, and the moral structure of His creation fully fractured.

What then does God do? If He forgives gratuitously it does nothing for the conscience of man. If He sweeps man's sins under the carpet, and puts a cover over his moral defilement, then the anguish of the human spirit is increased to destruction point. The truth is that there is no humanly conceivable solution to the

problem.<sup>1</sup>

For our sin and guilt to be forgiven, God must judge and destroy it totally. There is no other way. The big question is: how is this possible without us also being destroyed in the process? God's answer is the Cross of Christ!

*In time, Sam the farmer became curious about the huge change he'd witnessed in the lives of his relatives. That started him listening to tapes of mine on God's forgiveness. Sam's interest was aroused and he began to wonder if there might be something in this 'forgiveness thing' after all. His conscience started to trouble him. Perhaps he really did need forgiving. Perhaps it wasn't automatic after all.*

*I had never met Sam and our first encounter came about in an amusing way. I often used to drop in to see his relatives. They were my friends and I would call in to chat, to have a meal or to just play with their children in the backyard. One evening I was sitting at their kitchen table yarning when their four-year-old came running in from the playground. He immediately headed for the front bedroom where (unknown to me) Sam was intently listening to one of my tapes. His young nephew couldn't work it out. Why was uncle sitting in the bedroom listening to John Dunn on the tape when he could go out into the kitchen and listen to him for real? The youngster's logic and persistence got the better of Sam and it was not long before he appeared at the kitchen doorway: 'I'm Sam. I've been listening to your talks about God's forgiveness.'*

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<sup>1</sup> Bingham, *Christ's Cross over Man's Abyss*, p. 5.

*Like most farmers, Sam was fairly matter-of-fact about life—calling ‘a spade a spade’. Needless to say we were very soon immersed in deep discussion about God’s great gift of forgiveness. I don’t know when Sam came to faith but the change which eventually took place in his life was very real. He no longer ignored his need for God’s forgiveness and certainly no longer took it for granted as if it was his right. His whole life was turned upside down. God’s grace and love flooded his understanding and it was not long before he was telling everyone about his new-found Lord.*

## **GOD’S PROMISES OF FORGIVENESS**

The Bible has many clear promises of God’s forgiveness and of his intention to deal finally and fully with the problem of our sin and guilt as well as with all the enemies—those tyrants—which plague Mankind. The thread of this theme runs through the whole of Scripture—beginning in Genesis at the time of the Fall and going through to the end of the Book of Revelation.

Following Satan’s temptation and seduction of Adam and Eve, God confronted them all in the Garden. To the serpent the Lord said:

Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel (Gen. 3:14–15).

God announced a curse upon Satan, saying that even though he and Man had been in alliance in this rebellion,

from now on there would always be war between them. In God's plan of events, the woman's 'offspring' (Christ) would inflict a mortal wound on Satan when he 'bruises' his head, whereas Satan's 'offspring' would be permitted to 'bruise' Christ's heel (a painful but not deadly wound).

Though we may think this promise in Genesis 3:15 to be somewhat obscure, in fact it sets the stage for all that the Scriptures subsequently reveal of God's plan for our redemption in Christ. Several commentators have expressed it in these terms: 'A gracious promise is here made of Christ, as the deliverer of fallen man from the power of Satan',<sup>2</sup> and 'unsought and unsolicited, he promised them a Saviour, even his own dear Son, who should rescue both them and all their believing posterity out of the hands of their great adversary'.<sup>3</sup> As the thread is traced through the Old Testament Scriptures, the promises become more and more numerous, making it clear that God intends to break into history and effect salvation for his people.

Genesis 12 records the call of Abraham. This important event is the beginning of God's plan for Man's salvation. Abraham had the unique role of being the father-figure of all history. It is to Abraham that God gave the promise that he would bless all the nations of the earth through his seed:

Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1960, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Simeon, *Expository Outlines on the Whole Bible*, vol. 1, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1956, p. 39.

*'you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'* (Gen. 12:1–3).

When we think about this in the light of the great promise given in Genesis 3:15, we can see that the curse of the Fall was already starting to be reversed according to God's plan. He was now calling out to himself a people to be his very own so that through them all the nations of the earth would be 'blessed' and so restored to a right relationship to him. From this point onwards, all God's dealings with Man are through the offspring of Abraham, right down to the Messiah himself—Jesus Christ. Abraham had the unique role of being the one through whom God was initiating his great program of salvation history that would culminate in Christ's coming and his death and resurrection. 'Somehow Abraham must have understood the principle of the (yet-to-be) Cross.'<sup>4</sup> In fact this principle may be traced right through Scripture.<sup>5</sup>

Against all odds, Abraham believed God's promise and it was accounted to him as righteousness.

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.' But Abram said, 'O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?' And Abram said, 'You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.' But the word of the LORD came to him, 'This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.' He brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:1–6).

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *Freely Flows Forgiveness*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1981, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> See Genesis 22, especially vv. 8, 14; John 8:56; Hebrews 11:17–19; Galatians 3:8–9.

The writer of Hebrews says:

By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom he had been told, ‘It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.’ He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back (Heb. 11:17–19).

And in Romans chapter 4 Paul adds:

No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised (Rom. 4:20–21).

In God’s plan, this great man of faith was the prototype of all such men and women of faith. All who believe God’s promises are accounted as those who have a faith like Abraham’s:

Just as Abraham ‘believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,’ so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.’ For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed (Gal. 3:6–9).

God’s promises of salvation to his people, his announcements of restoration and his declarations of forgiveness have gone on being repeated down through the centuries. It is astonishing the number of times in the Old Testament alone that God says, ‘I *will* do this’, ‘I *will* bring forgiveness’, ‘I *will* bring salvation’, ‘I *will* deliver my people’, ‘I *will* honour my covenant’. The following verses indicate some of those occasions:

I will lead the blind by a road they do not know, by paths they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the

things I will do, and I will not forsake them (Isa. 42:16).

In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the LORD, your Redeemer (Isa. 54:8).

I will make an everlasting covenant with them, never to draw back from doing good to them; and I will put the fear of me in their hearts, so that they may not turn from me (Jer. 32:40).

I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel, and rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me (Jer. 33:7–8).

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice (Ezek. 34:15–16).

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you (Ezek. 36:25).

I will save you from all your uncleannesses, and I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you (Ezek. 36:29).

The promises of God's forgiveness in the Old Testament are so clear that one wonders how some people hold to the view that forgiveness is only a New Testament teaching! Look at the following passages:

If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land (2 Chron. 7:14).

I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins (Isa. 43:25).

. . . let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy

on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon (Isa. 55:7).

I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me (Jer. 33:8).

It is equally clear from the Old Testament that the ancient believers really knew God's salvation and forgiveness:

Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully. *They will receive blessing from the LORD, and vindication from the God of their salvation* (Ps. 24:3–5).

Happy [blessed] are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy [blessed] are those *to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity*, and in whose spirit there is no deceit (Ps. 32:1–2).

Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—*who forgives all your iniquity*, who heals all your diseases . . . He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; *as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us* (Ps. 103:2–3, 10–12).

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But *there is forgiveness with you*, so that you may be revered (Ps. 130:3–4).

He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19).

Through the prophets God brought a promise of a *new covenant*. He declared that he would institute a covenant that would be written upon the hearts of all his people. God would deal with their sin and guilt once and for all. He would defeat their enemies. He would put his Spirit

within them so that they would know an inner principle of faith and holiness and obedience. As God's true people, they would then be able to serve him in holiness and righteousness all the days of their lives:

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; *for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more* (Jer. 31:33–34).

On that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, *to cleanse them from sin and impurity* (Zech. 13:1).

Geoffrey Bingham writes:

Almost all the things that Abraham was promised were yet to come when he came to the end of his life . . . History has shown rich fulfilment of the covenantal promises in the children of Jacob, Abraham's grandson. The great people of God was established. Most wonderful of all, the blessed Seed was born, and has brought—as he is bringing—rich blessing to the nations. The end of that blessing is not yet, but it is leading to the greatest of all faith's anticipations to which we now look, for like Abraham who 'looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God' (Heb. 11:10), so we do.<sup>6</sup>

At last, with the coming of the Messiah the centuries of promises were finally fulfilled. One of the first to recognise this momentous occasion was the elderly priest Zechariah. When his son was presented on the eighth day for circumcision he knew that this babe (John the Baptist)

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<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *The Vandal*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1990, pp. 92–93.

was God's appointed forerunner of the promised Messiah. He burst into praise and thanksgiving:

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, *to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.* By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace (Luke 1:68–79).

We may be tempted to pass over—or even dismiss—these great historical accounts of God's promises to his ancient people as recorded in the Old Testament. But we are now the ones who benefit from his faithfulness. We are the recipients of all these promised blessings. We now live in the good of all that he planned long ago to bring to fulfilment through his Son, Jesus Christ. Each time a sinner comes to faith, that is the direct outworking of those great sureties given millenniums ago through Israel's prophets. We must never lose the perspective of God's great plan—his salvation history—as it stretches from creation to the second coming of Christ.

**QUESTIONS**

1. Why do many people think that God will automatically forgive their sin? What have such persons failed to understand about God's nature and Man's sin?
2. Why can't God just forgive and forget? What would happen if he did? What must he do to our sin in order to forgive and forget it?
3. What is the awful dilemma in which we find ourselves because of our sin? Is there a human solution to that dilemma?
4. To what is the promise in Genesis 3:15 referring? Can you support your view from Scripture?
5. Is the covenant that God made with Abraham significant for you? In what sense are you part of that covenantal promise? What does Romans 4:13–25 tell you about Abraham's faith? What is our relationship to him? How is our faith to be like Abraham's faith?
6. What does Psalm 51 tell you about David's understanding of God's way of forgiveness? What are his views of God's way of release, the steps of true repentance, God's justice and God's holiness? How do these apply to you?
7. What is the great promise of Jeremiah 31:33–34? What are the benefits that will flow out of this promise as it is being fulfilled? What does this passage say to you?

8. What does Ezekiel 36:22–29 show of God's intention and promise to have a people that are holy? What does this passage show of his *way* of forgiving us?
9. List other promises of forgiveness that you have found in the Scriptures. Are God's promises personal to you? If so, describe how they work out as personal to you in your day-to-day living? If they are *not* personal to you, can you suggest why this might be the case?

## God's Way of Forgiveness

We have seen in the last chapter that God has made numerous promises down through the ages that he will forgive our sin. But just *how* does he forgive? What is the means by which this holy God can forgive us? Does he just forget our sin? Is it that he simply decides to brush our sin aside? How does God forgive sinful human beings? As we have seen, God in his holiness cannot just forgive sin gratuitously. What then is his way of forgiving us?

### **NO FORGIVENESS APART FROM SHED BLOOD**

The Bible tells us that from the time of Man's Fall, God instituted sacrifices as his appointed means of accepting repentant sinners. These sacrifices involved the shedding of animal blood and were to be offered to God in faith. The principle was that the sacrificial victim represented the actual life of the one offering the sacrifice. Thus the Bible makes it clear that 'without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins' (Heb. 9:22), and it uses the word *propitiation* to describe this principle of

appeasement.<sup>1</sup> Propitiation is therefore that offering by which God's wrath concerning our sin is turned away.

In Genesis chapter 4 we read that Abel brought an offering that was acceptable to God whereas Cain did not. Cain did not offer his gift in faith. We know this from two passages in the New Testament: 'By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts . . .' (Heb. 11:4). And John warns his readers: 'We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous' (1 John 3:12).

God's approval of Abels' sacrifice over Cain's was not a question of merit because neither of them *deserved* God's favour. Cain got angry primarily because he was a guilty, unrighteous man. More than that, as a fallen human being he had allowed himself to be manipulated and controlled by Satan so that his own deeds were by nature 'evil'. In his guilt he viewed God as showing favouritism to his brother Abel. But that was not the case. Abel simply saw that God was a holy God who had to be trusted as the only one who could deal with his sin. Abel loved God and worshipped him with a pure conscience. By contrast, Cain hung onto his pride and demanded that God accept his offering in recognition of his own supposed self-righteousness.

Cain's approach was unacceptable to God back then, and any similar approach on our part today will be equally unacceptable. We too need to recognise that, on

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<sup>1</sup> Sadly, the word 'propitiation' is no longer part of today's vocabulary, although it is the most important of words to describe Christ's sacrificial death, and is being used again in some modern translations.

the one hand, there is nothing we can do about our own sin and guilt, but that on the other, God is the sort of God who intervenes and graciously makes propitiation for us.

### **GOD'S COVENANT THE BASIS OF FORGIVENESS**

We saw in the last chapter that God entered into a covenant with Abraham and with all who were to descend from him. This covenant was established by means of a sacrifice (Gen. 15:7–21). At the time of the Exodus, as the Israelites prepared to flee from Pharaoh and his army, God instituted the Passover sacrifice (Exod. 12:1–27), and the special significance of this great deliverance was to be remembered by them year by year. Thus the Old Testament is the record of God's dealings with his chosen people with whom he had entered into a special relationship. Because God is holy, they were expected to live as his holy people, representing him to the nations. Every failure to live as God commanded brought an immediate need for cleansing. This cleansing was for the benefit of their conscience in order that they might go on living in obedience and peace as his true people. God's way of forgiveness was therefore by means of sacrifice. Not only did God make provision for individuals to offer sacrifices for their sins, but also once a year there was also the great 'day of atonement' at which time the sins of the whole nation were dealt with. (Leviticus chapter 16 outlines the details and procedure of this annual event.)

Although the whole matter of sacrifice may seem very strange and even repulsive to us, its significance and importance must be understood if we are to grasp what

God has done in forgiving *our* sin. These sacrifices involved the shedding of blood. It was a life poured out on behalf of another. The great principle is stated clearly when God said:

For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and *I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives* on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement (Lev. 17:11).

Thus the blood of the slain animal was God's gift to his people. In other words, it was he who initiated the means by which they could be forgiven. Their offering was not a bribe. Rather, it was *God* granting them the means by which they could be cleansed. It was *God* who established this way of atonement; it was *God* who created the basis for them to have 'at-one-ment' with him—to once again be in a right relationship with him.<sup>2</sup> This highlights the primary aim of God's forgiveness of us—reconciliation! He intends to have us back in his presence as his reconciled people. But reconciliation is impossible until there is redemption, and redemption is impossible apart from propitiation, and propitiation is impossible without atonement!

The idea of atonement is the covering of sin by something which God provided, and by the use of which sin loses its accusing power, and its power to derange that grand covenant and relationship between man and God which founds the New Humanity.<sup>3</sup>

The Old Testament shows clearly that from start to finish, reconciliation, atonement and remission of sin—forgiveness—has always been God's gracious initiative

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<sup>2</sup> A good exercise would be to look through Leviticus chapters 4, 5 and 6 and see the relationship between 'priest', 'atonement' and 'forgiveness'.

<sup>3</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1994, p. 56.

on our behalf. It is God himself who cleanses, forgives and blots out our iniquity in order that we might be restored to fellowship with him. He says: 'I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me' (Jer. 33:8). And again: 'I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins' (Isa. 43:25).

At the outset, the New Testament announces the Good News of the promised Messiah, the great High Priest who comes to serve and to save. In Matthew 1:21 God said to Joseph concerning the birth of Christ: 'you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins'. This indicated that because sin is a dynamic and not a static thing, we need to be saved *from* its penalty, power and pollution—and, ultimately, from its presence too. This great Messiah is going to do what the Old Testament sacrifices could never do, *deliver from sin permanently!*

God raised up John the Baptist to announce the coming of the Lord, warning people to repent for the kingdom of God was very near. As soon as John saw Jesus he knew who he was. He knew that he was the true sacrificial Lamb foreshadowed in the Old Testament:

The next day he [John] saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, '*Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*' (John 1:29).

Immediately Jesus began his ministry of proclamation he announced who he was and why he was there:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18–19).

## **CHRIST'S LIFE A RANSOM FOR MANY**

Few understood the implications of what Jesus said. None understood that he came to die, even though he told them bluntly, ‘the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and *to give his life a ransom for many*’ (Matt. 20:28). His whole life (as recorded in the Gospels) was with one purpose in view, to do the Father’s will and go to the Cross as Man’s Redeemer. The writer of Hebrews shows that the sacrifices of Israel were an *anticipation* of this ‘once and for all’ sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. They were the shadow—Christ is now the substance. This means that all those Old Testament sacrifices pointed to Jesus and his death and resurrection:

But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption (Heb. 9:11–12).

Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself (Heb. 9:25–26).

For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins (Heb. 10:4).

And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, ‘he sat down at the right hand of God’ (Heb. 10:11–12).

This leads us to the conclusion that God's way of forgiveness has never changed. God has placed the Cross in the centre of history and all salvation for all people for all time flows from there. Those Old Testament believers looked *forward* to the Cross in faith; we look *back* to it in faith. '... before time the whole matter of salvation, sonship and glorification was planned by God to be effected in and through Christ, and that such planning included the death of the Cross.'<sup>4</sup> Thus, the principle by which God accepts and reinstates sinners has always been the same. It is, always has been, and always will be, through his Son's substitutionary death on that Cross. It is only *the blood of Christ* that cleanses us from sin. There is no other way:

Not all the blood of beasts,  
On Jewish altars slain,  
Could give the guilty conscience  
peace,  
Or wash away the stain.

But Christ, the heav'ly Lamb,  
Takes all our sins away;  
A sacrifice of nobler name,  
And richer blood than they.

My faith would lay her hand  
On that dear head of Thine,  
While like a penitent I stand,  
And there confess my sin.

My soul looks back to see  
The burden Thou didst bear,  
When hanging on the cursèd tree,

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<sup>4</sup> Bingham, *Christ's Cross over Man's Abyss*, p. 16.

And knows its guilt was there.

Believing, we rejoice  
To see the curse removed,  
We bless the Lamb with cheerful voice,  
And sing His dying love.<sup>5</sup>

## **CHRIST'S SACRIFICE IS A PROPITIATION**

God's way of forgiveness for us is through the sacrifice of his own beloved Son. It is still by means of propitiation. It is still by means of a sacrifice which diverts, or averts, his wrath coming upon us. In other words, there has to be judgment of our sin before we can be forgiven. Thus the New Testament writers take up this important principle and speak of the propitiation of Christ through his shed blood:

... [Christ] whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement [propitiation] by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed (Rom. 3:25).

... he [Christ] is the atoning sacrifice [propitiation] for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2).

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

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<sup>5</sup> Hymn by Isaac Watts, *New Creation Hymn Book*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2001, no. 316.

By his propitiation we are delivered from the wrath to come. By the shedding of his blood we are made whole.

By his death we gain life. Only by him, and through him, is there forgiveness. *This has always been God's way.*

*In the early 1700s a small group of students in Oxford University in England began meeting for prayer and worship. It was known as 'The Holy Club'. They were led by the Wesley brothers John and Charles, and included among their ranks the young George Whitefield. They were dubbed 'Methodists' because of their strict, methodical routine of self-discipline in public worship, private devotions and in the doing of good deeds for the sick, the poor and the imprisoned. Their stringent devotion to these duties came from their sincere desire and longing that somehow their souls might be made right with God, and so their discipline was specifically to do with their spiritual pilgrimage as they searched for salvation. Whitefield said of his part in this group: 'Never did persons, I believe, strive more earnestly to enter in at the strait gate'.<sup>6</sup>*

*For his part, Whitefield left no means unused which he thought would lead him nearer to Jesus Christ. Of that small band, he was the first to come into a true knowledge of God's way of forgiveness. It was the great turning point of his life and he subsequently became one of the greatest preachers the world has ever seen. Meantime the Wesleys had gone to Georgia as ministers to the New Colony. But things did not go*

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<sup>6</sup> *George Whitefield's Journals*, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1978, p. 48.

*well and they returned to England broken, disillusioned men as neither of them had found that peace of soul for which they both longed and worked and prayed. John Wesley himself admitted that his motive in going to Georgia was in ‘the hope of saving my soul’. Not until May 1738 were the two of them soundly converted to Christ, both as the result of German Moravian teachers who were then in London. Like Whitefield, they both began preaching the necessity of the new birth and of faith in the atoning blood of Christ as God’s way of forgiveness and as God’s way of righteousness.*

That was more than 250 years ago. But the same transformation can occur today:

*It happened to Dennis, a member of a similar ‘holy club’ at Sydney University. Like many sincere young students in that small band, Dennis was looking for a way by which he could be right with God. He considered he was a ‘good Christian’ and was sure that he was on the right track by getting up early to pray each day, in diligently searching the Scriptures and in being involved in every possible religious activity his busy study routine would permit. He was, to use his own words: ‘Strong in his commitment to Christ and full-on for the Lord’. The trouble was—like Whitefield and the Wesleys before him—Dennis was a self-righteous legalist. It was what he could do to earn his salvation and acceptance by God; it was what he could sustain in his religious duties that he felt sure was the way by which he would finally receive forgiveness from God. He was trying, as do many today, to cleanse his conscience by good works. He*

*was ignorant of the righteousness that comes to us from God through Christ. He was ignorant of the fact that our sin must be judged by God before it can be forgiven.*

*It was in the midst of this searching that Dennis started coming to a Bible study on Romans in my home. We had carefully and thoughtfully worked our way through the first two chapters and then launched into the third. We had seen the awful catalogue of man's depravity as Paul has depicted it in verses 10 to 18, and then we had come to the shatter-ing conclusion of verse 20: 'For no human being will be justified in his [God's] sight by works of the law, since through the law comes the knowledge of sin' (RSV). Dennis was devastated by this discovery. How then could he be justified if all that he had ever done was of no avail at the bar of God's justice? How could he be right with God? How could he ever be forgiven?*

*The very next verse came as a thunderclap that shook Dennis to the core. 'But now the righteousness of God has been manifested'. I recall emphasising rather dramatically the two words 'BUT NOW!' Dennis jumped. Suddenly he saw God's way. He saw what he had never seen before—that salvation is entirely of God's gracious initiative and that we can only ever be righteous in his sight by means of that gift which comes to us from the hand of the Father in the person and work of Christ. Light flooded into Dennis's understanding in that moment as the truth of Christ's righteousness burst upon him. I'll never forget the look of utter amazement and delight that shone in his face that day as faith was born!*

*Dennis's legalism evaporated that afternoon and all*

*his self-justifying ‘dead works’ were soon abandoned. Instead, he went on strongly in his understanding and appropriation of grace. He knew now that God’s way of forgiveness was through the sacrifice of Christ’s blood shed at the Cross and that as faith takes hold of this gift, so a person stands righteous in God’s sight. His preaching, teaching and song-writing all conveyed this wonderful truth as he began to mature in the faith. Of course, Dennis was the first to admit that he had periods where all this would go out of focus and that grace and forgiveness and righteousness would seem to be a million miles away. But never for long, because Dennis had come to know that ultimately there is no other way!*

## **QUESTIONS**

1. What was the purpose of the Old Testament sacrifices? How did they bring peace to the conscience of the offerer? Did these sacrifices in fact take away their sin? Can you support your view from Scripture?
2. In what way did the Old Testament sacrifices point to Christ? What does 1 Peter 1:10–11 tell us about the perspective of the Old Testament believers?
3. What do these verses tell you about Christ and what he has done for us on the Cross? 1 Corinthians 5:7; 1 Peter 1:18–19; Revelation 5:6–12.
4. How does Revelation 13:8 cast light on the truth that God’s way of forgiveness has always been the same?

How does this verse help you understand the Old Testament sacrifices?

5. Why is the shedding of blood so significant to God's way of forgiving us? What do the following verses indicate? John 6:53–58; Acts 20:28; Romans 3:23–25; Ephesians 1:7; 2:13; Colossians 1:20; 1 John 1:7; Revelation 1:5.
6. What was the mistake the Wesleys, Whitefield and Dennis made in their early search for God?
7. Why is the principle of propitiation so significant in God's way of forgiving us?
8. Explain why must there be a judgment of our sin before we can be forgiven by God?

## What Happened on the Cross?

To most people the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross is irrelevant. To others it is a great mystery. Few understand what happened when he died. Many think it was just a terrible tragedy or at least a gross miscarriage of justice. Few comprehend why Jesus *had* to die. Few understand what was going on when he hung on that Cross. So, ask yourself the questions: ‘What really happened on that Cross? What has his death got to do with me?’

It’s imperative that we understand as clearly as we can what Jesus did when he died on the Cross ‘for us’. Of course, by ‘the Cross’, I mean his death *and* resurrection, for one without the other is meaningless.

*I can recall—as if it was only yesterday—sitting in a Christian youth fellowship meeting at the Pennant Hills Scouts Hall in the mid-50s (before I had come to faith in Christ) listening to someone talking about the death of Jesus. I can remember thinking at the time: ‘What has this to do with me? What relevance has the death of some Jewish man on a cross some 1,950*

*years ago got to do with me today?’ I could not make head nor tail of this so-called ‘Gospel’—it made no sense to me at all. I could not see what had happened on that Cross, nor could I see any point in it for modern Man —let alone for me personally.*

There are probably lots of people today who think as I did. I remember John Chapman saying that he went to church for years and unthinkingly recited the words of the Creed each Sunday: ‘Jesus Christ . . . was crucified, dead and buried. He descended into hell. The third day he rose again from the dead.’ But it was not until someone asked him the very personal question, ‘Do you know that Jesus died for *you*?’ that he came to faith. Like John, I had been a churchgoer from my earliest days and had recited that same Creed for years. But the personal implications of the Cross and what it meant never dawned on me until someone posed a similar, direct question to me: ‘Have you ever received the forgiveness that Christ won for you on the Cross?’

In the previous chapters we have looked at the terrible ‘tyrants’ which hold Man in their grip by virtue of our guilt. We are all caught in the snare of these powerful enemies and we have seen that there is no possibility of self-release. We are incapable of extricating ourselves from their clutches. Unless God intervenes and acts on our behalf, then we are doomed. In his eyes we are all unholy, unrighteous, idolatrous, condemned sinners deserving nothing but his wrath. We have failed completely to be the persons he created us to be. Our defiance of him and our ongoing determination as a race to ‘go it alone’ and ‘do our own thing’ are totally unacceptable to our Creator. We stand under the indictment of his law and are subject to his personal

wrath. How then does Christ's death on the Cross and subsequent resurrection relate to this terrible plight of Man?

### **THE CROSS PIVOTAL IN HUMAN HISTORY**

In a very real sense God placed the Cross of Christ in the very centre of history. Those before that event looked forward to it (though not understanding clearly what was going to happen)—whereas we look back to it. The coming of Christ was according to God's perfect plan and therefore according to his perfect timing:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law (Gal. 4:4).

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly (Rom. 5:6).

The questions we need to answer are 'Why did he die on that Cross?' and 'What actually happened when he died and rose again?' The fact is, the Scriptures are very clear about what happened when Jesus died on the Cross and how that event is pivotal to our release from these terrible tyrants. We saw in the last chapter that the Old Testament prophets spoke of this coming Messiah who would take away sin—this great happening being foreshadowed by the sacrifices and the shedding of blood for the remission of sin. Then with the coming of Christ, the New Testament states very clearly God's intention and the purpose of the Cross:

[Jesus said] ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me *to proclaim release to the captives* and recovery of sight to the blind, *to let the oppressed go free*, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour . . . Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’ (Luke 4:18–19, 21).

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him *may not perish but may have eternal life* (John 3:16).

For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and *to give his life a ransom for many* (Mark 10:45).

He [Jesus] has appeared once for all at the end of the age *to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself* (Heb. 9:26b).

[Jesus] whom God put forward as *a sacrifice of atonement* by his blood, effective through faith (Rom. 3:25).

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

Back in the Old Testament it is stated clearly what Jesus was going to do—even though it speaks of it as having already happened!

Surely he [Jesus] has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, *and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all* (Isa. 53:4–6).

There it is! Do you see it? ‘The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all!’ When Jesus died on the Cross he was

carrying our sins in his body—just as Peter says: ‘He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross’ (1 Pet. 2:24).

### **CHRIST BORE OUR SINS**

Because we are sinners and are therefore subjectively involved in our failures, we find it impossible to fully comprehend what it means for someone else to bear our sins for us. It must mean that all those elements of sin (such as its guilt) which hold us in their power and which adversely impact on our lives were taken up by Jesus on that

Cross. It must also mean that all the penalty and judgment and condemnation which our sin deserves were taken by him. It must also mean that God’s anger and wrath which our sin rightly attracts were absorbed by Jesus on our behalf. It must mean that all our failure to obey God’s righteous law was taken up by Jesus and worked out on that Cross. It must mean that all the accusations which Satan and his hosts bring against us were taken by him on the Cross. It must mean that every enemy which we face and which can hold us has been dealt with by the Son of God as he became what we are, as he died on that Cross.

More than all these elements, it must mean that *sin itself*, that very principle of sin which permeates our race (and our own being as a fallen human), was taken by Christ as he suffered as a man for all humanity on that Cross. Paul puts it this way: ‘For our sake he [God] made him [Jesus] *to be sin* who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God’ (2 Cor. 5:21). And Peter tells us that he bore our sins to exhaustion,

extinction, obliteration—‘For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God’ (1 Pet. 3:18).

Geoffrey Bingham says: ‘We cannot escape the fact *he actually became our evil*, although he himself had never committed evil'.<sup>1</sup> On the Cross, Jesus took up into himself all that we are as fallen creatures. He became our sin. He became our guilt. He suffered our shame. He suffered our pollution. He carried our evil. All those things that would burden our conscience, Jesus suffered. All that troubles our mind, pierces our heart, haunts our memory, paralyses our will, *he became that*. On the Cross, Jesus became all that is *us*. He became everything that we *are* as sinners.

Let me put this to you in more personal and direct terms: in one total, overall, final, comprehensive act on that Cross, Jesus Christ became who and what *you* are. He became what you have done, and what you have been. He became all that you really are, and nothing less than that. Jesus became all that you are in the eyes of a holy, wrathful, judging God. On that Cross he became *you* in the sight of God. Jesus bore in his body on that Tree all the sin by which, and because of which, you would have been destroyed. Jesus suffered not as God, but as a man, until in his agony, and in his separation, and in his intense suffering, he cried out: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Matt. 27:46b).

The separation from God which you and I should have experienced, Jesus experienced. The death we should have died, he died. The judgment with which we should have been judged, he was judged. That holy wrath of God against our sin was poured out on Jesus as our substitute,

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<sup>1</sup> Bingham, *Christ's Cross over Man's Abyss*, p. 31.

and he absorbed it in our place:

All the shame, the pain, the burden, the loneliness, the filth and pollution—that is, the whole nature of sin—is what he bore in his body. Hence the curse was played out to its appointed end, and thus was exhausted and obliterated. Every searing pang of the evil conscience became the experience of his own pure conscience, until all was encapsulated and destroyed. Nothing escaped the white fire of his purity and the ruthlessness of his love.<sup>2</sup>

We are told in Isaiah 52:14 that on the Cross, Jesus was so marred and disfigured that he was not recognisable as truly human. That image of God in Man had totally gone out of sight. Instead, that loathsome being which he became on the Cross was *you and me imaged in him*. God had laid on him not just the punishment of our sin, *but the sin itself*. All the elements and components of our sin were upon Jesus and were him. *He was made not only to bear our sin but to be our sin.*

### **NOTHING FURTHER NEEDS TO BE DONE!**

Dear reader, know with assurance that there was nothing of you, or of your sin, your guilt, your fear or your inferiority which Jesus did not bear. He took all your shame, all your duplicity, all your resentment, all your bitterness, all your hurts, all your hatred and all your anger. Jesus has absorbed all your lust, your bondage, your idolatry, your insecurity, your selfishness and all your disobedience. He has suffered your emotional

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<sup>2</sup> Bingham, *Christ's Cross over Man's Abyss*, p. 56.

traumas, your mental torments, your rage and your self-despising.

***There is nothing of any of this which Jesus Christ did not take up into himself on that Cross and judge.***

Dr David Seamands once said of Christ's death on the Cross: 'It was on that Cross that God saw you at your worst, and it was on that Cross that he loved you the most'.<sup>3</sup>

[Jesus] the Son of God, who loved *me* and gave himself for *me* (Gal. 2:20b).

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God (1 Pet. 3:18).

Jesus suffered on the Cross—bearing the full weight of our guilt and sin—in order that we might be brought into a right relationship with the Father. Jesus has done all that is needed in order that we might now be free! On that Cross there has been a total judgment of our sin. There, God's wrath was poured out and fully expended and exhausted. There, his holiness was perfectly vindicated once and for all. There, his justice was wholly satisfied and met. There, all the demands of the law were fulfilled totally and finally by the beloved Son. Only at the Cross is there forgiveness and release for the accusations of the human conscience. Only through the Cross can that condemnation which lies over us be removed—and removed forever! Because of that Cross God can now look upon us as being 'in Christ'. *We are as he is.* How the Father sees his Son is how he sees us:

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<sup>3</sup> Seamands, sermon on tape.

Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, *because as he [Jesus] is, so are we in this world* (1 John 4:17).

This means that since the Son is guiltless before the Father, so too are we—because we are in him. The Son is perfectly righteous, so too are we—because we are in him. The Son is totally accepted by the Father, so too are we—because we are in him. Because there is no judgment hanging over him, so there is no longer any judgment hanging over us.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are *in Christ Jesus* (Rom. 8:1).

All this is an accomplished fact as far as God is concerned. When Jesus hung on that Cross and had completed his work of atonement on our behalf, he cried out: '*It is finished*' (John 19:30). We may know now for certain that it is a completed work. Our sin has been taken away entirely and we are now free. As far as God is concerned, ***nothing further needs to be done!***

Thus Christ has done all things. He has borne the penalty of sin in the form of the curse and the wrath. He has satisfied the just demands of the law. He has wrested the satanic weapon of the fear of death, and has substituted the deliverance of love. He has revealed the Father in the work of the Cross, and drawn man to sonship. Nothing has been left undone.<sup>4</sup>

‘Man of Sorrows,’ wondrous name  
For the Son of God, who came  
Ruined sinners to reclaim!  
Hallelujah! what a Saviour!

Bearing shame and scoffing rude,

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<sup>4</sup> Bingham, *Christ's Cross over Man's Abyss*, p. 81.

In my place condemned He stood,  
Sealed my pardon with His blood:  
Hallelujah! what a Saviour!

Guilty, vile, and helpless we:  
Spotless Lamb of God was He:  
'Full atonement!'—can it be?  
Hallelujah! what a Saviour!  
'Lifted up' was He to die,  
'It is finished' was His cry;  
Now in heaven exalted high:  
Hallelujah! what a Saviour!

When He comes, our glorious King,  
All His ransomed home to bring,  
Then anew this song we'll sing,  
Hallelujah! what a Saviour!<sup>5</sup>

*The service was over and Angela was at the rear of the church, defiantly perched on the back of one of the pews. She had not liked my sermon on justification and didn't mind telling me so! 'What right have you tell me how to live?' I had known Angela since she was a small girl and witnessed her many spiritual ups and downs. But in the following months she slowly seemed to come to faith and began to take an interest in studying the Scriptures. It was when she was in her late teens that she came into one of my Sunday study groups.*

*Many years later I was sharing these forgiveness talks with a group of folk at my home each Monday night. Among these were Angela and her husband. Several weeks after I had given this particular study on What happened on the Cross? I had to go overseas on a business trip. When I arrived at my lodgings after*

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<sup>5</sup> Philip P. Bliss, *New Creation Hymn Book*, no. 73.

*a long plane flight there was a letter waiting for me. It was from Angela.*

*Dear John,*

*All these years I have been reading the Bible with other people's sin in mind and all the wrong things that 'they out there' do. Not me. I don't think I ever once really truly and honestly knew that all the terrible things the Bible says about sin were referring to my sin and to me. Crazy really. So much self-justification and arrogant dismissal. And never then fully seeing and experiencing God's wonderful freely-flowing forgiveness, which I am now seeing and experiencing and believing for the first time in my life.*

*The seriousness of the Cross denotes the seriousness of my sin and my sinfulness. I don't know what I thought before, but it was terribly wrong and off-beam. People used to say that I had a big problem forgiving people, and also that they thought I had a deficient view of God's forgiveness. They were right. But it wasn't that I didn't believe God had forgiven me, it was that I didn't believe I really needed God's forgiveness. I wasn't all that bad. I was a converted Christian, so what was all the fuss about?*

*It wasn't until I saw just recently that when God forsook Jesus on the Cross, it was because He forsook me. It was my sin and my sinfulness that God looked at in hatred and judgment and then turned away. The anguish of Jesus' rejection was what I deserve to feel every day of my life. I had never felt that anguish before now. But I know that if I ever felt a part of what He felt that day, it would kill me, just as it killed Him. But to understand what went on in the process of the Cross is amazing. It's changed my entire life and thinking, and most especially my reading and understanding of the Scriptures. I now read Romans 1 and no longer place it at arm's length and think of 'all those naughty non-Christians out there'. I read it and insert my name, and see myself for the first time as God sees me: how He saw me before my conversion and how He sees me now.*

*What a shock it was to realise that Jesus had to die because I was so disgustingly sinful and needed saving! A repulsive*

*thought! And now I know it's true. Every last sin I must own.  
And a state of sinfulness before a holy God I must own. And  
then His full forgiveness I must own. I am now liberated to  
fully forgive as never before and, for the first time, know His  
full forgiveness as deep as my heart goes.*

John Chapman illustrates what happened on the Cross by comparing it to a magnifying glass. A magnifying glass can concentrate the rays of the sun onto one focused spot and thus start a massive blaze. John refers to the Cross as God's great *moral* magnifying glass in which all the accumulated sins of the whole world were focused onto just one man—Jesus Christ. He bore in his body at that point of time all that vast mass of human guilt and evil when he died on the Cross. Everything that Man has ever been and ever done was focussed and concentrated on him.

So, what did Christ do on that Cross? What were the elements of that great happening? Several distinct aspects of his death can be nominated although they are all of the one in the end.

### **Propitiation**

Christ diverted the wrath of God from us to himself. That terrible wrath against our sin for violating his law was absorbed by the Son in our place:

[Christ] Whom God hath set forth [to be] a propitiation through faith in his blood (Rom. 3:25, AV).

And he [Christ] is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for [the sins of] the whole world (1 John 2:2, AV).

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

Reg Hanlon speaks of the wrath of God being poured out on Man's sin and he uses the biblical word 'propitiation' to describe that wrath being 'burned up' by Christ when he died on the Cross. He gives an illustration of what happened:

There was a country town under threat from a huge, advancing bushfire where the residents had no time to escape. Then one of the townsfolk deliberately lit a fire in the path of the rapidly approaching inferno so that there was soon a burned-out area between them and the bushfire. He urged everyone to come and stand in the area already burned by the smaller fire. 'Stand where the fire has burned and you will be saved.' So it is that the fire of God's wrath has burned on that Cross and is the only place of safety. We must learn to stand 'where the fire has already burned'<sup>16</sup>

Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God (Rom. 5:9).

. . . Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming  
(1 Thess. 1:10b).

What happened on the Cross? *Christ became the propitiation for our sins.*

### **Redemption**

Christ has bought us back (so to speak) by giving himself as a ransom for our sin. He has purchased us at the cost of his own life—given in sacrifice for our debt of

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<sup>16</sup> Reg Hanlon, sermon at St Paul's Chatswood, 28th June 1998.

sin. It is the means by which our salvation has been achieved:

For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

[Jesus] who gave himself a ransom for all—this was attested at the right time (1 Tim. 2:6).

[Believers] are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:24).

He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us . . . (Titus 2:14a).

No word in the Christian vocabulary deserves to be held more precious than Redeemer, for even more than Saviour it reminds the child of God that his salvation has been purchased at a great and personal cost, for the Lord has given himself for our sins in order to deliver us from them.<sup>7</sup>

For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body (1 Cor. 6:20).

What happened on the Cross? *Christ became our Redeemer.*

### **Atonement**

Atonement literally means ‘to make at one’. Christ has redeemed us by becoming sin for us, thus making us one with God once again. His blood was poured out in our place, and that substitutionary sacrifice of himself has atoned for our evil so that our estrangement with God can

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<sup>7</sup> Everett F. Harrison, ‘Redeemer, Redemption’, in *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Everett F. Harrison, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1960, p. 439.

be healed:

For our sake he [God] made him [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).

Therefore he [Christ] had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people (Heb. 2:17).

What happened on the Cross? *Christ atoned for our sins.*

### **Forgiveness**

Since our guilt has been fully and finally dealt with by Christ, then the Father can extend to us his total forgiveness. There has been a judgment on our sin, and thus there is now no ground for God remembering our iniquities:

. . . I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more (Jer. 31:34b).

All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name (Acts 10:43).

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace (Eph. 1:7).

What happened on the Cross? *Christ brought us into full forgiveness of our sins.*

### **Justification**

By his death, he has justified us for our failure to be the true creatures that God intended us to be in his image.

The law's demands have been fulfilled in him. Believers are now 'just' in God's eyes. In other words, he counts us as being righteous because of Christ's finished work on the Cross and his resurrection from the dead. If there had been no resurrection, then there would be no proof that his death has accomplished anything! He was raised for our justification:

[Jesus] who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification (Rom. 4:25).

Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all (Rom. 5:18).

And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified (Rom. 8:30).

What happened on the Cross? *Christ brought us justification. We are now 'right' with respect to God's law.*

### **Reconciliation**

By his atonement, redemption, propitiation, justification and forgiveness, Christ has restored us to a right relationship with the Father. We have now been brought back into the family of God as his blood-bought sons and daughters. This is the ultimate goal and intention of all that God has done through his Son:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18).

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace [reconciliation] with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:1).

But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (Rom. 5:11).

What happened on the Cross? *Christ reconciled us to the Father and brought us back into his family.*

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Let me conclude by quoting the summary Geoffrey Bingham gives of our response to the work of Christ on the Cross:

- Let no man again bear a sorrow. They have been borne.
- Let no man bear within himself any pain or hurt. He, the Son, has borne these so that we bear them no more.
- Let no man be angry, much less angry unto death. He has been to death for the angers of man.
- Let no man say, ‘This is injustice which lacerates my soul’. His soul was lacerated with all the injustice of all men for all time. Let all men be free of such anger and indignation.
- Let no man say, ‘I am unloved’. Such love, such grand compassion, is there in the Cross to meet the needs of all men in all time. Be loved, and so love.
- Let no man say, ‘I am wounded. I bear the terrible wounds and scars of man’s hardness, his cruelty, his anger’. Understand that by his wounds our wounds are healed. The grace and love of the Cross takes away even the scars. Let no man glory in his scars that were, but in the wounds of the Cross, which heal.
- Let no man say, ‘There is no balm in Gilead’, for he, the Suffering One, *is himself* the balm of Gilead.
- Let no man say, ‘Ah, but my sin is too enormous to be forgiven, too vile to be cleansed, too dreadful to be borne away’. Hear tell that it is the enormity, the vileness, and the dreadful

nature of it that his love delighted to forgive, to cleanse, to bear away, no matter what the pain it required so to do. Hear his words, ‘Son, be of good cheer—your sins are forgiven you’.

- Let no man say, ‘There is no love for me’. His great love has embraced you in the hours of the Cross. He first entered into you, and then drew you into him, and on the Cross he prayed, and paid your debts, and loosed you. He defeated the powers that bound you, and he became Lord over all for his sufferings,  
that he might protect and guard you to your life’s end, and so present you to the Father in glory.<sup>8</sup>

## QUESTIONS

1. Why did Jesus *have* to die? Was it inevitable? Was it indispensable?
2. What is meant by the statement: ‘He not only bore our sin but was made to be our sin’?
3. Was Angela right in saying that Jesus was actually *forsaken* by God when he hung on the Cross? What really happened? Who or what was ‘forsaken’ when he died on that Cross? What is the implication for us?
4. How does Jesus’ death on the Cross bring us into a right relationship with God?
5. If Jesus has taken all your guilt and sin into himself on the Cross, and you trust in that fact, is there anything for which you are still unforgiven? Support your answer from Scripture.

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<sup>8</sup> Bingham, *Christ’s Cross over Man’s Abyss*, pp. 95–6.

6. What does this passage from Luke 11:21–22 mean?  
‘When a strong man, fully armed, guards his castle, his property is safe. But when one stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his plunder.’ Who is the strong man? Who is the stronger man? Who or what are the goods? What is the armour that is taken away?
7. In what way is the death of Jesus a ‘finished work’? Is it a ‘finished work’ for you? What is the implication for your life?
8. Think about the following statements: ‘No person, pastor, priest or pope can transform a human life, *only the Cross has that power*. No other gospel, god or guru can save us, *only the Cross has that power*. No other medium, message or mediator can rescue us, *only* *the Cross has that power*.’ In the light of modern counselling techniques, how do these statements relate to the Puritan saying: ‘Never meddle with a man’s heart’?

## God's Amazing Grace

We saw in the earlier chapters that our dreadful crime of refusing to be the persons God created us to be has brought an all-pervasive existential guilt upon the whole human race. Every human being is born with that guilt and has to live with its effects in their life. The seriousness of our corporate and individual sin deserves nothing less than death, and that guilt and shame weigh heavily upon us. This innate sense of our unrighteousness in God's eyes is a constant burden to the human conscience—even to those who do not believe in God! The Psalmist expressed it in these words:

Do not enter into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you (Ps. 143:2).

That God did not wipe out Adam and Eve after their defection was an act of sheer mercy on his part, and the fact that he has persevered with us as a race ever since is also entirely of his grace. We dare not deny our guilt, but nor can we afford to be thankless for that grace which did not allow us to be destroyed.

What then is grace? What do we Christians mean when we talk about the 'grace of God'? Believers use this expression all the time, but what does it really mean?

Some say grace is ‘God’s unmerited favour’. But is that an adequate definition? It’s important we understand exactly what the Bible is saying when it uses this word ‘grace’ so often.

### **GOD'S GRACE JUDGES OUR SIN**

We have already seen that there is no way that God can forgive us *just by forgiving*. A Cross is demanded because a *judgment* of our sin is demanded. As the prophet Habakkuk once wrote concerning God: ‘Your eyes are too pure to behold evil, and you cannot look on wrongdoing’ (Hab. 1:13a). In other words, God cannot look on our sin without judging it—sin is inflammable in the presence of the white hot flame of God’s holiness.

That all-consuming judgment took place when Christ died on the Cross. The astounding event of the Cross comes to us as God’s greatest act of kindness and love in all history. By it, he has provided the way of escape when we deserved and merited precisely the opposite. That is why the Good News concerning the Cross of Christ can rightly be called ‘the Gospel of the grace of God’. Grace is therefore that extraordinary action of God’s love as he moves towards sinful and rebellious Mankind to do us good when we deserved nothing but judgment, condemnation and everlasting exclusion from his presence. And what’s more, he did so when we refused to ask him, refused to seek him and refused to call on his name!

I was ready to be sought out by those *who did not ask*, to be found by those *who did not seek me*. I said, ‘Here I am, here I am,’ to a nation that *did not call on my name* (Isa. 65:1).

Paul makes the statement in Romans that we have all ‘fallen short’ in the matter of reflecting his glorious likeness. We were created in his image and ought to have mirror-imaged all that he is as a God of holiness, love, truth, righteousness and goodness. In other words, we were made to reflect his glory. That glory would then have been *our* ‘glory’ as true humans. Since none are exempt from this self-wrought loss of moral splendour, the only way for us to be rescued and restored is for *God himself to justify and redeem us*. This is exactly what he has done through his Son Jesus Christ as a pure grace-gift:

... since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his **grace** as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus . . . (Rom. 3:23–24).

It is imperative we understand that God’s forgiveness of our sin (both as a race and as persons) is nothing less than a gift of his sheer grace. It is all of his mercy. It is his love in action. It is never warranted nor do we ever merit it. In one sense he did not have to do it, but in another sense his love for us *compelled* him to do it. Either way, forgiveness comes to us out of his extraordinary kindness.

The following passages speak of this amazing grace:

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man’s trespass [Adam’s], much more surely have the **grace** of God and the free gift in the **grace** of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many (Rom. 5:15).

If, because of the one man’s trespass [Adam’s], death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of **grace** and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:17).

For you know the generous act [**grace**] of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9).

For the **grace** of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all (Titus 2:11).

This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his **grace**, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life (Titus 3:6–7).

### **GRACE PLANNED SALVATION BEFORE TIME**

This gift of justification and forgiveness was lovingly planned by God on our behalf before creation. Before the world began he wonderfully purposed to salvage us and bring us to a knowledge of himself and to draw us into his family as his blood-bought sons and daughters. There is no question whatever of us having any hand in any of this. It is all of God's grace. Let's be clear on this matter, he did not just make salvation 'available' to those who might choose to receive it, he *effected* salvation for his elect and he applies it to them in his own good time:

[God] who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and **grace**. This **grace** was *given* to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began (2 Tim. 1:9).

... he destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious **grace** that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his **grace** that he lavished on us (Eph. 1:5–8).

But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and

called me through his **grace**, was pleased to reveal his Son to me . . . (Gal. 1:15–16).

So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by **grace**. But if it is by **grace**, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be **grace** (Rom. 11:5–6).

Professor Bruce comments on this wonderful truth of God's great grace being the source and foundation of our faith:

Our salvation springs solely from God's grace and is appropriated by us through faith alone. Not that our faith *merits* the salvation in any way; it is simply the faculty by which we accept the salvation that God's free grace has procured for us.<sup>1</sup>

Paul reminds us that apart from God sovereignly acting on us by his Spirit we remain spiritually dead. Even faith itself (our ability to believe God's word) is his gift of grace to us! Unless he first brings us to life and enables us to receive the truth and accept what he says as being true, then we would not believe and could never be saved:

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by **grace** you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his **grace** in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by **grace** you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life (Eph. 2:4–10).

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<sup>1</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians; A Verse-by-Verse Exposition*, Pickering & Inglis, London, 1974, p. 51.

It is only God's grace which relieves us of our deepest of human problems—*existential guilt*. So long as we are in our guilt we will always be insecure. We will always reject God. We will always be at enmity with him. This means we will always be exposed to and susceptible to idolatry. We will always be wanting to justify ourselves to God, to others and to ourselves. We will still be suffering under the penalty of our sin and subject to God's wrath. But as the grace of God opens to us and we begin by faith to realise that we have been forgiven through the blood of the Cross, so our guilt with its self-justifying dead works will evaporate. Unless God had acted in grace on our behalf at the Cross there would no foundation for such faith.

Many Christians come to faith and are overwhelmed by his grace and love at the time of their conversion. But slowly they drift from grace. Their Christian life becomes a duty that must be performed, a life that must be lived out of one's own resources—in one's own strength, so to speak. But the same grace that brought us to faith in the first place must be the grace in which we live every moment of every day. As I noted in the Preface, that reality burst in upon me with great joy and thankfulness—though many years after my actual conversion to Christ. I came to see my release from guilt through the grace of God only after years of pain and struggle in trying to 'live the Christian life' out of my own resources. I knew the Lord during that time, but I did not understand that everything in life flows out of God's grace. I had never been taught up to that point that I needed to learn to rest each day in the grace of the Lord and to be at peace in him.

## LIVING IN GRACE EACH DAY

This means that God's great and glorious grace must become the air we breathe and the sunlight in which we live each moment of the day. We have to see that all that God gives to us is of grace alone and that each day our experience and certainty of his love and forgiveness is pure gift. The moment we drift from grace, we will find ourselves back into a law-works routine, together with a return of the old misery of guilt. It is not just a question of us needing to be constantly *reminded* of grace. Rather it is a matter

of *standing* in grace and of *living* daily in grace and of *depending* every moment on grace. The early church understood the grace of God. They knew that '*it was the factor upon which they could count all the time, i.e. that activity of God which kept them secure, protected them, and enabled them to live the new life into which they had come*'.<sup>2</sup>

Of ourselves we have nothing to offer God. As Christians we have to see that: 'Our righteousness is as little ours individually as the sin of Christ was His'.<sup>3</sup> We stand right now accepted by God only because we have been given, as a free gift, the pure robe of the righteousness of Christ himself.

*I was talking one day with a pastor about grace. I put to him that I assumed he would give his blood for the doctrine of grace. Yes, he agreed, the doctrine of grace was at the heart of all that he believed as an evangelical. I then asked him why he did not preach*

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<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *Great and Glorious Grace*, p. 137.

<sup>3</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, p. 84.

*grace? He was puzzled. What did I mean? I suggested that he preached a contractual gospel, not a gospel of grace. No matter what he said he believed about grace it nevertheless came across to his listeners as contract. His teaching and preaching all conveyed the message that we have to do 'our part' in the matter of faith and life. He was horrified. He found it hard to credit that his words and actions conveyed an entirely different message to what he thought he believed.*

This example illustrates the fact that we can think we know grace when in fact we do not. We can maintain a *doctrine* of grace and yet not know grace as a living reality day

by day. We can adhere passionately to the great principle of grace and know the relevant Scriptures but, at the same time, deny grace by the way we live and by what we say. Sadly, many Christians have fallen into this deadly trap.

We desperately need to learn to live in God's grace every moment of every day. That means we must learn to quit relying on our own ability to live life and quit doing things independently of God. We will no longer assume we are able to accomplish tasks, arrive at goals, discern needs, maintain our equilibrium, handle crisis, apply wisdom, work at our vocations or be a somebody in life. That is the world's way of thinking. All that self-dependence and self-reliance must be abandoned by the believer.

We must come to the point where we see that God never designed us to be able to function apart from him empowering us in every detail of daily living. We were *made* to be totally dependent on him! That means the wonderful facilities and capacities and abilities he has given each of us as humans are all now exercised under

his superintendence—as he intended from the beginning. We defer to him in all that we do. We ask his direction, we seek his wisdom, we consult with him in our decisions, we seek his guidance. This means the Christian ought to be functioning each day in the ordinary affairs of living *as if in God's very presence*.

There is a wonderful release in discovering this biblical principle! It means we do not have to ‘arrive’ anywhere, as such. We are in Christ and have already ‘arrived’ in him. What he is, that’s what we are. Where he is, that’s where we are. *Our true identity is now entirely in him.* That means we can relax and be at rest by simply working through the tasks and responsibilities each day *in the grace of God* and as he leads. He promises to sustain us. That means he will enable us and empower us. His Spirit will supply all our needs. More and more we will learn to trust his wisdom as our wisdom. More and more we will defer to his thoughts as being our thoughts. We will learn to look to his goals so as to make them our goals. As a result, what he intends for us to achieve in life is what he will enable us to do, no more, no less. He is our Lord.

As we grow in our practice of these principles of living in the Spirit, day by day we will learn more and more to be in submission to Christ. We will discover what Jesus meant when he said that apart from him we can do nothing (John 15:5). We will begin to see that anything we try to do independently from his enabling grace will amount to nothing in the final scheme of things.

Is this all some ‘ideal’ that we ought to aim at but which we really have no hope of ever achieving? Is this some impossible life that might be achieved by some very ‘spiritual’ believers, but which is unattainable by

most? Absolutely not. God intends that all his sons and daughters be pressing on in the high calling they have received in Christ. This is not an optional extra. Does this mean we will never fail? Of course not! We will often go down and perhaps feel discouraged. But we get up and go on, knowing that we are still in the grace of God—no matter what.

The point is, we are new creations and by God's grace he enables us to do and be what was not possible before we came into new life. If we do not constantly keep this perspective in the forefront of our thinking, then it will indeed seem like some impossible goal that can never be attained. No, the Bible speaks very plainly about what God has made us to be as his new creations and he expects us to be what we are! That's what the life of faith is all about. That's what obedience to Christ is all about. That's what Christian discipleship is all about. Of ourselves, it is all too hard. Left to our own resources, it is indeed impossible. But viewed in the light of God's grace, it is not only possible to live as God intended, but also imperative that we learn to do so.

## **GRACE STARVES THE EGO**

In all this we have to face the fact that grace starves our ego. We don't like to admit that we are totally dependent upon our Creator to save us, redeem us, establish our righteousness, grant us true life and to bring us into reconciliation through the remission of our sins. Nor do we like to think that we are utterly powerless ever to do anything good that has lasting moral value apart from the operation of his grace as he works in us, through us and for us by his Spirit. We are humiliated by this revelation

of our impotence. Reformer John Calvin once wrote:

. . . no good can ever be extracted from our heart until it is made altogether new, let us not attempt to share with Him what He claims for Himself alone . . . everything good in the will is entirely the result of grace . . . If any, even the minutest, ability were in ourselves, there would also be some merit.<sup>4</sup>

Martin Luther put it this way:

If the source of grace is the predestinating purpose of God, then it comes by necessity, and not by any effort or endeavour on our

part . . . grace comes so freely, that no thought of it, and certainly no endeavour or desire after it, precedes its coming.<sup>5</sup>

However, once we see that we are utterly impotent and that grace is all, and all is grace, then a true peace and liberty will flood our heart. As we discover God's grace, so we discover our true identity as persons created in his image. Paul discovered this as he wrestled with God over a weakness in his life which he earnestly wished God would take away. But it did not happen. Instead, the Lord simply gave him more grace!

. . . but he said to me, 'My **grace** is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me (2 Cor. 12:9).

The world keeps telling us that we have to be 'strong'. We must not be weak. We must use all our abilities to be

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<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, James Clarke & Co., London, 1962, pp. 255f.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther on *Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnson, James Clarke & Co., London, 1957, pp. 297, 301.

someone in life. We must assert ourselves and arrive! But that is not the Lord's way. He knows that we are incapable of standing alone and that unless we draw all our resources from him we will sooner or later collapse. It is in our very 'weakness' that Christ's strength is manifested. That's when we really begin to accomplish things in life—through his grace and not by means of our unaided 'natural' abilities or capacities. We would save ourselves so much pain, so many breakdowns, so much ill-health, if we would but learn to rest in the grace of God moment by moment each day.

Of course, this is not to say that grace is just some power or a commodity for us to utilise. Grace is not like some auxiliary engine that can be cranked up to augment our own source of strength and power. No, grace is never separate from God himself. *Grace is the Father in action.* Grace is in fact God himself coming to us to do us good. It is through Christ the Lord, and by his Spirit, that the Father has worked in our lives to redeem us. It is by the grace of God that we have come into new life and are now being sustained and kept. It is God who is doing it all. Nor is it up to us to maintain our relationship with him. No, it is God's grace that sustains and maintains and keeps *us*! '[We] never have a moment of life in which we are not dependent upon grace.'<sup>6</sup> This means that the whole process of salvation—of us coming to faith and 'lasting it out' to the end—is all God's work:

I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:6).

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<sup>6</sup> Bingham, *Great and Glorious Grace*, p. 68.

## GOD'S GREAT GRACE IS UPON US

No wonder it was said of the early church that ‘great grace was upon them all’ (Acts 4:33). The same is true of us. God’s great grace is upon us, and always has been—though we may never have realised it. There has never been an instant, from the moment of our birth, when we have not been the object of God’s special attention as he has set about to do us good. We may have rejected that ‘good’ for many years, but God was acting in grace towards us nevertheless. Then, at his appointed time, we have woken up to grace. We have come alive to the actions of the Living God as he has brought a revelation of the truth to our mind and understanding. At that point, faith was born and new life flooded into our beings. We were overwhelmed by the grace of God, especially as his forgiveness dawned upon us. When this happens, we are enabled to work harder and more productively than ever—especially in the service of the Gospel. This was Paul’s testimony:

But by the **grace** of God I am what I am, and his **grace** toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the **grace** of God that is with me (1 Cor. 15:10).

This means we ought to take great care not to abuse the grace of God. In other words, God is seeking to work in us and through us all the time. But if we are not careful we can deny that truth and so carry on as if it were not so. We can be diverted by other things, other priorities, other goals. We can be putting our trust in other things, rather than in the Lord. We can become proud and think we can handle certain situations! The following passages speak

of the dangers we can fall into in this regard:

As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain (2 Cor. 6:1).

But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble’ (James 4:6).

Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings; for it is well for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by regulations about food, which have not benefited those who observe them (Heb. 13:9).

See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled (Heb. 12:15).

Every department of our lives must be lived in the light of God’s grace. It is his grace which gives us comfort and good hope for the future:

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope . . . (2 Thess. 2:16 ).

It is in his grace that we must learn to be strong:

You then, my child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus . . . (2 Tim. 2:1).

It is through his grace that we come boldly in prayer to the Father. It is his throne of grace, for there we receive yet more grace!

Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:16).

What a wonder is God’s grace!

**QUESTIONS**

1. What is grace in the way the Bible talks about it? Try to define grace by using illustrations out of your experience of God's actions in your life.
2. Why is God's judgment of our sin at the Cross a great act of his grace?
3. How is the forgiveness of our sin related to God's grace?
4. What is meant by the saying: 'All is grace and grace is all'?
5. Is there ever an occasion when we are outside God's grace? Give reasons for your answer.
6. Is God's grace 'amazing' to you? If not, why might this be the case?
7. In what way are we dependent upon God's grace every moment of every day?
8. How does our need for an entire dependence upon God's grace relate to the gifts, abilities and talents that each of us have?
9. What does it mean to be 'weak' in order that the power of God may be seen in us? Illustrate this from daily experiences.

## Realised Forgiveness

In Romans chapter 5 we are told that God's grace has abounded towards us through Jesus Christ. It has been poured out upon us—it has overflowed towards us and flooded us. The depth of our sin and guilt and failure only show all the more the depths to which God's grace and love have gone at the Cross in order to forgive us and constitute us righteous. Romans 6 builds on this and teaches us that what God has said he has done we are to take up and believe. We are to believe that Christ's finished work on the Cross is true for us personally. We are to act on it in a personal way. We are to reckon or count on the fact that what God says, *is so*.

### **OUR UNION WITH CHRIST**

It is because of what God has done that we are not to go on in sin. We have died to sin. That is: God counts Christ's death legally as our death. Thus, our death to sin is *a death to the guilt of sin*, and our baptism into Christ is a union with him in his death and resurrection. The moment we came in faith to Christ we were plunged into Christ and became a sharer of all that he is. He is now our

sphere, he is our standing and all that he is and does we are and do. In exactly the same way in which all that Adam did and became we did and became, so too all that Christ did and became we have done and have become. In other words, we are saved in exactly the same way in which we were lost—*by the action of another*.

Our union with Christ means that we share not only his death but also his resurrection. As far as God is concerned we died legally when Christ died and we rose legally when he rose. Because we are ‘in Christ’, his resurrection life is to pulsate through us. That is, we have no need to go on in sin as we did before. We now have Christ’s righteousness. *We now have his life in us.* His right standing before God is ours. Christ’s death and resurrection and our participation in them have this purpose in view: to render our sinful bodies powerless and to liberate us from the slavery of sin.

An important passage is Romans 6:6–7:

We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died [past tense] is freed [justified] from sin.

I am told that there used to be a law in some countries relating to murder which went something like this: ‘Joe Brown, you are accused and convicted by law of this particular crime and the punishment is death’. The very day that Joe Brown died it was written in the statute book: *THIS DAY JOE BROWN WAS JUSTIFIED*. In other words, the law had nothing more to say to Joe Brown in regard to that particular crime. The law was fully satisfied *because Joe Brown had died!* As far as the law was concerned Joe Brown was now ‘just’ in its eyes because all its demands had been met and he could not

die again!

### **IN CHRIST WE HAVE DIED**

This is exactly what has happened to us through Christ. In him, the believer has died to the demands of the moral law. ‘In him’ we have died to its penalty and curse. That means the law has nothing more to say to us—not because we haven’t broken the law and not because we are not guilty, but because Christ has fulfilled the law on our behalf.

The penalty has been served out. This means the law can no longer accuse us because of our past failures. We are acquitted. We are justified. It is just-as-if-I’d never sinned!

Now suppose Joe Brown could somehow have risen from the grave and walked the streets once again. Could a policeman have arrested him for that crime for which he died? No, not legally. He might intimidate Joe Brown, he might threaten him and he might try to bring him back into fear of the law. But in reality, as far as the law was concerned, Joe Brown had died. And that was that!

### **IN CHRIST WE HAVE BEEN RAISED**

Once again, that is exactly what has happened to us in Christ. We died in him and we have been raised in him. Law can no longer bring any charge against us for those crimes for which we died. When Christ died on that Cross he took us up into himself, and in him we died for every sin we have ever committed. But Christ did not stay dead! He rose from the grave and, in him, we too

have risen. Our new life is now one in which sin and law and death can no longer have authority or power over us. But, just like the policeman in the illustration above, sin and law will go on trying to intimidate us into thinking we are still guilty.

Sad to say, it is because we still *feel* ourselves to be guilty that sin has power over us. This means that any doubt in our minds about our death to the guilt of sin will paralyse our moral action in life. It will be just the same as if the policeman had convinced Joe Brown that he was still guilty of the crime for which he had died! William Romaine's insightful statement is so true: 'If [sin] be not mortified [put to death] in its guilt, it cannot be subdued in its power'.<sup>1</sup>

In John 8:3–11 there is the account of a woman taken in adultery whom the Pharisees brought to Jesus for his judgment:

The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?' They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you.'

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<sup>1</sup> William Romaine, quoted by R. Haldane, *Exposition on the Epistle to the Romans*, p. 254.

Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.'

When the woman heard the words of forgiveness from Jesus, 'I do not condemn you, go and sin no more', he was saying to her: 'I justify you, so don't go on in sin'. The principle is: until we know we are not under God's condemnation, we will have no power to stop sinning. When there is no condemnation, there is a moral strength not to continue in sin. This 'not continuing in sin' is precisely *because* there is no condemnation. Our 'no condemnation status' in God's eyes is of enormous moral significance to us as believers in our day-to-day living, as Romans 8:33 shows:

Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.

In other words, if the Judge of all the earth justifies us, who is there in all the universe who can bring any legitimate accusation against us? There is no one!

The glorious truth is that we really have been forgiven! Our guilt has been taken away. Our conscience may be at rest and at peace. God has declared to us what he has done, and we need to believe it. When he dealt with the guilt of our sin, he broke the power of the enemy. There is no guilt!—therefore sin has no right to wield its power over us:

So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 6:11).

## **FAITH IN CHRIST IS NOT A WORK!**

Christ has died and has been raised. The life he now

lives, he ‘lives to God’. We must count or reckon upon the fact that we too have died and have been raised ‘in him’. This reckoning is not a work. It is not something that we have to do in order to make it so. We are to rest in it. I believe it was Martin Luther who said: ‘Faith is not a work, it is a resting in what God *has done*’. We are to count on the fact that God views us as having died with Christ and we are thus guiltless and blameless. We are to believe this great truth and rest the whole weight of our confidence upon it.

### **WE LIVE ONLY BY WHAT HE HAS DONE**

One of the problems all of us face as Christians is that we keep on thinking that we have to *perform* in order to remain in God’s good books! We keep falling into the trap of believing that God only accepts us when we are doing the right thing. We are tempted to think God smiles on us when we are obeying and threatens us when we are not! However, we must see that irrespective of what we feel, or think we are experiencing (even of failure), or whether or not we seem to be what we think we should be, God’s attitude towards us does not alter. God accepts us entirely because of what Christ has done, not because of, or on account of, *our* performance:

The gospel does not command us to *do* anything in order to obtain life, but IT BIDS US LIVE BY THAT WHICH ANOTHER HAS DONE: and the knowledge of its life-giving truth is not labor but *rest*, rest of soul, rest which is the root of all true labor; for in receiving Christ we do not work in order to rest, but we rest in order to work. In believing, we cease to work *for* pardon, in order that we may work *from* it; and, what incentive to work, or source of joy in working, can be greater than an ascertained and realized

forgiveness?<sup>2</sup>

God tells us that we are new creatures in Christ. God says we are in Christ. He says that we have died with Christ. He says we are now alive with Christ. He says we are now citizens of heaven. All this has occurred independently of our *performance*. It is all due to God's grace. It is because God himself has taken the initiative and done what we could never do. He has salvaged us from the pit of sin and guilt and lifted us up as those now totally forgiven and accepted by him. We must learn to rest in that.

*In 1962 our church was planning a teaching mission to be led by Geoffrey Bingham who was then home on furlough from West Pakistan where he was working with the Church Missionary Society. In preparation for this week-long event an evening of prayer was organised by a man from our congregation, Fred George. Fred and his wife ran a poultry farm out at the end of Duffy Avenue at Thornleigh and offered the use of a small cottage on their property as the venue. About 25 of us met at around 8 p.m. on the Friday night intending to pray for several hours. In those days we used to kneel to pray, and so we arranged ourselves in a circle, each facing into our chair. Not much happened. In fact, it all seemed a bit slow and none of us seemed to be praying with any degree of conviction.*

*At about 9 p.m. Geoff interrupted the praying and we sat up as he gave a short exposition of Psalm 24:3–5: 'Who shall ascend into the hill of the LORD?*

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<sup>2</sup> Horatius Bonar, *God's Way of Holiness*, p. 29.

*or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully. He shall receive the blessing from the LORD, and righteousness from the God of his salvation' (AV). He pointed out that we can go through life as believers and yet never have been faced by the holiness of God. We can pray but never really be drawing near to the Lord. The problem, he said, is that we may never have really seen our sin in the light of God's holiness. He then suggested that we go back to prayer, but that we wait on the Lord and see what he would want to show us. Our praying would flow out of that.*

*We all knelt down and waited on the Lord, as Geoff had suggested. There was a long silence when no one prayed. I felt a bit uncomfortable. Then a clergyman near me began to pray in a way I had never heard before as a young Christian. He poured out his heart to the Lord in sobs and tears of repentance. He was obviously very deeply moved. Then another prayed the same way, confessing his sin and asking for God's mercy for his ungodliness and unfaithfulness. Yet another prayed in the same vein, deeply moved and in tears. I now felt more uncomfortable than ever. I wondered what on earth was going on!*

*Then, quite suddenly, there came into my mind's eye a perspective of myself that I had never had before. It was as if I was standing outside of myself looking back at myself. I realised that I was seeing myself as God sees me—that's the only way I can describe it. I saw how utterly wretched and evil I was in his eyes. So awful and repulsive was the sight that I wanted to get up and run from that room! It seemed as if I was in a great pit, caught in my own evil. There was clearly no*

*hope of self-release. I could see no way of rescue. It was dreadful. I was in tears. I just sobbed at the realisation. I was now totally oblivious of anyone else in the room, and the sight I had of my actual state before God was all-consuming.*

*If that had been all that occurred, I would have been crushed. I would have been overcome by despair. But I then saw Christ come and stoop down and reach to the bottom of the pit and lift me out. He raised me up and rejoiced over me as one rescued from the very jaws of death. As this realisation swept over me I could hardly contain my joy! I was bursting with thanksgiving. And at that point I was aware that others in the room were singing. Of course, I joined in and soon we were all on our feet, singing our hearts out! Apparently everyone there had had a similar sight of their depravity but had also been given a realisation of the depth of Christ's grace and forgiveness. We sang and sang. Then someone noted the time. To our utter amazement it was 4:30 on Saturday morning! We couldn't understand it. It seemed like only an hour or so had passed since Geoff had spoken from Psalm 24. At that point none of us doubted that God had visited us and brought us into a realised experience of our total forgiveness in Christ. We knew we belonged to him and we knew we were totally accepted in the Beloved. It was a night none of us will ever forget.*

Such a revelation must come to all of us—though of course not necessarily in the same way as it did to the little group that night in 1962. On the basis of what God says to us in the Scriptures, we are to believe his testimony as to his complete acceptance of us ‘in the

Beloved'. We are totally forgiven. We are justified in God's sight. We are acquitted of guilt. We are righteous in his eyes. All this is by virtue of Christ alone and what *he* has accomplished. We are none of these things in and of ourselves.

Believer, address yourself in these terms:

- Since I have been born again, then I *am* alive to God, whether I *feel* it or not.
- This new life and this new relationship is not because of anything I have done, but is entirely due to the fact that I am now 'in Christ'.
- It is not my faith, or my dying, or my reckoning or my believing that makes it so—it is only by virtue of Christ. **Christ** is my death.
- **Christ** is my resurrection. **Christ** is my life.
- It is all **in Christ**, and I am in him.
- I am not getting him to come alongside me to help me, rather, *he has taken me up into himself*.
- 'I have been crucified with Christ; *it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me*; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal. 2:20, RSV).

### BE WHAT YOU ARE!

Let me summarise this by posing two propositions that we need to keep before us all the time if we are to go on living in the joy of our forgiveness, and if we are to know each day the practical outworking of our justification in

Christ:

- (a) Know that Jesus Christ loved you so much that he took you up *personally* into that Cross and crucified you with himself. On the Cross he has secured your complete release from sin's power and guilt.
- (b) Act deliberately on this truth. Claim this forgiveness as being for you personally. BELIEVE WHAT GOD SAYS! That is: faith it, act on it, realise it in your experience. Move out daily on the basis of God's declaration concerning you, and 'be what you are'—*a forgiven son, a forgiven daughter of the Father.*

Be of good cheer, take heart—buck up!—your sins are forgiven! (Matt. 9:2b).

*Jennifer's life had not been an easy one. She married young and enjoyed those early years of bringing up the children. But gradually her husband began to drift. He slowly slipped into alcoholism and started abusing her. The relationship deteriorated and their life together eventually became intolerable. Separation was soon followed by divorce. The subsequent years were hard going for Jennifer. She was resented and misunderstood, not only from within her own family, but also by those whom she had thought were her friends. Deep guilt and anger became major components of her life.*

*It was many years later that Jennifer came to faith in Christ at an evangelistic rally to which she had been taken by a friend. To her utter amazement the Gospel all made sense—for the first time in her life—and she suddenly saw her deep need for the Saviour. In those moments of quiet surrender her whole life*

*changed. Great joy flooded her heart. She realised what had been missing all those years. Christ had come to her and had now drawn her to himself. At last she knew she 'belonged'.*

*It was impossible to meet Jennifer and not be impressed by her warmth and evident love for all with whom she has contact. She was—and still is—tireless in visiting those in need and helps wherever possible in her local church. Her wonderfully bright disposition is a tonic to all who encounter her and she always seems to be praising the Lord in a genuine heartfelt thankfulness.*

*It was some years after her conversion that Jennifer came into a Bible study at the invitation of a mutual friend. At first she was not too sure about what was being taught. She would often object very strongly to any suggestion of God being sovereign in drawing men and women to faith! She was convinced it was entirely up to the individual to believe and make a 'decision' for Christ. She was very disturbed to think her close family members might not be among the 'chosen'!*

*One night there was a study on guilt and grace. Jennifer was asked to read aloud 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verse 8: '[Christ] will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ' (RSV). The leader asked if she 'felt' guiltless. 'No, I certainly don't!' Others in the group expressed a similar opinion about their own feelings of guilt and shame before God—even though they were all believers. They went on to look at other passages which speak of a Christian's 'no condemnation' status in God's eyes because of what Christ has done on the Cross. They came to Galatians 2 verse 20. 'I have been crucified*

*with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (RSV). Suddenly Jennifer saw it! She saw that Christ had taken her up into that death on the Cross and that she had been crucified with him. She saw that, just as he is guiltless before the Father, so too she was now guiltless in God's eyes. Although Jennifer had been a Christian for many years, she had lived all that time under a huge cloud of guilt. But now it was truly gone. She was free at last!*

*Jennifer's release was dramatic and lasting. She could hardly contain her joy at realising her guilt was gone—her guilt for the failed marriage; her guilt over her children's failures for which she had blamed herself; her guilt about not witnessing to them enough; and her guilt about not being a 'good' Christian. From that night God's great grace flooded her understanding. She not only saw that her own salvation had all been God's doing right from the start, but that no one can come to the Father unless he draws them. She no longer rejects any discussions about election! Jennifer sees that that is just how it is. She is overwhelmed with gratitude to her Father and she now genuinely trusts him to bring her children to faith according to his sovereign purposes. Her praying and her witnessing are no less earnest—it's just that there is now a quiet rest in the midst of the wrestling. 'Praise God', she joyfully exclaims, 'I can now be a normal human being!'*

## QUESTIONS

1. In 1 John 4:17 we read: ‘as he [Christ] is, so are we in this world’. What is the implication of this in the light of this study?
2. What is the practical benefit of our ‘no condemnation’ status as Paul states it in Romans 8:1? Give some specific examples from your experience.
3. What is the significance of the New Testament teaching which says that believers are ‘in Christ’, ‘in him’, ‘in the Beloved’? What does it mean to you to be ‘in Christ’?
4. How are Christians to appropriate all that Christ has done for them on the Cross? What is the role of faith in this? What is the role of the will in this?
5. Is faith a ‘work’? How do the benefits of Christ’s action on the Cross come to us? Is it *because* of our faith? Is faith something that we have, or something we get? What does it mean to say that faith is a gift from God? (See Eph. 2:8–9 and Rom. 10:17.)
6. Is God’s total forgiveness real to you? If not, what do you think is needed so that it will become real to you? Do you think you need ‘more faith’? Do you think God needs to do more than he has? What is meant by the expression: ‘Claim in action this forgiveness as being for you personally’?
7. How is it that we do not have to ‘perform’ in order to retain God’s acceptance of us? Does sin no longer matter? What should our attitude be when we are

conscious of having sinned against him?

8. Is confession something that buys God's favour? Is confession just owning up to the fact that I am a failure and accepting God's forgiveness? Is God's forgiveness of my sin *conditional* on my confession? If you think so, then how will you ever know that you have adequately confessed?

## Set Free to Be Free Indeed!

The great victory of the Cross in which Christ has triumphed over all our enemies was in order that we might be set free to serve him in liberty and with joy. We are now free to be the true persons God created us to be in the first place:

So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed (John 8:36).

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery (Gal. 5:1).

The objective fact is that God has delivered his children—his elect—from all their enemies. He has salvaged us from sin and its guilt. He has taken away our condemnation and has set us free. *We are new creations.* He has released us from all those ‘lords’ which once held us in their grip:

Before Christ came into our lives, we were hopelessly lost in our lust, helpless to restrain our profanity, our glandular drives, our insatiable greed, our continual selfishness, or our compulsions either to please people or to control and manipulate others. While some of those things may have brought us feelings of pleasure

and periodic satisfaction, our inability to control them was not without its complications. We were slaves! We were chained to the slave block, and we had to serve the old master. There was insufficient strength within us to live any other way. By 'redeeming' us, Jesus set us free.<sup>1</sup>

Our redemption is now a finished and accomplished fact. For our part, we are to see that it is so and learn to live in the good of what God has done for us through Christ. At every turn we will be tempted to think that things are not as the Scriptures say they are. We will feel that sin is still very powerful and that we can't 'lick it'. We will still feel the pangs of guilt and will be tempted to doubt that we have been totally forgiven. There will be many occasions when the devil will come and whisper lies in our ear. He will accuse us whenever we fail, and will tell us that we're no different to what we were before our conversion. The world, the flesh and the devil will never let up in their attempts to seduce us, and at times we will submit. Sadly, there will be times when we will give in to temptation. We will fail. We will lapse into our old sinful habit tracks. But the Scriptures give us clear prescriptions as to what to do about this:

Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Swindoll, *The Grace Awakening*, Word, Dallas, 1996, p. 110.

are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification (Rom. 6:12–19).

This passage makes it clear that God expects us to take up our stand against sin *based on what Christ has done for us at the Cross*. In other words, he has made provision for us to make moral decisions of our own—for it is by the exercise of the will that we grow spiritually. Our whole life as a believer is therefore made up of a series of moral choices—choices that you and I did not have to make in this way before our conversion. ‘Will I or won’t I? Shall I or shall I not? Can I or can’t I? Should I or shouldn’t I?’ It is by our active decisions to go the way of the truth (resist the way of evil) that we grow in spiritual maturity.

### **DON’T LET SIN RULE!**

We have already seen that sin has no right to reign in us, so, says Paul, DON’T LET IT! We should not kid ourselves, sin is still potentially present in all its mighty power, but it has no right to have dominion over us. Therefore Paul says: ‘do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions’. Don’t go on yielding to sin. Don’t go on serving sin by giving in to its demands. Don’t continue yielding to

temptation. Make the conscious decision not to sin. At this point we may say that we are unable to quit—that we cannot resist temptation. We may be convinced that we cannot break with old habits and old sins. That's not true! *We can if we will!*

During World War 2 many servicemen in South East Asia contracted an endemic disease called beri-beri which paralyses the limbs. (The words mean, 'I cannot, I cannot'.) However, under hypnosis it was found that the paralysis could be overcome and they could be made to move their limbs.<sup>2</sup> This illustrates something of the mystery of the human will and can be applied to the principle Paul teaches in Romans 6. When it comes to defeating sin we say, 'I cannot, I cannot', but the reality is, we *can* if we will! We feel that it is inevitable that we will go on in the same old way as before. We say, 'I can't beat it', and so sin hoodwinks us and bluffs us into yielding to temptation. We fear sin's power and so we submit.

A gunman brandishing a revolver entered a shop, demanding money. The shopkeeper took no notice of the gun and chased the man out into the street. The reason was simple: he knew something about guns and saw that the would-be thief had a toy pistol! Sin is very much like that with us. It sets out to intimidate us. It tries to hoodwink us into submitting. Therefore we need to recognise its empty threats and see that we no longer have to surrender to its temptation nor be crushed by it if we do happen to fall.

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<sup>2</sup> Account by Geoffrey Bingham, *Tall Grow the Tallow-Woods*, pp. 112–13.

**YIELD TOTALLY TO CHRIST**

So Paul says (with an imperative command!), ‘Stop yielding to sin’. Instead, we are to yield ourselves in one act to God. He says in effect, ‘You have been brought from death to life, so don’t go on in the old ways of death. Yield to God utterly and move out into a walk of faith and obedience in new life.’ In Christ, we really are alive, but if we are not living that way then we are fools. We are denying our inheritance and living in a way that is a contradiction of all that Christ intends for us. If we refuse to obey then we are being wholly inconsistent with all that God has now made us to be. The fact is: UNTIL WE YIELD AND OBEY, WE CANNOT HAVE THE GOOD OF WHAT WE KNOW HE HAS DONE FOR US.

*Eric was a young man who had been a Christian for some years but was having great struggles with sin in his life. He loved the Lord but had allowed himself to be seduced into bad habits which he knew were a denial of his new life in Christ. These habit patterns had become deeply ingrained and the more he studied the Scriptures so the more he was under tension. We talked at length about what he already knew concerning the finished work of Christ on the Cross. He seemed to have a clear understanding of the Gospel and had no doubts as to his own salvation. What distressed him was his inability to break with sin and be free of its debilitating effects in his life. As we talked through Romans 6 he came to see that he had never really yielded his life in obedience to God. He had never really let go of his own efforts to be what he thought he should be as a Christian. Over some weeks of sharing together a realisation of his freedom from*

*guilt came to him very powerfully. With that freedom came a simple yielding to God in obedience and faith.*

The Scripture makes it clear that no believer should serve sin and no believer need serve sin. ‘He [God] has provided for thy perfect deliverance from it in Christ. Everything needful for this purpose was finished by Him upon the cross.’<sup>3</sup> We know that sin still dwells in us but we need no longer *serve* sin. We *can* serve sin in the sense that we are capable of doing so, but we need not. Indeed, as Paul puts it in Romans 6:2, ‘How can we who died to sin go on living in it?’ How is it possible that we would *want* to do such a thing?

## **SET FREE SO AS TO OBEY**

Peter gives an important clue: ‘For anyone who lacks these things is nearsighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins’ (2 Pet. 1:9). Peter shows that if we do not intend to obey then we have to deliberately forget that we have been forgiven. We have to turn our backs on the Cross. Sadly, the reason we do this is because we sometimes want to get the benefits of forgiveness while at the same time wish to evade the obligation to obedience. Trouble comes when we lose sight of our freedom in Christ. We need to stand our ground against the temptation to go back into our old legalistic ‘law-way’ patterns of living. In other words, when we are conscious of having failed, we are tempted to justify ourselves by ‘doing something’ to make amends. That’s why Paul exhorts us in Galatians 5:1:

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<sup>3</sup> William Romaine, quoted by R. Haldane, in *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans*, p. 253.

'For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.' The purpose of liberation is LIBERTY! I think it was Ian Pennicook who once said to me, 'Although the action of liberation cannot be reversed, the experience of liberty must be guarded'. He is absolutely right.

American President Abraham Lincoln campaigned hard and long to see the abolition of slavery in his country, but he died without seeing his dream finally fulfilled. Although the Emancipation Proclamation was announced on New Year's Day in 1863, it was another two years before the Constitution was ratified and made those sentiments public. On that day in December 1865 every slave in America was free under the law. They could walk away from their cruel masters and begin to live in the freedom that was now their right. But, as Charles Swindoll writes, something extraordinary happened:

The vast majority of the slaves in the South who were legally freed continued to live on as slaves. Most of them went right on living as though nothing had happened. Though free, the Blacks lived virtually unchanged lives throughout the Reconstruction Period.<sup>4</sup>

He goes on to comment on this tragic ignorance:

A war had been fought. A president had been assassinated. An amendment to the Constitution had now been signed into law. Once-enslaved men, women, and children were now legally emancipated. Yet amazingly, many continued living in fear and squalor. In a context of a hard-earned freedom, slaves chose to remain as slaves. Cruel and brutal though many of their owners were, black men and women chose to keep serving the same old

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<sup>4</sup> Swindoll, *The Grace Awakening*, p. 106.

master until they died.<sup>5</sup>

Though ‘the action of liberation’ had been finalised, these slaves had to learn to live in their new-found liberty. In faith, they had to stand against the intimidation of those masters who wanted them to stay in their slave mentality. So it is with us.

Even though our Great Emancipator, Christ the Lord, paid the ultimate price to overthrow slavery once for all, most Christians act as though they’re still held in bondage. In fact, strange as it is, most seem to prefer the security of slavery to the risks of liberty.<sup>6</sup>

The instant we step out of grace-faith living, we’re back into the old slave mentality. *We must go on having faith in the finished work of Christ if we are to live in the good of our liberty.* This means that our freedom is not maintained by obedience (by doing, achieving, arriving) but by exercising a continuing trust in who and what we are ‘in Christ’. Though we do not have to obey in order to be free, now that we *are* free, we will *want* to obey. Our actual obedience is therefore lived out on the basis of who and what we now are ‘in Christ’.

## **WE ARE ACQUITTED SLAVES**

We should understand that the Bible never says we have ceased to be sinners—rather, we are *acquitted* sinners. We are sinners whom God has graciously set free *in order that we might not go on sinning*. John reminds us that the norm is ‘not to sin’, but if we do, then ‘we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous;

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<sup>5</sup> Swindoll, *The Grace Awakening*, p. 107.

<sup>6</sup> Swindoll, *The Grace Awakening*, p. 107.

and he is the atoning sacrifice [propitiation] for our sins' (1 John 2:1–2). There will always be the tension caused by the ongoing presence of sin in the life of the believer, but thanks be to God, the victory over its dominating power to condemn has already been won! We lament that sin is still present, but we now know that it has no power to bring back guilt or condemnation.

John Newton once wrote a letter to a friend in which he talked about 'the advantages from remaining sin' in the Christian's life:

If the evils we feel were not capable of being over-ruled for good, he [God] would not permit them to remain in us. This we may infer from his hatred to sin, and the love which he bears to his people.

As to the remedy, neither our state nor his honour are affected by the workings of indwelling sin, in the hearts of those whom he has taught to wrestle, strive, and mourn, on account of what they feel. Though sin wars, it shall not reign; and though it breaks our peace, it cannot separate from his love. Nor is it inconsistent with his holiness and perfection, to manifest his favour to such poor defiled creatures, or to admit them to communion with himself; for they are not considered as in themselves, but as one with Jesus, to whom they have fled for refuge, and by whom they live a life of faith. They are accepted in the Beloved, they have an Advocate with the Father, who once made an atonement for their sins, and ever lives to make intercession for their persons. Though they cannot fulfil the law, he has fulfilled it for them; though the obedience of the members is defiled and imperfect, the obedience of the Head is spotless and complete; and though there is much evil in them, there is something good, the fruit of his own gracious Spirit.

He went on to say to his friend:

They shall not always be as they are now; yet a little while, and they shall be freed from this vile body, which, like the leprous house, is incurably contaminated, and must be entirely taken

down. Then they shall see Jesus as he is, and be like him, and with him for ever.<sup>7</sup>

Though sin is still present with us, and though from time to time we fall for its lure, nevertheless there is great joy in the life of faith of the Christian. To live in liberty is to live in the reality of what Christ has done at the Cross in setting us free from all condemnation. Many hymn writers have caught this great truth:

When Satan tempts me to despair,  
And tells me of the guilt within,  
Upward I look, and see Him there  
Who made an end of all my sin.<sup>8</sup>

Here is another:

'Tis God that justifies!  
Who shall recall the pardon or the grace,  
Or who the broken chain of guilt replace?  
'Tis God that justifies!<sup>9</sup>

And another:

Mine is the sin, but Thine the righteousness;  
Mine is the guilt, but Thine the cleansing blood;  
Here is my robe, my refuge, and my peace—  
Thy blood, Thy righteousness, O Lord my God.<sup>10</sup>

And again:

He is our righteousness,

<sup>7</sup> John Newton, *Letters of John Newton*, Banner of Truth, London, 1960, pp. 131–2.

<sup>8</sup> Charitie Lees Bancroft, *New Creation Hymn Book*, no. 92, v. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Horatius Bonar, *Christian Praise*, Tyndale Press, London, 1964, no. 249, v. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Horatius Bonar, *Christian Praise*, no. 153, v. 4.

Our saving Holiness,  
 Our wisdom, Life and Light and Peace.  
 Set free in righteousness,  
 His praises we express,  
 And look to joys that never cease.<sup>11</sup>

It is at this point of realised forgiveness that joy and peace flood into our life and sin loses its power to reign and dominate. We truly have been set free—set free by Christ to live in genuine liberty:

Let it be known to you therefore, my brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you; by this Jesus everyone who believes is set free from all those sins from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses (Acts 13:38–39).

## QUESTIONS

1. Why do many Christians go on living in ‘slavery’ even though they have been emancipated by Christ? What is the remedy?
2. If we sin, do we cease to be pardoned, justified and free? Does this mean that sin is now not important in the life of a Christian?
3. How is our freedom maintained? Is it possible to cleanse the conscience (from a sense of failure) by obedience? What is God’s way for us to be living in liberty?
4. How important is it to confess our failures to God? Why is the maintenance of our liberty not conditional on confession? What is confession? What is the

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Bleby, *New Creation Hymn Book*, no. 170, v. 5.

function of confession?

5. Can you see any advantages in the fact that God has not yet entirely eradicated sin from us?
6. What is the importance and value of the moral decisions we now have to make each day as believers? (Refer to Rom. 6:15–19 and Heb. 5:11–14.)

## Forgiveness and the Holy Spirit

The Scriptures teach that we are entirely dependent upon the Holy Spirit in order to move forward in our new life of liberty. Without God's Holy Spirit indwelling us we are impotent. In other words, we do not have any *inherent, natural* resources by which we are able to live as God would want. Nor do we have any power of our own by which we can maintain our freedom, resist evil and live holy lives. That power comes only from the Holy Spirit working within us. He is the Father's gracious gift to us as his new-born sons and daughters.

It is the ministry of the Holy Spirit to bring through to us the blessings and benefits of our forgiveness. He is the one who communicates to us the reality of the Cross. The Holy Spirit shows us what Christ has done. He conveys to our understanding and to our wills the full impact and importance of Christ's atonement and helps us see how that sacrifice has dealt with our guilt and sin. It is the Holy Spirit who reveals to us the truth concerning our forgiveness and liberty, and it is he who enables us to live in the good of that revelation.

This means that it is only by the Holy Spirit that sin can be mortified (put to death, subdued) and grace appropriated. It is the Spirit who empowers us and enables us to stand our ground against temptation and accusation. It is the Spirit who communicates to us all that Christ *is*—in his love, his mercy, his grace, his forgiveness. Without the Spirit enlightening our minds we would never understand these great truths. It is the Spirit who brings through to us and enables us to maintain a realised forgiveness, a liberty of conscience and an obedience of will. It is he who brings to us the joy of our salvation. It is the Holy Spirit who applies the forgiveness of Christ's Cross to us.

### **THE HOLY SPIRIT DWELLS IN ALL BELIEVERS**

It is important to understand that the Holy Spirit actually *dwells within us*. From the instant of our conversion, the Spirit came to be in us. Jesus promised this to his disciples before he died, pointing to the time when the Spirit would be poured out on all peoples and would abide in those who belonged to the Father:

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.”’ Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified (John 7:37–39).

‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and *he will give you another Advocate, to be with*

*you forever.* This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, *and he will be in you.* I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.' Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, 'Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?' Jesus answered him, 'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and *we will come to them and make our home with them.* Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me. I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you' (John 14:15–26).

Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned. I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. *When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth;* for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you (John 16:7–15).

This great promise of the coming Spirit was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts chapter 2:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability (Acts 2:1–4).

No sooner had the Holy Spirit come upon them than they began to declare the wonderful works of God. Peter interpreted this great event in the light of the promise given in the Book of Joel. He said:

In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved (Acts 2:17–21).

The early church immediately began preaching the Good News that Jesus is Lord, and promised their hearers forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit:

Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).

Forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit go hand in hand. It is not possible to have one without the other. It is not possible to be a Christian (someone whom God has forgiven) and not have the Holy Spirit dwelling within:

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit

of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him (Rom. 8:9).

Paul goes on in the next few verses in Romans 8 to equate the indwelling of Christ with the indwelling of the Spirit, and says that we are alive now because of righteousness, that is, because we are totally forgiven and acquitted. We are now alive to God and have a new, living relationship with him as our Father:

And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ (Gal. 4:6).

### **THE HOLY SPIRIT GOES ON REVEALING CHRIST TO US**

The Holy Spirit dwells in us, and he does so for the purpose of continuing to convey to us the benefits and merits of Christ’s death and resurrection. It is the Spirit who gives us the wherewithal to go on living as God’s sons and daughters. Without his continual operation within us we would very quickly lose sight of the Cross and would fall away from following our Lord.

Since the welfare and good health of our soul is entirely dependent upon the fact of God’s forgiveness, then it is imperative that we never lose sight of the Cross and the power of Christ’s shed blood to go on cleansing us from all sin. Without the Holy Spirit working within us we cannot maintain that perspective in the midst of Satan’s harassments, the pressures of the world and the seductions of the flesh. We won’t survive! Yes, we are saved; Yes, we have eternal salvation, but unless the Holy Spirit keeps bringing through to us each day the reality of forgiveness, our lives will be miserable. And what’s more, we will be poor ambassadors for our

wonderful Saviour!

Consider the following verses and see how the Holy Spirit is intimately related to our knowledge and experience of forgiveness and of our ongoing enjoyment of the victory of the Cross:

... for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God . . . (Rom. 8:13–16).

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things (Gal. 5:16–23).

Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit (Gal. 6:7–8).

All that we do and say and think in life is a ‘sowing’, and God expects us to be sowing to the Spirit, not to the flesh. In other words, we need to be putting into life that which is the product of the Spirit’s prompting and leading, not that which emanates from the flesh and from sin. We need to be constantly moving forward as the Spirit leads

and to be living is such a way as is consistent with our calling. In this regard, nothing is more important than being led by the Spirit in an ongoing, realised forgiveness.

Paul writes to the Ephesian believers: ‘I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called’ (Eph. 4:1). To this end he prays for them that:

... according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Eph. 3:16–19).

This fullness is the fullness of Christ, which is the fullness of love, which is the fullness of the Spirit.

### **THE HOLY SPIRIT IS MAKING US MORE LIKE CHRIST**

We are reminded in Philippians 2:13 that ‘it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure’. It is God who is energising us. His aim is that we should be as his Son. We have seen in previous studies that legally we now stand where Christ stands, but God wants us to be actually *like* him. ‘For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family’ (Rom. 8:29). God is at work in us every moment of every day, changing us by

his Spirit to be like his glorious Son:

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17–18).

Without the cleansing of the Cross this sanctifying, glorifying work would be impossible. The Holy Spirit is therefore constantly taking up the benefits of that Cross and applying them to us. Our responsibility is to be seeking in every way to correspond to the working of the Spirit within us, obeying him, following his leading, learning from him and making sure we do not grieve him or quench him. We should be ‘walking in step with the Spirit’—to use James Packer’s phrase. ‘And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption’ (Eph. 4:30). ‘Do not quench the Spirit’

(1 Thess. 5:19).

If, for some reason, God’s forgiveness seems remote or unattractive to me, then I can immediately ask: ‘In what way have I grieved the Spirit? Have I been sowing to the flesh instead of to the Spirit? Have I neglected my responsibility to be living in such a way as honours the Lord? Have I become slack in my obedience to the Lord? Have I deliberately turned my back on the Cross in not wanting to be obligated to the Lord for what he has done? Have I allowed sin to intimidate me and so succumbed to guilt once again?’

The apostle John focuses our attention on who we really are and what our appropriate response should be:

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure (1 John 3:1–3).

Only by the Holy Spirit is it possible to put to death the drive of sin in our lives. Because we are sons and daughters of the Father, his Spirit is leading us and seeking to give us a godly zeal to follow after him. Since our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit, all that we do should be to his glory. We have been brought to new life by the Spirit and through Christ's sacrifice on the Cross, therefore we should live each day by the Spirit, in his power and through his enabling. We must guard the truth that he has entrusted to us, and make every effort not to spurn the Son and outrage this wonderful Spirit of grace (Heb. 10:29).

## QUESTIONS

1. Do all Christians have the Holy Spirit? If not all professing Christians demonstrate that they have the Holy Spirit indwelling them, what could be the reason?
2. If forgiveness is not real to you, what may be the cause? What is the remedy?
3. In what way are we dependent upon the Holy Spirit in order to know and live in God's forgiveness? What are the implications of this?

4. What is the primary work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian? How does this primary work relate to our forgiveness?
5. Since our bodies are ‘the temple of the Holy Spirit’, how important is God’s forgiveness in our day-to-day living as his temple? What happens if we live outside his forgiveness or lose sight of it?
6. When we deliberately live apart from God’s forgiveness (forgetting or neglecting it), what does this do to the indwelling Holy Spirit within us? What are the implications? How does this impact on our relationship with our Lord? Is this a serious matter? What should we do?
7. Is it possible to live a holy life apart from the Holy Spirit? Is it possible to live a holy life apart from knowing that we are totally forgiven? Does God command us to live a holy life? What are the implications of these facts? Are you being obedient in these matters? If not, what do you intend to do about it?

## 20

# Practical Holy Living

If the question be asked, ‘Why has God forgiven us?’ a good answer might be: ‘In order that we might be the persons he originally created us to be’. God created us to be true persons, whole persons, fulfilled persons. He created us in his image to be like him, reflecting his character. We are designed to be persons who live in conformity with our Creator. Because our rebellion in the Garden (and subsequent existential and personal guilt) has blocked the fulfilment of that creational role, only God’s gracious dealing with our sin can restore us. *This he has done through the Cross:*

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life (Titus 3:4–7).

God has forgiven and cleansed us in order that we might now live in the way that we should have done from the beginning. In that sense he has ‘set us apart’—for that is what sanctification really means. He has renewed us by his Holy Spirit in order that we might now live holy

lives—lives that are set apart for him. We are to live godly lives, we are to live like Christ. The Bible makes it clear that holiness of life is mandatory for the believer. We are *commanded* to be holy:

Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’ (1 Pet. 1:14–16).

Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14).

What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you, and I will be your father, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.’ Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and of spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of God (2 Cor. 6:16 – 7:1).

Peter reminds us that the second coming of Christ ('the day of the Lord') will come like a thief in the night. It will be sudden and unexpected. Without any warning the Lord will appear! Peter therefore says:

Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God . . . Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish . . . (2 Pet. 3:11–12a, 14).

### **FORGIVENESS THE BASIS FOR HOLY LIVING**

Forgiveness is the foundation upon which this holy life

is to be built. *Without first knowing that we are totally forgiven, holiness is impossible.* This is exactly the opposite to the teaching of most religions—and even that of some branches of the Christian Church. Some teach that you must be ‘good’ before God will forgive you. They say that you must be ‘holy’ in order for God to smile on you and accept you. But until such time as we know for a certainty that we have been cleansed from our guilt before God, we will have no power not to sin, no strength to resist evil, no resources with which to live in a way that is pleasing to the Lord. In other words, if there is no true forgiveness first, there can be no true holiness.

A holy life must be based on God’s truth. Our guidelines must be derived from the Scriptures. We must know God’s word and we must be disciplined in its application. We must make the time to study the Bible and find out how he wants us to live now that we are unconditionally forgiven and accepted into his family. It is a gross inconsistency when we say we are forgiven and yet make no effort to order our lives according to the Scriptures or to seek to live Christlike lives. Not to be concerned about bringing Christ into all the everyday affairs of our existence (our relationships, our attitudes, our dress, our time, our hobbies, our priorities, our vocations, etc.) is to miss the whole point of the New Testament teaching about holiness of life. We belong to God now. We are not our own, we have been ‘bought with a price’.

God is concerned that every part of our life reflect his character. (This includes our *private* life as well as our ‘public’ life.) God is concerned as to how the pagan world sees us. He is concerned as to what our lives are conveying to those around us. We are to be representing God to a lost and dying world. We are to be his ambassadors, speaking out his truth to others—not only

by our words but also by our lives. What we *are* is to be consistent with what we *say*. It is by our *works* as well as by our *words* that God touches the lives of lost men and women. Nor should we lose sight of the fact that our conduct and attitudes are also being witnessed by the evil principalities and powers, and hence God's glory and character (as demonstrated in our lives) is on show in that heavenly spirit-realm also. Paul speaks about this to the Ephesians when he says:

...through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (Eph. 3:10).

Our conduct, relationships and attitudes within our Christian fellowships ought to reflect the holiness of God. In the community of believers Christ's name should be magnified. Sadly, this is not always the case within the church. Divisions, factions, animosities and lack of charity sometimes fracture our fellowship, no matter how much we may seek to hide these glaring inconsistencies. Holiness of life is sometimes far from being our central priority and passion. I learned this lesson during one of my business trips to England.

*I had the weekend off and decided to take up an invitation to travel from London to spend the two nights at a Christian community out of town. Late Saturday evening the pastor asked if I would like to preach at the service next morning. I knew nothing about the people in the community nor had I ever visited such a house-church before. I had very little idea how things functioned and did not know what to expect next day. Although I had enjoyed the fellowship thus far, I had a*

*slightly uneasy feeling that everything was being done in a rather intense, rigid and legalistic way.*

*The service was very informal with many folk exercising their gifts of the Spirit by way of testimonies, prophecies and tongues. They clearly had a passion for worship. The singing was very stirring and there was generally a warmth emanating from the congregation as I stood to give my talk. I spoke on how the Holy Spirit brings to us a realisation of God's love and forgiveness and from this flows the true basis for holiness of life.*

*I tried to convey something of the urgency and necessity of a real experience of God's cleansing if our lives were to count for him. Without this true sense of pardon no genuine love could ever flow from us to others. Unless we know deep within our hearts that his love for us has been shown finally and fully in the death of his Son on our behalf, then we can never truly love or forgive one another. None of the gifts of the Spirit would be of any lasting value if we have not first been captured by his love through his forgiveness of our sins.*

*I don't recall how long I spoke for but I do remember having a beautiful freedom and a sense of God's power as I shared these grand truths. Immediately after the service a woman came up to me and gave me a huge hug—tearfully explaining that she had long been praying for such a message. I later learned that the group was racked by division. In spite of their seemingly warm worship, gifts of the Spirit and community living, there was animosity, lack of genuine love and deep-seated unforgiveness. There was even a mother and son who lived on the same premises and worshipped together but who had not spoken to each*

*other for a year. Thankfully, God's word brought genuine healing that morning. Many were in tears and I was hopeful that the Lord had touched the lives of some.*

*I went back to London a wiser man, having been reminded once again of the centrality of the Cross and of our imperative duty as Christians to be living together in God's forgiveness. I saw—as never before—the danger of mistaking worship, community and brotherhood for genuine love and holiness of life. How foolish to think we can work up the real thing! God's love is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, but such love comes as the Spirit himself conveys to us the fullness and finality of our total forgiveness as forged for us by Christ when he died on that Cross. There is no other source for love. There is no other basis for true fellowship and true community. There is no other basis for genuine holiness.*

### **FORGIVENESS LEADS TO CHANGED LIVES**

God's great forgiveness through the Cross (which has come to us by his grace) *is intended to change the way we live.* We dare not just go on living as if nothing has happened to us! We have been radically altered *inwardly* by the Spirit. The proof of this reality is that our lives are in the process of being *outwardly* changed. Our lives are now to demonstrate the miracle of the New Birth, the miracle of salvation and regeneration, as well as the miracle that the Spirit of God himself indwells us. If this is not happening, then we should seriously question whether or not we have really accepted his forgiveness.

We may call ourselves ‘Christian’ but are we truly ‘believers’? The *proof* is a life of holiness. The proof is that we are seeking in every way possible to be living like Christ. The proof is that we are living in the truth and our lives are being ordered by God’s word. The proof of the genuineness of our forgiveness is that the whole fabric of our walk with God is now governed by what he says and by what we know he has done for us. The proof of our acceptance of God’s forgiveness is that we are now desiring (by his grace) to live under his Lordship.

The reality of this desire will nowhere be more evident than in our private or secret life. It is when no one else can see us that the real test comes. What we are in public—where all can see and hear—should reflect what we are in private when we are alone before our Lord. In the secret recesses of our heart the truth is revealed as to where we really stand in respect to holiness of life and submission to Christ’s Lordship. Only God’s total forgiveness can penetrate into the deepest corners of our lives to purge and cleanse from all secret filthiness and guilt, and it is only this same total forgiveness that can set us up to be genuinely holy and Christlike in our personal walk with him.

It is only as we come to understand the wonder of God’s total forgiveness that we will want to live and work for him. In other words, *pardon is the first step to holiness*. Horatius Bonar once put it in these terms:

Forgiveness of sins, in believing God’s testimony to the finished propitiation of the cross, is not simply indispensable to a holy life, in the way of removing terror and liberating the soul from the pressure of guilt, but of imparting an impulse, and a motive, and a power which nothing else could do. Forgiveness *at the end or in the middle*; a partial forgiveness, or an uncertain forgiveness, or a grudging forgiveness, would be of no avail; it would

only tantalize and mock; but a complete forgiveness . . . is *a power* in the earth, a power against self, a power against sin, a power over the flesh, a power for holiness, such as no amount of suspense or terror could create . . . It is forgiveness that sets a man working for God. He does not work in order to be forgiven, but because he has been forgiven; and the consciousness of his sin being pardoned makes him long more for its entire removal than ever he did before. An unforgiven man cannot work . . . first liberty, then service.<sup>1</sup>

True holiness always flows out of forgiveness. Godliness of life comes from knowing that we have been cleansed and that God's grace has touched and transformed our lives. Christlikeness in our character is the result of what Christ has done on the Cross and applied to us through the Spirit. Hence Paul says:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, *training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly*, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might *redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds* (Titus 2:11–14).

## **GRACE MOTIVATES TO HOLY LIVING**

The Titus passage above shows clearly that *grace* is the motivation for holiness. In other words, the sheer love and mercy and goodness of God in salvaging us is the only motivation we need in order to live as he desires. 'The love of Christ constrains us'. His grace 'trains us' to live holy and godly lives. God's grace steers or directs us into holy living. And so, to quote Bonar again, 'that

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<sup>1</sup> Bonar, *God's Way of Holiness*, pp. 52–4.

which cancels the curse provides the purity. The cross not only pardons, but it purifies.<sup>2</sup>

This Titus passage also tells us that the reason for Christ's death on our behalf was that we might be redeemed from all iniquity *and* live pure lives reflecting his character. The reflection of Christ's character is seen in a life of 'goodness' and of '*doing good*'. In other words, holiness of life is not a static, cold thing: it is dynamic! The Bible says that Jesus 'went about doing good', and so should we. A life of service and care for others is part of the whole outworking of the Cross, of forgiveness, of holiness and of showing God's love to others just as it has been shown to us. Speaking and acting in a Christlike manner is the evidence of the liberty we say we have. It will also be the basis of the judgment we will receive in the end time. James puts it this way: 'So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty' (James 2:12).

Such 'good deeds' are not therefore optional—they are part of what it means to be a genuine, forgiven person. Paul goes on to tell Titus:

The saying is sure. I desire that you insist on these things, so that those who have come to believe in God *may be careful to devote themselves to good works*; these things are excellent and profitable to everyone . . . And let people learn to devote themselves to *good works* in order to meet urgent needs, so that they *may not be unproductive* (Titus 3:8, 14).

Sadly, not all Christians want to be fruitful. Not all believers want to live as God wants them to live. Some want to do their own thing. **They want the benefits of his love but not the obligations attached to that love.**

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<sup>2</sup> Bonar, *God's Way of Holiness*, p. 65.

They cannot see that it is both an awful contradiction as well as a travesty to maintain a *belief* in Christ but not have a *life* like his. Peter speaks about such ‘Christians’ in his second letter. After talking about the building blocks of true Christian belief (faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection and love), he then says:

For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For anyone who lacks these things is nearsighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins

(2 Pet. 1:8–9).

As we saw in an earlier chapter, such blindness and forgetfulness are deliberate and indicate that those persons do not want to be obedient. They do not want to live a holy life and do not want to respond to God’s love. Those who are deliberately disobedient have had to close their eyes to the Cross. *They have to deliberately forget they have been forgiven.* Such disobedience and deliberate forgetfulness of the Cross may mean that they were never converted in the first place. Hence Peter goes on to urge his readers to be zealous to ‘confirm your call and election’. In other words, make sure you really do belong to Christ! If holiness is a mark of belonging to Christ, then to refuse to be holy may indicate that you were never converted. So watch out! Make sure your faith in Christ is not counterfeit!

Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. *Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?* —unless, indeed, you fail to meet the test! (2 Cor. 13:5).

## HOLY LIVING BRINGS ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

Holiness of life is therefore one of the great grounds for having a personal assurance of salvation. Holiness or godliness or Christlikeness of life brings a deep certainty to our hearts that we really do belong to the Lord. There is a peace and tranquillity that conveys to us an assurance that we have been drawn into his family, that we really are his child and that we have been made ‘heirs of hope—joint heirs with Christ’. Another way of putting this is to say that when we obey his commands, we can be sure that we belong to him.

Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments. Whoever says, ‘I have come to know him,’ but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may be sure that we are in him: whoever says, ‘I abide in him,’ *ought to walk just as he walked* (1 John 2:3–6).

How then is this holy life shown? What are the marks of a godly person? What sort of things go to make up a holy life? Horatius Bonar wrote:

But a holy life is made up of a multitude of small things . . . Little words, not eloquent speeches or sermons; little deeds, not miracles, nor battles, nor one great heroic act or mighty martyrdom, make up the true Christian life . . . The avoidance of little evils, little sins, little inconsistencies, little weaknesses, little follies, little indiscretions and imprudencies, little foibles, little indulgences of self and of the flesh, little acts of indolence or indecision or slovenliness or cowardice, little equivocations or aberrations from high integrity, little touches of shabbiness and meanness, little bits of covetousness and penuriousness, little

exhibitions of worldliness and gaiety, little indifferences to the feelings or wishes of others, little outbreaks of temper, or crossness, or selfishness, or vanity—the avoidance of such *little* things as these goes far to make up at least the negative beauty of a holy life. And then attention to the little duties of the day and hour, in public transactions or private dealings, or family arrangements; to little words, and looks, and tones; little benevolences, or forbearances, or tenderesses; little self-denials, and self-restraints, and self-forgetfulness; little plans of quiet kindness and thoughtful consideration for others; to punctuality, and method, and true aim in the ordering of each day—these are the active developments of a holy life, the rich and divine mosaics of which it is composed.<sup>3</sup>

Good deeds, fruitfulness and caring with genuine love for others should be the natural outcomes of our new standing before God as forgiven men and women. The love with which God has loved us will be clearly demonstrated to others through our actions towards them. They will see Christ in us. The reality of God's forgiveness of our sins will produce a transparency of life that others will immediately know to be genuine:

One who has ‘learned of Christ,’ who ‘walks with God,’ will not be an *artificial* man; not one playing a part or sustaining a character. He will be thoroughly *natural* in manners, words, looks, tones, and habits. He will be like that most natural of all creatures, a little child. Christianity becomes repulsive the moment that it is suspected to be fictitious. Religion must be ingenuous. No affectation, nor pedantry, nor conceit, nor set airs . . . The ‘epistles of Christ,’ to be ‘known and read of all men,’ must be transparent and natural. In living for Christ, we must follow HIM fully, not copying a copy, but copying HIMSELF; otherwise ours will be an imperfect testimony, a reflected and feeble religion, devoid of ease, and simplicity, and grace; bearing the marks of imitation and art, if not of forgery.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bonar, *God's Way of Holiness*, pp. 109f.

<sup>4</sup> Bonar, *God's Way of Holiness*, pp. 113f.

**QUESTIONS**

1. Why has God forgiven you? Is his forgiveness of your sin just for the here and now, or has he also a long-term purpose in mind? If so, what is God's *end* purpose for you? How should that end view influence how you live here and now?
2. What does it mean to be holy? What does the word 'holy' mean? List at least six aspects of holiness that should characterise your life as a believer.
3. Is holiness mandatory for all believers, or is it only for certain people such as ministers, and missionaries and the like? Is it possible that some Christians are not living holy (pure, set-apart-for-God) lives? Why is this? What is wrong? Is this the case with you? If so, what should you do?
4. Why is holiness of life mandatory for all believers? Is such holiness possible without first knowing that we are totally forgiven by God? Why is this? Knowing that holiness is mandatory, how do you deal with the temptation to 'make it up to God' for your day-to-day failures?
5. What is the relationship between holiness of life and the Cross of Christ? How does the Cross bring us into holy living?
6. Is holiness of life just a matter of avoiding evil, or is there also a positive side to such living? If so, list some of these positive elements.

7. How are good deeds related to holiness? How are good deeds related to forgiveness?
8. What is meant by the statement: 'They want the benefits of God's love but not the obligations attached to that love'?
9. If we do not intend to obey God's command (to be holy, mature, growing Christians), what do we have to do? What do we have to deliberately forget? Why is this so dangerous? What are the implications of such an attitude of heart? What serious defect in our understanding of God does this betray?
10. What are some of the ways in which a holy life is demonstrated? Should the holiness of a Christian's life attract or repel unbelievers? How is it with you?

## Forgiveness and Love

*Why has God forgiven us?* Was it just so that we would not go to hell? Was it just so that we could have peace and joy here and now? Was it just so that we could enjoy a private relationship with him? Was it just so that we could be restored to fellowship with him? What was God's intention in saving us? What did he have in mind? What is his goal for us now that we belong to him once again?

### **WE WERE CREATED TO LIVE IN GOD'S LOVE**

The Bible tells us that God is love and that he created us out of love and for love. The Bible speaks about God loving us 'with an everlasting love', and hence it says that he has loved us 'from before the foundation of the world'. This must mean that *all* that God does is done in love. His whole creation has been created in love and no evil has ever come from his hand. He sustains the creation in love and he keeps and attends to his creation in love. This means that everything in the creation has been designed to know his love, to live in his love and to act in his love.

Therefore, **we human beings were created in love and for love.**

Speaking to the Christians at Ephesus Paul says:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he [God] chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will (Eph. 1:3–5).

Just prior to his death Jesus prayed:

Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world . . . I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them (John 17:24, 26).

God said to Jeremiah: ‘I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you’ (Jer. 31:3).

Because of the Fall we have cut ourselves off from God’s pure love—though we were designed always to be in his immediate presence. This means we were made always to be in the presence of pure love. Since God is the one by whom we have life, he too is the one by whom we have and know love. When we cut ourselves off from God—our fountain of life—we *cut ourselves off from the fountain of love*. When we died in our relationship with him at the Fall, that true love died in us. Pure love was no longer the source and fountain of our life and actions—because *the life of God and the love of God are one and the same*. By forsaking the one, we have forsaken the other. Of Israel, God says: ‘My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living

water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water' (Jer. 2:13).

When Mankind forsook God and his love, he forsook them. We turned our backs on his love and in judgment he withdrew his love from us. He banished us from his presence. Through Isaiah he spoke of Israel with these words:

For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but *with everlasting love* I will have compassion on you, says the LORD, your Redeemer (Isa. 54:7–8).

This is the story of all humanity. We were all destined and made to love God and to love one another. In our obscene rebellion we have forsaken him and turned our backs on that love. In judgment he has banished us from his immediate presence. We have cut ourselves off from the source of life and of true love.

In spite of our sin God's love has continued to act upon us. We are built to love and unless we love we are not truly alive—we are not true persons. Outside of God we cannot love in the way he has designed us to love. It is impossible for us to *rightly* love him or anyone else so long as we are guilty creatures. We cannot love a person we have wronged, and we will certainly not love God against whom we have done such terrible wrong. Because of our guilt, we hate God instead of loving him. We have become his enemies. The Scriptures use very strong language to describe our innate hostility and hatred of God:

For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot . . . (Rom. 8:7).

And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds . . . (Col. 1:21).

For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son . . . (Rom. 5:10a).

In spite of our hatred of God, his love goes on flowing towards us. He graciously gives us biological life, and goes on meeting our natural needs: for example, by making his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and by sending rain on the just and on the unjust (Matt. 5:45). It is in him that we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). His love to us and for us has not ceased as a result of our rebellion and defection:

The LORD passed before him [Moses], and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty . . .’ (Exod. 34:6–7).

### **HUMAN LOVE IS ALWAYS TAINTED**

There is no question that human beings do love. We love in our relationships in life, in our noble actions, in our friendships, in our mateship, in our marriages, and so on. But that love is never the pure love that God intended us to know. Human love is a love that always seeks to get. It is what we call *eros* love. It is God’s true (*agape*) love perverted and distorted by our sin. Unlike God’s love for which we were designed, human love is never wholly pure. It is always tainted. By contrast, God’s love never gives in order to get, but is a giving that is unmotivated by any form of selfishness. This means that we can never truly love apart from God and his pure love. If we are to love as God intended, then we must know his *agape* love

and have that flow through us and out to others. Only then will our love be genuine love. Yes, we all love, but with what *sort* of love?

John tells us :

Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love . . . No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us . . . So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them . . . We love because he first loved us (1 John 4:8, 12, 16, 19).

Jesus said: ‘I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing’ (John 15:5).

In our blindness and in our wilful disobedience we cannot know what true love is. Only at the Cross can we begin to understand the nature of God’s love and therefore understand how we were intended to love. The Cross shows us God’s love and obligates us to love *in that way*:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life (John 3:16).

But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8).

God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him (1 John 4:9).

It is on the basis of what God has done at the Cross that we are to love. It is not an option. It is not a suggestion. It is not a hint. It is not even good advice. *It is a command.* We are commanded to love in the way God

has loved. ‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you’ (John 15:12).

Paul taught the Ephesian believers: ‘Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, *and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us*, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God’ (Eph. 4:32 – 5:2).

### **NO TRUE LOVE APART FROM GOD'S FORGIVENESS**

We can only truly love because of God’s forgiveness. In other words, God’s action at the Cross on our behalf focuses on the one great truth—that he has forgiven us. He has acquitted us from guilt. He has cleansed and purged us from our sin. In Christ we have been taken up into that death, and have died in him. We have been crucified with Christ—his death being our death:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, *who loved me and gave himself for me* (Gal. 2:19b–20).

He gave himself for us entirely out of pure love. Unmotivated by anything in us, God has forgiven us by judging our sin in his Son. God’s love at the Cross in judging and forgiving our sin is that which sets us free. We are no longer under guilt. We are no longer under condemnation. Caught and captivated by his unconditional *agape* love we are now free at last to love in a pure way with *his* love!

For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that

one has died for all; therefore all have died (2 Cor. 5:14).

Free from the dread of judgment, we are able to have God's *agape* love come to full maturity in us. We are in Christ, and so in God's sight we are as he is:

Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world (1 John 4:17).

It is this matter of love that finally shows the genuineness of our faith in God. It is love that is the crowning peak of all that God is seeking to do in us and through us. It is by the outworking of *agape* love in our life that he provides us with an ongoing fruitful knowledge of, and relationship with, Christ himself. Because we have now become sharers in the very divine nature of God himself we are urged to press on and outwork his love in our lives:

For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 1:5–8).

The forgiveness of the Cross shows us not only the *way* in which God has loved but also *how much* he loves. Such a revelation obligates us to obedience. It obligates us to forgive as he has forgiven and to love as he has loved. If we refuse to love *in this way*, then it is because we have had to deliberately forget that we have been forgiven. As we saw in an earlier chapter, this is a dangerous position to be in, because it may mean we were never converted in the first place! (See 2 Pet. 1:9–

10.)

## **LOVE THE PROOF OF GENUINE FAITH**

Love is therefore the proof test that we have come into a genuine relationship with the Living God. No *agape* love, no true life. No *agape* love, no true experience of God. No *agape* love, no forgiveness. No *agape* love, then no grounds for an assurance of salvation. No wonder Peter urges us to work hard at confirming our call and election! We need to make sure that we are on the right track and not having ourselves on with a pseudo faith that appears to love with *agape* but which is still ultimately *eros*:

We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death (1 John 3:14).

Ultimately God has redeemed us in order that we might love as he loves. He wants his *agape* love to flood through us to the world around us, and especially to those who are fellow-believers—members of his family:

Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart (1 Pet. 1:22).

God's command that we be obsessed with him and that we love him with all our heart and mind and soul and strength is captured in these words: 'For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Gal. 5:14).

## **WE LOVE GOD BY LOVING OTHERS WITH HIS LOVE**

This reminds us that we love God primarily by loving others. It is a contradiction to say we love God if we refuse to love others:

Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also (1 John 4:20–21).

We love him by obeying his command to love others as he has loved us. We love him by loving others and we love others by *serving* them:

For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another (1 John 3:11).

. . . love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor (Rom. 12:10).

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law (Rom. 13:8).

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action (1 John 3:18).

And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds . . . (Heb. 10:24).

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another (Gal. 5:13).

Because God’s *agape* love is foreign to us, we need him to bring that love to us. God has done that through

the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who floods us with a revelation of God's love. As he does, so we are enabled to love, for 'hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Rom. 5:5).

True love is therefore always the fruit of the Spirit. We never have the resources to truly love in and of ourselves. If we attempt to love it will always be *eros*, not *agape*. God's great love is the work of the Spirit. Since he indwells us, we can never say that we cannot love as he would have us love. If we do not love, it is not because we cannot, but because we will not:

... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things (Gal. 5:22–23).

This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit (Col. 1:7–8).

Paul gives us a sobering reminder in 1 Corinthians 3 that, for Christians, all of life is a building. What we build on the foundation of Christ will be tested out in the end. If we do not build with 'durable material', then there will be nothing to show for it on the last day and we will lose our reward. The building we are to be doing are the works done with *agape* love:

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will

test what sort of work each has done. If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire (1 Cor. 3:10–15).

## GIFTS HAVE NO MEANING WITHOUT LOVE

Paul's great chapter on love in 1 Corinthians 13 is set in the midst of teaching about the gifts of the Spirit. We may have many wonderful gifts, but if these are not expressed and used with *agape* love they are quite useless. If the deeds are not meeting the needs of others out of true love, they are meaningless. But the converse is also true: If I have gifts and use them in genuine love, then they *are* something and they *do* serve a wonderful purpose:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing (1 Cor. 13:1–3).

Paul goes on to speak about the nature of true *agape* love. This is how we can test out the genuineness of our love:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (1 Cor. 13:4–7).

It is the end chapter that counts! God has a great plan

for history and this is being worked out right at this moment. Finally, all will be consummated in Christ, and he will head up all things. The fullness of love will be manifested to all. Only *agape* love will stand the test of time:

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love (1 Cor. 13:8–13).

### **LOVE IS A MATTER OF THE WILL**

Loving with God's *agape* love is a matter of the will. We have to see that we cannot love unless it is by his love, and at the same time we have to see that it is a matter of obedience. We *must* love and we *can* love. But love is not just a duty. It is the constraint of the Cross that motivates us to love. We do not love just because we are commanded to love. We love not only because we want to, but also because we know that we are now *able* to love! True life is therefore known only as we love. We have been made to love, and we are only ever true persons when we are loving with *agape* love. The person who loves is the person who is truly alive! Paul exhorts his readers to therefore make love their aim. He says, 'Pursue love' (1 Cor. 14:1), 'Let all that you do be done

in love' (1 Cor. 16:14), 'may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you'

(1 Thess. 3:12), 'Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more' (1 Thess. 4:9–10).

As with all matters of faith, we are subject to failure. We are weak and frail vessels. Like the Christians in the early church, we too can drift out of grace and so drift out of love. We should heed the warning of Christ to the church at Ephesus, and if we have moved away from *agape* love, return to the Cross. See afresh his love and be about the business once again of doing the 'first works'—the works of love:

But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent (Rev. 2:4–5).

We need to be alert all the time. *Agape* love in us will be the first thing that Satan will attack and seek to undermine. We must be consciously and deliberately maintaining our determination to stay in the warm sunshine of God's love of the Cross:

Keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life (Jude 21).

**QUESTIONS**

1. If we were created in love and for love, what has happened to our race as a result of the Fall?
2. Do fallen human beings ever really love as God intended? What is wrong with the way we love?
3. How are love and God's forgiveness related? Why is it that we cannot ever love aright until we first know God's cleansing and pardon for sin?
4. Is it true that the genuineness of our profession of faith in God is known by how we love?
5. Is love more than words? How did God demonstrate his love for us? How then should our love be shown?
6. Is the sort of love with which God loves us something we can manufacture ourselves? If not, where does true love come from? How can we love in the way God loves?
7. Why is it that the exercise of spiritual gifts such as healing and tongues and prophecy have no meaning without love? What is the message that is at the heart of 1 Corinthians chapter 13?
8. Discuss and explain the practical outworking of the statement: 'love is a matter of the will'.
9. Think about 16th century poet Robert Southwell's saying, 'Not where I breathe, but where I love, I live'.

## Set Free to Proclaim!

When God's love and forgiveness are real to us we will want to tell others! We will be like those who have discovered an oasis in the desert and who cannot but share that good news with other thirsty and parched travellers. So long as our realised experience of forgiveness and God's love is fresh to us, we will want to go on sharing the joy of it with others. On the other hand, if for some reason we have lost sight of our forgiveness and are burdened once again with a sense of guilt, we will have no desire whatever to tell others of Christ. We will think it hypocritical to be speaking of the joy and peace which he is supposed to bring if we are not actually living in it!

Of course, not every believer finds it easy to carry on a conversation with non-Christians about the Gospel. Some are wonderfully gifted in sharing their faith (especially in difficult situations) and have a God-given boldness that enables them to witness to Christ with great success and fruitfulness. Others, who by temperament are more timid, find it very hard to say anything for their Lord and often feel a significant sense of guilt as a result of their apparent failure to do so. It is not uncommon for young converts to be encouraged to 'go and tell someone about

Christ today', and they consequently feel ashamed if they are afraid to do so. A 'law' is placed on them right from the first moments of their conversion, and instead of their witness being a spontaneous matter of sharing out of a new-found experience of the truth, it becomes a *rule* which has to be obeyed. What is conveyed to the unconverted is often a sterile and forced message that is quite un-inviting.

### **ALWAYS READY TO SPEAK THE TRUTH**

The great blessing of our conversion—especially the wonder of forgiveness—is that we are released from these false guilts. We are thereby enabled to speak quite naturally to others about Christ—should the occasion arise. Thus, it is only as we are living in the good of our forgiveness that our life will convey to the unconverted the truth that we have found a pardon, a peace and a joy that they do not know. This will often arouse their curiosity. We should therefore be ready to take up any such opportunities to declare our faith to them in a simple and natural way. Peter speaks about it in this way: 'Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you' (1 Pet. 3:15).

I worked for three and a half decades in a large engineering company. There were many opportunities to share my faith and I had the joy of seeing a number of my colleagues come to know Christ during those years. (Some of those stories are told elsewhere in this book.) However, there was one event which stands out in my mind. I'll call him Mr Smith:

*I was a junior in our company at the time and therefore had no association with any of the senior executives. Understandably, I was surprised when one of them requested I come to his office. He invited me to sit down as he closed the door behind me.*

*'I understand you're a Christian?' he began, taking his seat behind the desk. Leaning forward and looking me straight in the eye, he said very seriously: 'Tell me what you believe about Jesus Christ'. The question was so unexpected that for a moment I was speechless! Once I'd regained my composure (and offered a silent, urgent prayer for help!) I commenced telling him something of who Jesus was and is, what he taught and what he had done. He listened intently and from time to time interrupted with pertinent questions. I don't recall the exact details of the conversation but it went something like this:*

*'Mr Smith, we human beings were created by God to know and love him. We have deliberately gone against his purposes for us and have chosen instead, not only to disobey him, but to set up our own substitute gods in his place. We have failed to realise that our life can only be derived from God himself and that by cutting ourselves off from him we have lost our true source of genuine human existence. We have lost true meaning and purpose for living. We have destroyed ourselves. As far as God is concerned we are dead creatures. Not only that, but God is pretty angry with us, and rightly we face his judgment for no longer being the persons he designed us to be.'*

*'The reason Jesus Christ came was in order that this awful plight of ours might be reversed. In his great love for us the Father sent his Son, and the Son willingly came to be a man just like us, and to live as*

*we live and to experience life as we know it. The unique thing about Jesus Christ is that he was sinless. He was the true Man that we all should have been. For that reason his death was not like ours. He chose to die. As a sinless man he deliberately gave up his life just so that he could carry Mankind's sins on his shoulders down into the grave.*

*'Sir, that is why the Bible says Jesus came to give his life a ransom for our sin. He was a substitute for us. You and I deserve to die because of our rebellion against God. As I've said, God created us to love him and serve him. He made us to love each other and to show his character to those around us. But because we've reneged on that role we've come under a huge thundercloud of guilt as a result. Our guilt drives us further and further away from God—and from one another. And it drives us further and further away from genuine love and genuine peace. That's an awful state to be in! But on that Cross Jesus Christ took into himself all our guilt and sin and failure. He has absorbed all our rebellion. He has taken away all our evil. When he rose out of the grave he proved that he is Lord over our failure! So the way is now clear for us to come back into a living relationship with our Father-God.*

*'Mr Smith, we can't do a thing about our own salvation even though we are totally responsible for the mess we're in. God has to do it all. We have to be born again—spiritually. Only God can come to us and bring that new life. He must enter into us by his Spirit and bring forgiveness and pardon and, at the same time, change us from being rebels into persons who can love him in return. It's a wonderful miracle. But it all comes from God's initiative. Sir, all I can do is*

*encourage you to simply ask him to reveal himself to you and ask him for the gift of faith and for the miracle of the new birth.'*

*The executive stood up, thrusting out his hand to warmly shake mine. 'John, thank you so much for what you've told me. I really appreciate it and I'll certainly think about these things.' He ushered me to the door and I returned to my office somewhat dazed. Some months later news came that he had died suddenly from a heart attack.*

We can never tell how much our life is being observed by others. I had no idea that Mr Smith knew I was a Christian, and still don't know how he could have known. Because non-Christians around us can be influenced for good or bad without us even realising it, we should take great care to live in such a way as commends the Gospel. Then, when the unexpected occasion arises where we can verbalise our faith, we can speak out the truth—the Lord helping us.

In his first letter, Peter says that we have been called to live in such a way that our lives will be a blessing to others, and that as we do this *we will obtain a blessing* (1 Pet. 3:9). He goes on to quote from Psalm 34, saying that if we want to love life and see good days, then we should keep our tongue from evil and our lips from speaking guile. We should turn away from evil and do right, seeking peace and pursuing it. All this is in the context of living primarily in a pagan world amongst unbelievers. They may seek to bring us down with their accusations and criticisms, but Peter says in verses 13–15:

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your

hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you . . .

Thus, in the midst of the accusations and pressures of the pagan world in which we live, and to whom we are called to be witnesses, we need to be consciously trusting Christ and owning him in our hearts as Lord.

This means *keeping our conscience clear* (v. 16) so that if we are abused and reviled we may know that our behaviour has been exemplary. We are to know that we have lived (as best we could) in such a way as has been honouring to our Lord, and that any abuse is against what we *believe*, not against any wrong behaviour on our part. We need to ensure that our lives are not open to *justifiable* criticism on account of our stupid conduct, bad temper, rudeness, lying, bitterness, rebellion against authority and so on. In other words, we are not to react to others or to situations in an ungodly way, but to live in the good of our forgiveness. Peter goes on to say: ‘For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil’ (v. 17). In so doing, our detractors will be put to shame (v. 16)—they will know that they have unjustly judged us!

Peter then reminds us in verse 18 that ‘Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God’. Salvation has come to this fallen race so that we might be in God’s presence as forgiven men and women. *This is what the world needs to know.* It is only as we live the life and work the works and do the deeds that they will see this truth.

## YOU ARE THE ONLY 'BIBLE' SOME PEOPLE WILL EVER READ

Make every effort therefore to live in such a way as communicates the character of God to those around you, at home, at school, at work, at university or wherever God places you. You are his witness! You are his representative. You are his ambassador. Paul puts it this way:

So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:20).

Remember, it is at the same time an obligation as well as a privilege to be his ambassador.

Many of us will have non-Christian family members and our witness to them is of great importance. This will never be easy, but God has placed us in that situation and we should recognise the great ministry that he has given us. If we do not witness to them, who will? A gracious life, the joy of forgiveness and a genuine caring love for them will be a powerful testimony to them of the reality of the living God. *They need to see Christ's forgiving love in us.*

*I have a friend who came to faith in Christ and she immediately began praying for her family members. One by one she saw them all come to know the Lord. Her witness was quiet but persistent. She was never pushy, but she also never missed an occasion to speak the word of grace to them or minister in a caring way to their specific needs. They saw Christ in her. They saw the reality of her relationship with the living God, and that love drew them into the Kingdom also.*

It is most likely that all of us will have to spend a good proportion of our life working with non-Christians. We may have a boss who is not a believer. We are certain to have work colleagues who are not Christians. Some of these men and women will be quite hostile and irrational in the way they treat us. Precisely because we are Christians they may single us out for abuse or ridicule or victimisation. They may even set us up unjustly for failure, and may succeed in forcing us to resign or in having us dismissed. We must learn to take it with joy *for the sake of Christ*.

It is in our relationships with these family members, friends and work associates that we will need to know the life of Christ operating in us and through us. We will need great patience, as well as a constant supply of God's grace so as to maintain our equilibrium. We will often be faced with ethical situations (especially in business dealings) that are clearly contrary to the word of God. When these circumstances arise, it is essential that we know how to respond. We may be asked to do or say things that are untrue or unethical. This may place our employment and even our personal welfare at risk.

*There was an occasion when I was part of a team negotiating a large overseas contract. Our company was partner in a consortium led by a huge oriental multi-national corporation. A series of events occurred which placed the whole project in serious jeopardy, and this crisis came to a head the day I was to participate in the final presentation to the overseas client. I was hurriedly briefed by the consortium chief and instructed to make my presentation along certain lines that would hide any evidence of the crisis. That*

*meant I would have to lie through my teeth. I pointed out that he had no right to dictate to my conscience and I refused to do anything that would compromise my integrity.Flushed with rage he warned me in no uncertain terms that if I said anything that put the contract at risk he would personally take me to court and sue me! I felt ill. It was the worst day of my life and I recall passionately wishing I was somewhere else. Since I could not bail out I had to go ahead with the presentation, trusting the Lord to honour my determination to be honest. In God's goodness he preserved me. He gave me the wisdom to speak the truth. What I did not know until later was that my ethical stand had a profound impact on some of the others who were present.*

Few of us escape being placed in situations which suddenly plunge us into embarrassment or tension. In an instant our faith can be on trial and God's honour at stake. At such times we must not lose sight of the fact that we are his ambassadors and it is at these times that our knowledge and experience of God's love and forgiveness must be real. If, at that point, we are unsure of our standing with him we will be ashamed to testify concerning him and will remain silent, quietly going the way of the crowd. In the case of the illustration above, it was not a matter of speaking the Gospel but of maintaining my integrity as a believer. Most knew I professed to be a Christian, but how would I conduct myself under these difficult circumstances? These are often the hard tests of faith that come when least we expect it. A similar test of integrity came in another way during my professional career:

*I had to do a presentation to an Australian client. I knew it would be difficult because the senior executive leading their team was widely suspected of being corrupt and would want the contract to go to one of his 'mates'. He would do everything he could to discredit me and tear my presentation to pieces. I rang my friends the night before and told them that I felt I was going into the lion's den the next day and would they pray for me!*

*At the meeting I was placed directly opposite this gentleman at the large conference table. He had his aides on each side, but I was on my own. I gave copies of my presentation to all present and was about to begin. He took one look at the papers I had handed out and said in a very disparaging tone of voice: 'Anyone can produce figures to suit themselves, what makes you think we are going to accept yours?' In that moment the Lord gave me a word of wisdom and the boldness to speak it. I looked him straight in the eye and said firmly: 'Sir, if you insist on measuring others by your own standards, then I'd thank you to leave me out'. He never said another word. I did my presentation and my company was awarded the contract.*

## **WE WITNESS AND SPEAK OUT OF GRACE**

It is usually guilt or fear that prevents us from being able to witness to God's truth in a simple and natural way. Hence a realised forgiveness is of the utmost importance in being able to share the Gospel with others. The fact is, we will often fail. We will often feel that we could have acted differently. We will often know that we could have

spoken up and said what we knew to be true. There will be many times when we will know that we have ‘chickened out’ of witnessing to the Lord we love. As a result we may feel a hypocrite. We will feel guilty. We may be depressed by our failure. We may even feel that we have ‘let the Lord down’ and that he is now ‘disappointed’ with us.

Be encouraged that nothing has changed as a result of our failure! God still loves us. He still forgives us. Our relationship with him has not altered one bit. In the midst of such feelings of failure to witness, we need to just come back to the Cross and know afresh God’s love and grace. This means that we need to live each day in his grace. He knows the pressures that we face. Jesus knew the hatred of the world and warned us that it would be no different for us. He said:

If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘Servants are not greater than their master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. But they will do all these things to you *on account of my name*, because they do not know him who sent me (John 15:18–21).

As Christians, our responsibility is to love men and women as Christ has loved us. When we were his enemies, Christ loved us and gave up his life for us. May the Lord help us to be self-sacrificing in our relationships with our pagan friends around us. This will probably mean giving up our prerogatives and ‘rights’. It is giving away all that we think we deserve to have in the way of advancements and status and wages and respect. We need

to trust our loving Heavenly Father. It is that very faith and love that will communicate to others that our God is real, and that he loves and forgives. As we live in the truth, so the truth will be communicated.

*Pam had an infectious laugh and never complained when urgent jobs were pressed on her for immediate attention by her boss. In her off moments she would read anything she could get her hands on. Although she told me she did not believe in God, I asked one day if she would like to read some of the Christian biographies I had on my shelves at home. She readily agreed and so began to devour volume after volume. As fast as she would finish one book I would bring in another. She always seemed to enjoy the stories, although she said she could not agree with the 'religious' views expressed by many of the authors!*

*It may have been six months or more before Pam began to show signs of being interested in the Gospel. She started to ask questions about what she had been reading, and slowly we were able to talk through matters concerning God's existence, of human guilt, the reality of sin and of faith in Christ. Issues about which she had never before given a moment's thought now came to the forefront. A sense of her need to know God and to be forgiven by him began to surface. The reality of her guilt before a holy God started to disturb her deeply. Then gradually she began to see the way back to her Creator-Father.*

*There was such a slow and imperceptible dawning of faith in Pam's life that it is hard to say when she really believed. But believe she did. Jesus Christ became so real to her that she sparked an interest in God from her unbelieving husband, Tony. We met in*

*their home for relaxed discussions and, in time, he too came to faith.*

*In time they went into Bible college, after which Tony became a Christian pastor—the two of them eventually sharing the Gospel far and wide across Australia.*

## QUESTIONS

1. Why is the reality of our experience of forgiveness so significant in our witness to non-Christians?
2. It is said: ‘Actions speak louder than words’. How important are our actions and attitudes in our witness? Are actions enough? How important is it to interpret our actions to others?
3. How should we respond when we know we have failed in a particular situation to witness to others concerning Christ?
4. In our relationships with non-Christians, ‘living in the truth’ is the bottom line. What does this mean? What, primarily, are the twin truths that we need to be living out each day?
5. What principles concerning witness can you deduce from the following Scriptures? Matthew 5:13–16; 1 Corinthians 9:19–23; 13:4–7; Philippians 2:14–16; 1 Peter 3:1–4; Jude 21–23; Ezekiel 33:7–9.

## Hindrances to Liberty—I

*So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed  
(John 8:36)*

Liberty from the guilt of sin is the new-birth ‘right’ of all believers. However, many Christians have difficulty living in this liberty. What they know in their head, they often find hard to live out from day to day in the rough and tumble of life. Though they see that Christ promises liberty and victory, they nevertheless struggle with this as an experiential reality. There can be a number of reasons for these difficulties. The fact is, our liberty will always be contested and there are often ‘roadblocks’ to freedom that must be recognised and faced. The enemy of the soul, Satan, will never let up in trying to sidetrack us from that ‘abundant life’ which Christ has won for us. We must learn to discern what these obstacles are and know how to counter them. In all this, *we must see that Christ has already done all that is needful in order for us to know that liberty and freedom.* If we are not living in the enjoyment of his wonderful provision then the fault lies somewhere with us in our understanding and appropriation of the truth.

The following four chapters show some of the possible reasons for our failure if we are not living in the rich enjoyment of Christ's liberty.

## **WE CAN DRIFT OUT OF GRACE**

One of the common causes of loss of liberty—if we are not careful—is that we lose sight of grace. It is usual for our conversion to bring a wonderful freedom as the glory of forgiveness dawns on us. But with some Christians that seems to fade. We know that God has saved us and that he loves us, but somehow we begin to think that it is now all up to us. We get the idea into our heads that our life as a believer must now be battled out on our own. Though we understand that we have been given the Holy Spirit to dwell in us, somehow we fail to see that our whole life is to be lived in the light of that same grace of God which brought us to faith in the first place.

The fact is, though we are never out of grace, we can certainly lose sight of it. We can so easily forget that we don't have to 'perform' in order to maintain our relationship and acceptance by God. We forget that our sanctification (growth in holy living) is as much a gift of God's grace as is our justification. We forget that we have no resources of our own by which we can live consistent, holy lives. We forget that we are totally dependent upon God's grace every moment of every day. We forget that it is grace which triumphed once and for all over Mankind's sin and guilt. And we forget that we have to *go on* seeing God's love and forgiveness and living by faith in the good of all that Christ has done through the great act of grace at the Cross.

When failure comes (as it often will) we may become depressed and unsure of ourselves—if we are not resting in grace. We will think we need to pray more or read the Bible more in order to recapture something of the joy and peace we knew at the beginning. *We fail to see that nothing has changed.* God has not moved. His love has not altered. Our standing with him has not changed. His grace has not diminished. Nor are we any less dependent upon him to accept, sustain and keep us than when we first believed. At that point of failure we must know that we are still righteous in his sight, not in our own right, but entirely due to our being ‘in Christ’ and being invested with his righteousness. We can never be *less* righteous in God’s sight than we are right now! It is all of grace!

Geoffrey Bingham notes that, ‘Had people been living wholly in grace, much that is written in the New Testament Letters would not have been required’.<sup>1</sup> The fact is, a great proportion of the Epistles are devoted to exhorting believers to go on living in grace. For example, Paul says: ‘As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain’ (2 Cor. 6:1–2). In other words, there is clearly some way in which the grace of God can be accepted by believers but which, though appearing to be genuine, is fruitless and does not lead to godly living. Geoffrey Bingham expands on this by saying:

‘You could receive grace without being aware of its nature and importance, and so be unaffected’, or, ‘You could receive grace as though it was not grace, and so refuse its purpose and action’, or, ‘You could come under grace, be glad of it and acknowledge it, but then refuse to continue in it, rejecting it by neglect or

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<sup>1</sup> Bingham, *Great and Glorious Grace*, p. 148.

deliberate refusal'.<sup>2</sup>

Paul advised his young friend Timothy: 'You then, my child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus' (2 Tim. 2:1). We too must learn to be strong in God's grace as it is in Christ. The moment we move out of grace, we are weak. Of ourselves we are impotent. Outside of grace there is only law and works. Outside of grace we are back into the whole complex of failure and guilt and more failure. Moving out of grace may take place slowly and imperceptibly. It can be a subtle drift. That is why we need to be alert. We need to be awake. We need to recognise that our very survival depends on trusting and resting in God's grace for all that we do and say and *are*. This implies a recognition that we are weak and impotent without him. It means that we know deep down in our heart that without him we can do nothing. On the other hand, it means we also know that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us (John 15:5; Phil. 4:13).

As we saw above, Paul warns us not to accept the grace of God lightly or in an empty way. Thus we need to go on seeing the utter wonder of this gift of God's mercy and love as he constantly seeks to do us 'good'. The very air we breathe is his gift. All that we know each day of the joy of living is of his grace. It is in him that we live and move and have our being. Even our dark times are his gift in order that we might trust him more, and so know his love in a deeper and more mature way.

Paul's letter to the Galatians was written to correct their failure to go on in God's grace. The Galatian Christians had made the terrible mistake of thinking that Christ was not enough: they had been seduced into

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<sup>2</sup> Bingham, *Great and Glorious Grace*, p. 149.

thinking of their ongoing salvation as Christ *and* something else added. They thought that they had to now live by law in order to maintain their relationship with God. Paul had some very strong words to say on the matter!

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel . . . (Gal. 1:6).

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? (Gal. 3:1–3).

You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace (Gal. 5:4).

Galatians teaches a fundamental principle which we must all understand. God's work of grace in each one of us is entirely centred on the person and work of Christ. We receive the benefits and blessings of that atonement by faith through the operation of the Spirit revealing the truth to us. It must always be that way. We are never out of that 'faith-way' of living. We trusted in the work of Christ at the beginning, and we must go on trusting and relying on the work of Christ until the day we die! We will never get *beyond* the Cross and we will never get *beyond* grace. Nor will we ever arrive at a position where we will be able to 'handle things' ourselves. The Galatians had fallen into the error of thinking that they could now live the life of a Christian 'law-way', that is, by 'obeying' and 'doing' out of their own resources. In so doing they had tried to 'add' to Christ's finished and complete work. They had moved out of grace.

*I was overseas taking a teaching mission in Tokyo*

(mentioned in chapter 2). The missionary called me aside after the meeting. This was the third night of a week-long series at which I was speaking, and he had come in late, slipping into a back-row seat. I had talked that night on the Cross and he seemed to be deeply moved. He was anxious to discuss what had been said. Since we both had busy schedules, we agreed to meet early the following morning for breakfast in a nearby restaurant. Over our bacon and eggs and refills of coffee, we talked on for over an hour.

He had grown up in a Christian environment in the United States and had been convinced as a teenager of the truth of the Gospel. His conversion was rich and very real as he came into the wonderful reality of God's grace in Christ. Through his College years he had been involved in church and Christian activities. He and his wife had embarked on a missionary course which led in time to their current overseas appointment. But all was not well. The language was difficult and the culture very different to their own. The children were rebellious and hard to handle, and he had found it difficult to make ends meet financially.

As we talked about the previous night, he said he had been stunned by what I had said concerning the happening of the Cross. It came to him for the first time in his life that Christ had taken his guilt and shame up into himself and that he had been crucified there on that Cross. Somehow he had never seen it that way before. He had never really grasped what had occurred in the death of Christ by his taking upon himself the sin of humanity. The great flood of grace which had swept over him during the meeting had left him astounded. 'I felt as if I had been washed through

*and through from head to toe!'*

*I understood exactly what he meant. It had come to me that way all those years ago in my own life, and many times since I had seen other men and women suddenly 'come alive' as the truth of God's grace flooded their understanding. Yet here was a man who had lived and worked as a Christian missionary in a foreign country for more than a dozen years but who seemed to have never really had a sight of Calvary. I was both amazed and saddened. What had he been preaching to these people? What had he been teaching them all these years? He was urgent in pressing me to explain further what I believed in respect to the heart of the Gospel. We talked about grace and about forgiveness, but what seemed to stun him most was the realisation that it is God and God alone who saves men and women. He had somehow caught an insight into the reality of God's sovereignty in a way he had never seen before. To him, evangelism was the task of persuading others to believe and that until such time as they did believe, God could do nothing! I hope I was able to help him see that grace is God going out to do us good, and that unless God comes to us in that way, nothing will happen!*

*My friend was clearly in a bad state of health. I would say he was near to a breakdown. I hope his glimpse of grace may have averted that collapse. He had been burning himself out in a frantic effort to press as many as possible into making 'a decision for Christ' and, as a result, was exhausted. He had seen lots of so-called 'commitments', but somehow they didn't seem to last. All his detailed programs and methodologies were sapping his time and energy, but to what*

*end? I put it to him that he may have never really understood the heart of the Cross and what God did in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Yes, I was sure he was an evangelical; that he believed firmly in his heart that Jesus had died for him, that he was loved and had been forgiven, and that he was now obligated to share that Gospel with others. But that did not alter that fact that he may have never had a sight of Calvary—that he may never have understood and been gripped by grace. I suggested that he take all his ‘programs’ and ‘gimmicks’ and toss them out with the garbage. He looked at me with horror, but I think he understood!*

I have not been able to follow up my missionary friend. But I hope that something of God's truth may have come to him that morning. And I hope the truth will change the course of his life, not just for his sake but also for the sake of all those whom he genuinely wants to see come to faith in Christ and who must know the Gospel as *the Gospel of the grace of God*.

Christians today are often falling into the Galatian heresy.<sup>3</sup> We must take great care not to slide back into a ‘law–works’ routine. Of such ones Walter Marshall wrote in 1692: ‘They account that, though they be justified by a righteousness wrought out by Christ, yet they must be sanctified by a holiness wrought out by themselves’.<sup>4</sup> Such people think they can attain a holy life by achieving and doing apart from what Christ has done on the Cross. Such is to ‘fall away from grace’. It is to ‘begin with the Spirit and end with the flesh’. It is to have accepted the

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<sup>3</sup> See my *Letters to Brian and Daniel* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> Walter Marshall, *Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, Evangelical Press, Welwyn, 1981, p. 34.

grace of God in vain. If we are not living entirely by grace and in grace and through grace, *then it is not of grace at all*. There is no such thing as ‘God’s part’ and ‘our part’. From start to finish it is all of God’s grace! No wonder Paul could say of his Philippian friends: ‘I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ’ (Phil. 1:6).

*Ann was becoming involved in the life of our church, but her many questions indicated that she was still very unclear about her experience of God. She gave every indication of knowing a lot about Jesus, but admitted that she did not believe she knew him personally.*

*One Sunday morning I woke up very early with a passage of Scripture clearly on my mind. In an instant I sensed that it was from the Lord and specifically for Ann. I can’t say how I knew, I just knew! Later that morning I told her what had happened and then, opening my Bible at Isaiah 53 verse 6, asked her to read it aloud. She sat down and slowly began to read the words: ‘All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all’. Suddenly light shone into her heart. Suddenly she saw what we had been saying to her for many months. She instantly understood that God had taken her sin away by laying it on the Lord Jesus when he died on the Cross. I had no need to explain the meaning of the passage, she just knew straight away what God was saying. She now saw that God really had forgiven her sin. Her face became radiant as faith dawned. Ann’s change of life was instantaneous and she soon became a significant part*

*of our fellowship, joyfully sharing the truth with others. I believe she was probably responsible for leading several others to faith in Christ.*

*Ann eventually married a fine Christian man but in spite of an active church involvement for many years, the relationship between them gradually soured and then finally disintegrated. The strong faith in Christ that had once been fresh and real withered and virtually died. My subsequent and very brief encounters with them convinced me that they had lost sight of their forgiveness and God's great grace. Guilt had come flooding back and provided the seedbed for mutual distrust, accusation, extra-marital relations and gross rationalisations of their disobedience.*

The stories above should warn us that we are all equally vulnerable and liable to failure. We see in them our own weaknesses and are reminded very powerfully that we all stand only by the grace of God. How we need to keep ourselves in the love of God and have daily recourse to the Cross for cleansing and pardon. Obedience and holiness of life are never options, and to be presumptuous concerning God's grace is to skate on very thin ice.

### **THE DANGER OF POOR SELF-DISCIPLINE**

This leads me to consider another serious impediment to living in liberty as a believer in Jesus Christ: poor self-discipline. We can drift out of grace simply because we have not been disciplined enough in attending to the

fundamentals of Christian discipleship.<sup>5</sup>

A disciple is one who is disciplined to follow his Master. Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me’ (Matt. 16:24). We are not called to be recluses or ascetics, but we *are* called to be responsible, mature, disciplined sons and daughters, living in obedience to God and his will. History shows that the men and women whom God has used have been those whose lives were marked by a consistent self-discipline. Hence a disciplined person works while others waste time; a disciplined person prays while others sleep; a disciplined person takes on those unpleasant tasks that others avoid. A disciplined person, on seeing the issues of life as they really are, sets out deliberately to live accordingly. A disciplined person is sensitive and open to the prompting of God’s Spirit and word, and responds in obedience. It is the disciplined person who genuinely grows spiritually and matures in the faith. *It is the disciplined person whom God uses to touch the lives of others.*

In 1 Corinthians 9:24–27 Paul uses the illustration of an athlete disciplining and training himself for a race, to show how the believer should likewise discipline himself in the Christian life. Paul says he disciplines himself: ‘I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified’ (1 Cor. 9:27). He knew he needed to take great pains to keep himself daily in check lest, at the end of his life, there be nothing to show for it. Learn from Paul that (humanly speaking) even the greatest of preachers could end up on the ‘scrap heap’ because they failed to live disciplined

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<sup>5</sup> See my book, *Running the Race* (NCPI, Blackwood, 2002).

lives!

When we do something long enough and often enough, it becomes part of us and, for good or for bad, it becomes *a habit*. From early childhood all of us begin to learn these patterns of life—these habits. It is of considerable importance that we be sure our habits are good ones and not those which could eventually destroy us. Discipline for the Christian is therefore not an option but a fundamental necessity. It is impossible to be the person God wants us to be, or to do what he wants us to do in life, unless we live in a disciplined manner. Hence laziness, sluggishness, indiscipline, carelessness, love of ease, poor stewardship of time, money and leisure are serious hindrances to a life of godliness. Lack of self-discipline inhibits our full appropriation and enjoyment of the freedom that Christ has won for us, and stifles our ability to live in accordance with his will.

*Janet really loved the Lord. She was always wanting to talk about the things of God and was full of good works—doing things for others and ministering to the needs of those around her. But Janet rarely had a smile on her face. She was always looking inward. She always appeared to have a cloud of doubt over her faith. She lamented her weaknesses and wondered at times how she could be a converted person. I am sure she knew the truth—there is no doubt about that—but she was hopelessly undisciplined. She dressed untidily, she forgot her responsibilities and often failed to turn up when she had given her word to do so. Her reasons were always plausible, but that did not alter the fact that her undisciplined state of mind had led to unhealthy habit patterns of slackness and unreliability. She was acutely aware of her failings*

*and this in turn paralysed her from achieving anything to her satisfaction as a Christian. Janet was a perfectionist, and although she wanted everything to be right, was incapable of arriving at her desired goals. She found it hard to accept the way she was as a person and was always wanting things in her life and in her personality to be different. Technically, she understood forgiveness and could give an articulate account of what Christ had done for her. But, because of her undisciplined way of life she had terrible trouble actually living in the good of all that God had done for her. In the end, she drifted right away from Christian discipleship and no longer belongs to a church.*

‘Train yourself in godliness’ (1 Tim. 4:7b). Paul tells young Timothy that he must discipline himself towards godliness. He must be self-oriented towards godly living. Clearly godliness does not just happen in the life of a Christian. God does not just come and ‘zap’ us the moment we are converted! It is not automatic. Nor does it come about by some sort of natural progression. Godliness comes in the Christian life by the inner working of the Spirit as we are disciplined to follow his leading. Godliness comes as a result of being obedient. Godliness comes as we exercise our wills to do and be what God instructs

us to do and be. Godliness results from consistent effort and perseverance and endurance. In other words, godliness comes as a result of our persistent self-discipline according to the promises, exhortations and teaching of Scripture.

Our self-discipline must include all areas of our life. Here are three important ones:

**1. Our mind:** Our mind belongs to God and we are responsible to him as to how we use our mind. As fallen creatures, we have minds that are distorted and perverted. That image of God into which our minds were originally cast has been marred and defaced. Now, through the great blessing and miracle of regeneration, we have been given a new heart, a new will and a new mind. The Holy Spirit is now bringing to us new patterns of living and we are to be disciplined in conforming our minds to these new patterns. ‘Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds’ (Rom. 12:2).

We need to be disciplined in bringing every thought into captivity to Christ, that is, under his authority (2 Cor. 10:5). Paul says: ‘Be renewed in the spirit of your minds’ (Eph. 4:23). ‘Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord’ (Eph. 5:10). ‘Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus’ (Phil. 2:5). We are to use the incredible faculty of our mind to the honour and glory of God. That will take no little discipline!

**2. Our body:** Our body belongs to God. ‘... do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body’ (1 Cor. 6:19–20). It is a fallacy to think that we can serve God on some sort of spiritual level without giving him our body. We happen to be in a body that walks, talks, thinks, eats, sleeps, has sexual urges, goes places and does things. It is what we *do* with our body that communicates what we *are*. Our body is God’s gift to us. There is nothing evil about our body. It is sin manipulating our body that is the problem. Hence Paul urges: ‘do not let sin exercise dominion in your

mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions' (Rom. 6:12). All this spells self-discipline! We are to be disciplined in resisting the urges of indwelling sin as it seeks to manifest itself through the natural drives and instincts of the body.

**3. Our time:** Our time belongs to God. To each of us has been given a block of time for which we are stewards and, as such, responsible for every minute that God gives us. God says our times are in his hands (Ps. 31:15) and he also says, 'I know the plans I have for you' (Jer. 29:11). Thus the planning and use of our hours should be under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit. Wasted time is lost time and can never be recovered. On the other hand God does not intend that we be rushing about madly trying to do a hundred things at once! Take a good look at Jesus' life. It was full of pressing demands, but he never seemed to be in a hurry. He had time for individuals, he had time for preaching and teaching and healing, but he also made time to be alone in prayer with his Father.

Discipline of our time will include managing the way we spend our leisure hours as well as our work hours. We need to look out for over-indulgences in sport, recreation, watching TV and general socialising. It is often *because* we waste so much time in these pursuits that all sorts of guilts and pressures arise, driving our life deeper into disorder and frustration.

Lack of self-discipline in the ordinary affairs of daily life can totally undermine our experience and enjoyment of the blessings of forgiveness. This means that lack of self-discipline can be the root cause of a Christian not growing spiritually. Growth and maturity come in the

context of a disciplined building on the foundation of Christ, a building with gold, silver and precious stones (see 1 Cor. 3:12). The undisciplined Christian will know the shame of having nothing to show for their life at the end.

Of great importance in the life of a believer is the time spent in prayer and the private study of God's word. Without this daily discipline it is hard to imagine how a Christian can grow. How is it possible to know the mind of God if we only spasmodically seek his face in the communion of prayer or in the searching of the Scriptures? This should be a top priority for every Christian. We should recognise that it will also be the prime target of the enemy in order to deflect us from such discipline.

It is also in the fellowship of other believers that we grow to maturity. We should therefore be disciplined in encouraging one another to spend as much time as possible in the community of believers; disciplined in our use of the Lord's Day, disciplined in being together in worship and in prayer and in the study of his word, disciplined in serving one another in love:

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery (Gal. 5:1).

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves (James 1:22).

## QUESTIONS

1. Why is it so dangerous to lose sight of grace? What happens when we move away from an utter dependence upon grace each moment of each day?

2. What is the Galatian heresy? In what way is it ‘alive and well’ in the church today?
3. What is the great lesson about grace in 2 Corinthians 12:7–9?
4. If failure comes to us, how should we view our relationship with God? Has anything changed? In what way does grace meet our need at that point? Is grace ever a cover for sin? Give reasons for your answer in the light of Romans 6:14–15.
5. Do we have to do anything in order to maintain our standing with God? What place do discipline and effort and determination have in a Christian’s walk? Is there any contradiction between ‘resting’ in what Christ has done, and ‘pressing forward’ to live in and appropriate what he has done?
6. Why did Paul make such an effort to discipline himself? (See 1 Cor. 9:24–27.)
7. Do good habit patterns come naturally to fallen man? If not, why not? Why is self-discipline so important in the life of a Christian in establishing God-honouring habits?
8. What is the relationship between self-discipline and godly living?
9. Could it be that poor self-discipline is a ‘roadblock’ in your life to knowing a rich experience of God’s love, grace and forgiveness? If so, what do you intend to do about it?

## 24

# Hindrances to Liberty—2

It may sound strange to say this, but it's hard for many Christians to get used to the idea of liberty! The thought of being totally forgiven is foreign to us. Complete release from guilt seems to be too good to be true! *We don't really believe it.* In principle, a similar problem faced many African-American slaves last century. They found it impossible to believe that they were actually legally free following the abolition of slavery. Similarly (as mentioned in an earlier chapter), prisoners in Changi Camp in Singapore at the close of World War 2 had to be lined up and marched out in platoons because they couldn't grasp the fact that they were now free to walk out through the open gates. They had such a 'prison mentality' that they could not believe the truth!

### **UNBELIEF A HINDRANCE TO LIBERTY**

We too have to get used to the idea of freedom—freedom from guilt. We need to learn to accept forgiveness and to personally break with our old 'prison mentality' and slave routines. We need to consciously enter into our 'no

condemnation' status and live in the good of it each day. *This is a matter of faith.* You will recall that the Israelites had trouble believing God's word to them. They did not benefit from God's wonderful blessing because his actions were not met by faith on their part. Exactly the same can happen to us if we are not careful:

For indeed the good news came to us just as to them; but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened (Heb. 4:2).

God says he has liberated us, and we need to believe it! We must learn to take him at his word and step out in faith to live in the blessing of all that he has done for us. If we do not go on in faith, we will revert (as did the Galatians)

to living law-way—by measuring our performance and acceptance by God by what we do rather than by what he has done. But, as Ian Pennicook puts it: 'God will not be bought off . . . The only thing which will satisfy God is the faith of his children.'<sup>1</sup>

We need to encourage one another from the Scriptures and be in the business of exhorting others when they are tempted to doubt their forgiveness. It's great to say to another brother or sister, 'Buck up—be of good cheer—your sins are forgiven!' That word of encouragement from another is of great benefit and help to those who are struggling to believe. That exhortation helps them to know that *through Christ* they are free from guilt and are accepted by God just as they are.

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Pennicook, unpublished paper, *The Dynamic of Forgiveness*, p. 6.

## LOVE OF SIN IS A HINDRANCE TO LIBERTY

Repentance is a change of mind. It is to change our mind about sin and so to turn and go in the opposite direction. When we came to know the Lord our conversion involved repentance—this radical change of mind. As God's love came to us we saw that we were sinners in need of his grace and mercy and forgiveness. As a result, we changed our mind about our previous rebellion and hatred of God and commenced obeying him. That change was not automatic, nor was it something which we just decided to do. Repentance was—and always is—God's gift to us. (See Acts 5:32.)

That once-and-for-all repentance which took place at our conversion should be going on in our lives at every point where sin may have overtaken us. That means we can't receive the benefits and blessings of forgiveness without repentance. If we refuse to repent and abandon sin, then God's forgiveness will be remote and unreal to us. Because we are never free from the back-drag of sin, we will always be needing the ongoing benefits of the Cross, and hence we will always need to be owning up to our sin and repenting of it. In other words, each day we will be having to 'out-work' that initial change of mind that took place at our conversion. We will constantly need to be repudiating all that we are *in and of ourselves*. 'This leaves us with no option but to cling to Christ, which is faith. That means that there can be no faith apart from repentance nor repentance apart from faith since the two are inseparable.'<sup>2</sup>

The Old Testament has a lot to say about Israel being

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<sup>2</sup> Ian Pennicook, *The Dynamic of Forgiveness*, pp. 7–8.

in love with their sin. Though God had delivered them from the bondage of Egypt, they nevertheless hung on to their old ways and refused to obey him. Though he constantly blessed them with visible manifestations of his Presence and spoke to them through his many prophets, yet *they did not change their minds*. They were the recipients of all the blessings of liberty, but did not benefit because of their love of sin. (See such passages as Jer. 2:9–19, 32; 3:3; 4:22; 5:30–31; 8:4–7.)

Like Israel of old, we too can carry on a love-affair with our sin and be in need of repentance. Sin's deceit is so perverse that we may not see where we are heading, and we could become very adept at rationalising our actions. The words of Hosea could be applicable to us when he says to Israel:

Take words with you and return to the LORD; say to him, 'Take away all guilt; accept that which is good, and we will offer the fruit of our lips' (Hosea 14:2).

God's word through Joel may also be appropriate:

Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing (Joel 2:12–13).

Jesus knew that we would always have debts to owe and that we would need to ask for forgiveness. He taught us to pray: 'forgive us our debts' (Matt. 6:12). As Christians we approach our Father always on the grounds that we are *forgiven* sons and daughters. That forgiveness is free and final. If it were not so, then we couldn't come to him at all. The Christian is never other than a forgiven sinner. This being so, why do we need to confess sin and

ask for forgiveness? One writer puts it this way:

There will inevitably be in the Christian life experiences of sinning and of being forgiven, of falling and of being restored. But the grace which forgives and restores is not some new thing, nor is it conditioned in some new way. It is not dependent upon penitence, or works, or merit of ours. It is the same absolutely free grace which meets us at the cross. From first to last, it is the blood of Jesus, God's Son, which cleanses from sin. The daily pardon, the daily cleansing, are but the daily virtue of that one all-embracing act of mercy in which, while we were yet sinners, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son.<sup>3</sup>

To refuse to ask for God's forgiveness is to leave ourselves wide open to the paralysis of guilt, and so to forfeit the incredible power of a guiltless conscience:

If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness . . . My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. *But if anyone does sin,* we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 1:9; 2:1–2).

To confess our sin is to own up to God that what he says about us is true. It is to acknowledge that we daily need the gift of repentance and the grace of his forgiveness. It is not that God is forgiving us *because* we confess. No, that forgiveness has already been forged and extended to us freely at the Cross and we came into that full forgiveness the moment we became Christians. Our confession is for the sake of our conscience. Confession is his gracious provision in order that we might be reminded —at the times of our failure—that he has once

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<sup>3</sup> James Denney, *The Death of Christ*, Tyndale, London, 1960, p. 162.

and for all loved us back there at the Cross and that Jesus Christ goes on being our Advocate. Forgiveness is therefore not conditional on confession. But knowing the ongoing reality of that forgiveness in our conscience day by day is indeed conditional on confession at those times when sin has tripped us up!

Inherent in the whole act of confession is the fundamental principle that we are *forsaking* our sin. To come to God in confession with no intention of forsaking that sin is to make a mockery of his grace and love. We need to ‘lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and . . . run with perseverance the race that is set before us’ (Heb. 12:1b):

. . . if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land (2 Chron. 7:14).

## **RETAINING BAD MEMORIES**

I have talked about unbelief and the lack of repentance as being obstacles to us living in liberty, but what about those bad memories from the past that seem to dog our steps every day? How does knowing God’s forgiveness apply to those believers whose dark memories seem so deeply imprinted that they just can’t seem to forget them?

I once heard a pastor speak in this way about our memories:

Many sincere people suffer from the awful, horrible, mistaken, destructive idea that they are going through their present problems because God is punishing them for something in the past. But God does not intend that we carry the sterile burdens of

our guilty or damaged past. The problem is, we never really forget anything that we have experienced. We may not be able to just call it to our conscious memory, but it is there. It is filed away in the storehouse of the mind. This is both wonderful and terrible. It can be so destructive when painful memories of the past (perhaps of childhood) seem to rise to the surface. We want to forget them, but we can't. All we do is bury them deeper in our unconscious minds. The great, strong, intense emotions that we experienced back there at some time have no way of being siphoned off, of being channelled off, of being expressed. They build up and live within our hearts for years and years with amazing persistence and almost hypnotic power. The truth is, these submerged memories can't be stored away in peace in the same way as our mind files away pleasant memories. Some people have to maintain such a great effort to keep this balance in their lives . . . to keep the memories below the surface of actual conscious thinking . . . that there's a constant drag on their energies. They come to the surface and express themselves as deep depression, or rage, or lust, or inferiority, or anger or fear.<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes these problems are not always automatically resolved as a result of our conversion to Christ. If our initial understanding of our forgiveness is deficient, then deliverance may not come. As a result we may have great difficulty in growing and maturing as a Christian. What is needed is for the reality of the Cross to be seen in all its fullness and, in faith, applied quite specifically to these memories. *We need to see that the Cross has cleansed our past entirely.* We need to realise that Christ has taken upon himself all our past, and all the elements of that past which trouble our memory. We must know that he has once and for all purged these memories of their guilt. It is not so much that our memory of sin needs to be healed, it is that the sin itself needs to be cleansed and purged. Once we see that our

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<sup>4</sup> Dr David Seamands, sermon on tape.

guilt has been truly taken away, then our memory of those past sins will be at rest. At the Cross, God has cleansed our sins and therefore our memory of those sins. We have a cleansed memory *because* our sins have been cleansed. This is true whether we 'feel it' or not:

Come now, let us argue it out, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool (Isa. 1:18).

God's grace comes to us in the person and work of Christ and, although totally sufficient for all our needs, is of no benefit if not appropriated by faith. No matter what a person may have suffered as a result of their own sin or the sin of others, the surrender of the will to the Lordship of Christ is the prime requisite if we are to know and live in the enjoyment of the fruit of the Cross.

It may be that what troubles us about our past and the memory of our sins is not so much their evil and unholiness, but our wounded *pride* in that we did not make it without having done those things! We feel the deep shame of not being the person that God created us to be, and for that reason we seek to repress or erase the memory of those past failures. Geoffrey Bingham says this:

Man cannot recall [take back] his sins for he has done them. He cannot erase them for that is impossible. In spite of all his efforts he cannot have 'a good self-image' for he has fallen short of the full image of God in which he was created. He needs a miracle (i) to erase his guilt of sins, and (ii) to restore to him the sense of being fully a human being . . . How then does God erase guilt and drain human memories of their accusing and painful content? . . . The answer is, 'By Christ'.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *The Cleansing of the Memories*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1995, pp. 9–10.

He goes on to quote Jeremiah 31:34b, ‘I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more’, and comments:

We can call this ‘the Divine forgetfulness’, i.e. ‘holy amnesia’, but more correctly we should call it ‘the Divine non-remembering’. *God refuses to remember our sins!* If then God refuses to remember our sins, why should we choose [to] remember them?<sup>6</sup>

We must remember *not* to remember our past sins! This is not just a matter of ‘positive thinking’. Rather it is seeing *by faith* how things really are. It is seeing our past from God’s point of view. Geoff Bingham continues:

We are saying that God—through Christ—has so purged our sins, that they have been worked out to exhaustion and extinction, and all their power of guilt, penalty and pollution has been erased. In other words, there are—effectively—no sins to remember! God has not simply ignored our sins. He has destroyed them, forever! They are as if they never were, which is really the technical meaning of justification . . . God has denuded them of substance, of guilt, power and pollution. If they come to us in memory, then in faith in the Cross we should say, ‘Whilst you represent the sins I committed, you have no substance. God has emptied you, purified you, and taken away the guilt which accompanied you. You are wraiths, ghosts of the past come back to haunt me via the accusations of Satan and his hosts, but you have no substance. I refuse to let you have substance. Begone!’<sup>7</sup>

There are ‘counsellors’ today who want to dig up the past of those who come to them for help. They believe that this is the way to enable them to have their damaged emotions and memories dealt with. They want to act as ‘mediators’ or, worse still, as ‘priests’, in aiding their subjects to be exorcised from all past guilts and bad

<sup>6</sup> Bingham, *The Cleansing of the Memories*, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Bingham, *The Cleansing of the Memories*, p. 15.

memories. This is an impossible task even if it were not dangerous on the one hand, and unnecessary on the other. Such a re-cycling of our past will have no other effect but to *increase* our sense of guilt! ‘No one ever need visit our memories to disinter them, and no one should ever seek to recycle them through some technique they have for purifying the past, for it has been purified and we have been eased from frightening memory.’<sup>8</sup>

In his excellent little book *The Cleansing of the Memories* Geoff Bingham lists a number of reasons why people want to go back to the past. These may be summarised as follows:

1. Some do not know that the evil of their past has been dealt with.
2. They do not wish to be obligated to obedience by the love shown in (God’s) forgiveness.
3. Pride cannot accept that grace has completed the work of healing our past in the one decisive act of the Atonement.
4. We think our past too difficult a thing to have been dealt with decisively by the Atonement.
5. There are the elements of self-pity and anger where the person believes that he or she has been badly done by. (They are the victims of heredity, environment, parental upbringing or circumstances—to say nothing of the cruelty and selfishness of *other* people.)

It could be that the great blessing of God’s total forgiveness is unreal to us because we are hanging on to the bad memories of what *others* have done to us—as John’s

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<sup>8</sup> Bingham, *The Cleansing of the Memories*, pp. 13–14.

story illustrates:

*John was so self-conscious and timid he could hardly muster the courage to say why he had come to see me or what was on his mind. I tried to find some common territory as a basis for our conversation but was only met by an awkward silence. Slowly and painfully (amidst many tears) the story began to emerge. He said he had been abused within his family ever since he was a small child and the memory of these occasions had been returning recently with vicious and paralysing power. He was now in a state of utter exhaustion from trying to suppress these dark visions from the past. His sense of self-worth was so low that he felt he was a nobody. He could not sleep and was unable to concentrate on his studies. He feared he was going mad. I said very little, preferring to allow him to share only what he wanted me to know. In the end I prayed for him briefly and asked if he would like to come back in a few days.*

*John returned a number of times during the subsequent weeks. On these occasions he opened up much more, and we were able to talk about the hurts and hates which come into our lives as the result of what others say and do to us. I spoke to him concerning God's love and grace, and he affirmed very strongly that he was a Christian and was very definite in stating his belief that God loved him and had forgiven his sin. I asked if he thought he was angry, but he vigorously denied the suggestion! However, when he returned the next week, he said that he'd come to realise that he was indeed angry—angry with those whom he believed had stuffed up his life. I suggested that he was probably also angry with God. I tried to*

*steer his thoughts to the reality of what Christ had accomplished on the Cross when he took upon himself all our anger and guilt and failure and inferiority. We talked about the cleansing of the memories (as distinct from the so-called 'healing of the memories'), and I tried to help him see that Christ —by his sin-bearing act on the Cross—had erased all the evil of sin so that our memories of the past could be at rest. Although he said he believed all this, I could detect no flicker of response in his lifeless eyes and expressionless face.*

*Over the weeks we also talked at great length about our need to forgive those who had wronged us. If, as he said, God's forgiveness was real to him then he ought to forgive. But whenever I raised this subject I detected a strong resistance. It was not so much because he found it hard to forgive those who had wronged him, rather that he seemed to be determined not to forgive.*

*John relied very much on people's sympathy and told far too many about his situation and past life. He gradually became harder and harder to talk to until, eventually, he avoided any contact with those who were likely to face him with his responsibility for his side of the problem.*

*I don't doubt the awful emotional damage that John may have suffered and the impact this would have had upon him, but I watched with sadness his retreat into gross self-pity, rebellion and determined disobedience. I'm sure there are professional counsellors who could offer John help on the horizontal level and I would not minimise their value. But in the final analysis, only God's grace can change the human heart and bring total and lasting cleansing to the memory as well as peace to the conscience. John knows, at least intellec-*

*tually, what God has done for him through the Lord Jesus Christ, but seems to think he cannot afford to let go. He thinks he needs that hurt. He wants to retain something to make people feel sorry for him. He does not want God's grace. By refusing to forgive, he has refused to truly receive God's forgiveness and the release from his past which the Lord alone can provide.*

*Thankfully that is not the end of John's story. Over time, others have helped him to grow spiritually and accept his responsibilities in life. His past no longer haunts him as it once did and he is beginning to rejoice in his release from guilt and shame and blame. He is now living a productive and meaningful life as a believer in Jesus Christ.*

Many of us refuse to let go of our hurts and hates. We refuse to forgive those who have wronged us, and thus our enjoyment of the Christian life is superficial and somewhat artificial. No matter how much we may have been wronged by others, *we* must take full responsibility for *our* anger or bitterness or lack of forgiveness or refusal to forget. Not only has Christ healed us of those damaging experiences of the past, he has also healed us of the *effects* of those wrongs that others may have committed against us. We are no longer the helpless victims of our past. It is simply not valid to think that what others have done to us has now irrevocably scarred and marred us, and that, as the victims of those events, there is nothing we can do about it. Christ has purged us from all the harmful elements of our past, and we may now look at our bad memories and know that they can no longer touch us—they have been de-loused! Right at this moment we may step out in faith and begin to live our

new life in the power of the Cross and in the new life of the Spirit. *Not* to do so is to deny all that Christ has done for us in liberating us from sin and guilt and evil.

At the same time it must be said that it is pointless trying to forget what may be indelibly marked on our memory. If we pretend that things have not happened or try to expunge these memories, that will only add to our guilt. We must learn to see ourselves separate from our sins and guilt, and see them as dealt with, no longer part of us and no longer possessing power to contaminate our mind. We need to come to the place where we do not care any more about our past memories, nor care about whether or not we are experiencing recalls of traumatic events. These may still come, but they are skeletons. We should see that we *need* the past—whatever it may have been—for without it nothing makes sense. It is better to have a bad past than none at all! Without a past we have no meaningful present and no future. But we need to know that our past has been entirely purged of all guilt and of all harmful effects upon us because ‘all things—both good and bad—constitute our past, and are substantial in our present, and are linked with our future . . . The Christian’s past has been purified . . . The good things of the past are retained, so that in the present the believer may live unimpeded by the wrong things of the past’.<sup>9</sup>

## QUESTIONS

1. Why is it hard for us to get used to the idea of liberty? What is the real issue? What is the remedy? What does Galatians 3:1–5 teach about this matter?

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<sup>9</sup> Bingham, *The Cleansing of the Memories*, pp. 24–5.

2. Why is repentance and confession of sin so vital in the life of a Christian? What happens when we don't own up to our sin? Does this mean that God's forgiveness is conditional on our confession?
3. What is the sobering lesson we can learn from Israel's failure to repent? Is it possible that we too could love sin and not want to forsake it? What is the likely outcome of such disobedience? How does repentance relate to our day-to-day enjoyment and experience of forgiveness?
4. Why is it that we can never really erase our memories? In what way is memory God's gift to us? How do our memories shape what we are and what we will be?
5. Are there any human techniques that can ultimately liberate us from our bad past if God has not forgiven us? Why is our realised experience of God's forgiveness so important in regard to bad memories?
6. What are some of the reasons why people want to dig up their bad past? Why do some people insist on recalling their unhappy memories? Are these efforts healthy? In the light of the Cross are they necessary?
7. Once knowing that God has entirely cleansed us from the guilt of sin, why is it vital that we remember NOT to remember those sins?
8. How important is faith in the matter of the cleansing of the memories? Upon what is our faith based? How

does this differ from 'positive thinking'?

## Hindrances to Liberty—3

*No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us (1 John 4:12)*

### **REFUSING TO LOVE OTHERS AS GOD LOVES**

We have come to know God's love for us through his great work of the Cross, and that love now flows out through us. Thus it is through his forgiven people that God's love is demonstrated to others. 'Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart' (1 Pet. 1:22). Peter is telling us that we have been purified (forgiven and cleansed) by the truth and power of the Gospel—not as an end in itself, but *with a view to loving the brethren purely*. We now can (and must) love the brethren earnestly. Paul's words to Timothy are in the same vein: 'But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith' (1 Tim. 1:5).

The truth is, love is mandatory. We are *commanded* to love. 'The commandment we have from him is this: those

who love God must love their brothers and sisters also' (1 John 4:21). It is because God so loved us that he *gave* his only Son (John 3:16). Thus the heart of God's action towards us is that his love is shown in his giving. God sets out to meet our deepest needs (pardon, reconciliation, forgiveness and new life) by giving us of his very best—his own beloved Son. God's love for us is never just words, but action—it is *doing*. Our love for others should therefore be of the same character. True love *serves* others. Paul puts it clearly: 'through love become slaves to one another' (Gal. 5:13b). Love discerns the needs of others and cares enough for them to set out to meet those needs.

This love (of Christ in us) constrains us in all our actions. It controls and motivates our thoughts, words, actions and attitudes. Redeemed men and women are *new creations*. They are not what they were before their conversion—in spite of their present idiosyncrasies, faults and failings!

For the love of Christ urges us on . . . From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Cor. 5:14, 16–17).

In the light of the Cross, for Christians *not* to love is a travesty. It is to go against all that God has done. It is to deny that we are now indwelt by the very Spirit of love himself. We should therefore take note of the severe warning given by Christ to the Ephesian church in Revelation:

I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know

that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent (Rev. 2:2–5).

Ian Pennicook has written:

It is therefore essential that we should be continually filled with the Father's love and deliberately and consciously abide in that love. This means that we must consciously and deliberately live in the wonder of the forgiveness which was won for us on the Cross and which was worked in us by the Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

## **REFUSING TO FORGIVE OTHERS**

The great practical test of our experience of forgiveness is that we forgive others. Consider carefully the following passages. Jesus taught us to pray: 'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors' (Matt. 6:12). He then added: 'For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses' (Matt. 6:14–15). On another occasion Peter put the question to Jesus: 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' (Matt. 18:21). Jesus replied with the following powerful parable:

Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the

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<sup>1</sup> Pennicook, *The Dynamics of Forgiveness*, p. 9.

reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, *if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart* (Matt. 18:22–35).

The first servant in this story never really understood that he had been forgiven. The same could be true of us if we consistently refuse to forgive others. ‘Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses’ (Mark 11:25). ‘Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, “I repent,” you must forgive’ (Luke 17:3–4).

If we would be forgiven, then we must forgive. If we will not forgive, then it proves we have not been forgiven ourselves. ‘It may be a blessing to be wronged, since it affords us an opportunity of judging whether we are

indeed the recipients of the pardon which comes from the throne of God.<sup>2</sup>

*Joe first visited my home when he was about nineteen. He was angry and very depressed. He had attempted suicide and felt he had very little to live for. His father had left his mum when he was a youngster and he still boiled with anger at the loss of a normal childhood. We talked long into the night about God's love in providing salvation through Christ and how the Lord alone could give purpose and meaning to his life.*

*As we talked on, light began to flood into Joe's understanding. Suddenly he saw what it all meant: the Cross, the death of Jesus, his resurrection and his promise of new birth. His face lit up as the revelation of God's truth dawned on him. He was so excited! He danced around my lounge room like a young kid! He could hardly believe it was true: 'God has forgiven me—entirely? He has taken all my sin? He's no longer angry with me?'*

*In the weeks that followed he began to read his Bible with great relish. It had been a closed book before, but now had rich and immediate meaning as he commenced his life as a Christian disciple. He would call in from time to time to clarify this or that point and seemed to be growing spiritually at a great rate of knots.*

*Some months after his conversion he called in, this time very much down in the dumps. He complained that all the 'sparkle' had gone out of his enjoyment of Christ. The Bible now seemed dead and lifeless. Prayer was no longer the joy it had been from the time*

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<sup>2</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon's Popular Exposition of Matthew*, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, London, 1962, p. 36.

*he first came to faith. Something was wrong. So we talked, tracing the great truths of the Gospel once again. He had no trouble agreeing with all I said. Yes, he still believed all these things with strong conviction. Why then this complete loss of joy?*

*I then asked what he felt about his father. His explosive response was quite unexpected. ‘I hate the rotter.’ He stomped around the room venting his hostility. When he had calmed down I suggested that this may be the problem. Of course I knew it was! He had been reading and learning about God’s forgiveness but was not prepared to forgive his own father. He had received God’s pardon but would not let go of his hatred and anger for his dad. We then worked through the Scriptures relating to our need to forgive others. I convinced Joe that he had to do something about this. Ideally, he should try and find his father. With this aim in view we rehearsed the very words that he would use if he was able to locate him.*

*In the weeks that followed he finally traced his dad. They were able to meet and Joe confessed to him his hatred and anger—asking for his forgiveness. The two were wonderfully reconciled and Joe’s joy and peace in the Lord instantly returned.*

Consider the following passages:

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, *forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you* (Eph. 4:31–32).

As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other, *just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also*

*must forgive* (Col. 3:12–13).

When we come to see the extent of God's forgiveness towards us, love is evoked and we see we are indebted to him. It is this forgiving love which obligates us to obedience. The reason a man does not forgive others is that he has never seen the extent to which God has forgiven him. Once God's total forgiveness grips us, we'll not find it hard to forgive others.

Love and forgiveness go hand in hand. Our forgiveness of others is the ultimate proof test of the love we say we have. Love goes into action to make the first move. Love does not wait for the other person to make the first move. Love does not wait for the other person to take the blame and reach out first. It's pointless saying that the other person is 95% in the wrong, therefore it's up to them to apologise! *You* are 100% responsible for your 5% wrong, and you must deal with it no matter what the cost. That's the way of love. That's the way of true forgiveness. That's the way of true sonship. That's the way of the Cross.

To be *unforgiving* is to be in direct rebellion against God. At core, somewhere, is a form of self-assertion which is deliberately leaving God out of the picture. Any refusal on our part to forgive others is a defiance—open or secret—which resists the authority of Jesus Christ as Lord in our life. Many times, in the history of the Christian Church, a bitter spirit, maintained by just one Christian against someone else, has been like a great dam holding back a river of blessing. The catalyst for revival in your life, and in your church, may well be right at this point. It only takes one person to begin the chain reaction!

### SAYING, 'I CAN'T FORGIVE MYSELF'

People sometimes say to me: 'I can believe God has forgiven me, but the trouble is, I can't forgive myself'. Such a statement is a contradiction in terms. If God has totally forgiven me, then I have no right to say that I can't 'forgive' myself. In reality, I am saying that I don't believe *God* has forgiven me.

Some people are tortured by all sorts of emotional conflicts and personality problems: guilt, duplicity, resentment, self-despising, poor self-image and so on. They are unable to 'feel' forgiven because they say they can't 'forgive' themselves. They think they are the ones against whom they bear the greatest resentment. Their hatred is against themselves. At core, this is probably just our perverted pride by which we are saying we won't admit that we need God's forgiveness. As I have said in an earlier chapter, God's grace starves our ego and so we won't admit we are entirely dependent upon him to cleanse us. This disguised refusal to accept God's forgiveness is just as damaging and brings just as much torment as does resentment directed against someone else. The same self-atonement is being played out. Such people have never really accepted the forgiveness of God and are still attempting to pay for their own guilts.

The fact is, *we are not called upon to forgive ourselves*. Forgiving oneself is not a Scriptural concept. In fact, it's an impossible task to forgive one's *self*! If we are forgiven by God, then that forgiveness must be accepted:

If God has forgiven us, then who are we to dare to gainsay that by inferring that if we will not forgive ourselves then God has forgiven us in vain? It is obviously a concealed way of opposing forgiveness. It must spring from pride or a perverted and wrong

sense of inferiority. We are forgiven and we had better accept the fact.<sup>3</sup>

As we have seen in a previous chapter, to believe that God has *forgiven* our sin is to believe that he has *forgotten* our sin.

The second half of the greatest commandment in Matthew 22:36–40 says: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’. If you refuse to ‘forgive’ yourself, then you will never be able to love yourself. If you do not love yourself, how will your neighbour get on? The fact is: God’s total forgiveness leaves us free now to love ourselves completely and absolutely without any strings attached! This means we can love ourselves in a right way, and hence love others in a right and godly way.

### **NOT FULLY RECEIVING GOD’S FORGIVENESS**

The patterns of defeat and the sin of our past may have had a very strong hold upon us and we could be tempted to look back at these with fear and misgiving, not sure that the future really can be different. The reality is, there is no need to look at our past. As far as God is concerned we have no guilty past! (See the story about Ginger in chapter 10.) Our past has been entirely cleansed. The Lord says to us: ‘I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins’ (Isa. 43:25). Thus he calls on us to look constantly to the Cross and to the finished work of Christ, knowing that our past has been dealt with once and for all. The Cross of Christ should always be the focal point

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<sup>3</sup> Bingham, *Freely Flows Forgiveness*, p. 52.

of our attention.

It sometimes happens that (as believers) we fall into some significant temptation and, as a result, feel that all has been ruined. We really did believe before, but *this* failure seems so awful and so final. We now doubt the sincerity and reality of what we have previously thought to be true. Or it may be that failure has come over a period of time and gradually we have drifted away from the things of God, one failure leading on to another. We may now have completely lost sight of our forgiveness. We have great doubts that God can now accept us. We may even feel too much of a hypocrite to go back to church or to associate with other believers. If this is the case, then several things may be happening:

**1. We may have become disillusioned:** We have lost confidence in God's power and his promises. We have prayed but found no answer. We have tried all sorts of disciplines, but with no success. It will seem that we are only playing over again the same old 'recording' of the defeats of the past. All the outward aspects of our profession will be kept up, when in fact we will be going deeper and deeper into disillusionment and despair inside. God will seem far away. He will no longer seem real to us. What we once knew in the past will seem far away, and we will doubt that it was ever real.

**2. We may have become dishonest:** There will be a veneer of Scriptural and theological terms by which we will cover up our real state. We will deny our deepest needs and the problem will go further underground—perhaps reappearing in a disguised form in some other area of our life. We may think it is hidden, but others will plainly

see through the cover-up and will not be impressed by our ‘witness’. We may pretend to keep up our profession of faith, but inside we will know that it is not real. We will feel truly miserable and hypocritical. We will have a foot in the world and will drift more and more into the things of the world, while at the same time have a foot in the Kingdom with a nostalgia for the things of God. Our guilt will be pressing in upon us, and we will see no way out of the dilemma.

*Don had become a Christian many years before we met. But his life had been far from consistent. There had been many deep failures and he drifted in and out of an awareness of God's acceptance. When he first visited me we talked about the forgiveness God has brought to us through the event of the Cross, and the wonder of God's grace and love seemed to break open to him. He became very excited at the discovery that God had entirely forgiven all his sin. ‘Isn't it wonderful!’ he would often exclaim. He began coming each week to a Bible study in my home, but after about six months he suddenly quit and would have nothing more to do with me. I was perplexed and saddened. There was nothing*

*I could do, and so we continued to earnestly pray for him. I later learned that he had once again fallen into gross sin and no longer felt that he was forgiven. He could not face his Christian friends and so retreated.*

*Months stretched into years. Occasionally he would ring me at work or at home and express a somewhat nostalgic longing that we might get together and talk. But it never happened. Each time I tried to follow up his plea the door would close firmly in my face. Sometimes I would find a forlorn-sounding message*

*from him on my answering machine, but when I attempted to ring back or make contact there would be silence.*

*Unexpectedly, I bumped into him one day. Our rapport was instant. He excitedly described his current 'renaissance with God', reminding me of the time I had talked with him about Christ's forgiveness all those years before. 'I've never forgotten what you told me', he said. Through that 'chance' meeting our friendship was re-established. Only days before we met he had come to the end of his tether and in deep depression prayed desperately that God would change things—otherwise he didn't want to go on living. We began talking once again about God's forgiveness. This time there appeared to be a new quality to his sharing. He now seemed to have a deep humility with an openness to the truth. He said he had surrendered his will to God's will and was now not only content to hear what he had to say, but desperate to hear—as if his life depended upon it!*

*Although I marvelled at what seemed to be happening in Don's life, I had a strange and nagging uneasiness about it all. On the one hand I felt I was a spectator witnessing the unfolding miracle of a transformed life and yet, at the same time, something warned me that he could revert to his old ways—just as he had done all those years before.*

*Don continued to grow and mature in the faith—though not without great difficulties. Then one day he quit speaking to me—just as he had done previously. Other Christians found themselves equally cut off without any apparent reason. We tried to make contact but without success.*

*There is little doubt that Don 'knows' the truth of*

*the Gospel as clearly as any man could ever know it. He is able to articulate the great doctrines of the Bible very clearly. But his knowledge appears to be primarily at the intellectual level and not a deep matter of the heart. His ‘knowing’ is conditional on what he wants to do with his life at the time. It seems that ultimately Don does what Don wants to do. If this happens to clash with the claims of Christ, then he rationalises his actions or his belief, to suit. His old habits had no doubt resurfaced and he had succumbed. His personal realisation of God’s forgiveness had evaporated.*

The fabulous truth is that God’s wonderful grace never changes! If I was able to contact my friend Don I would tell him that *no failure is final*. No matter how he may have fallen, and no matter what he may have thought or said or done, the Cross still stands as the testimony to God’s unchanging love for him. We all need, in the face of any such failure, to come back to that Cross. It is only by seeing that God’s total forgiveness also applies specifically to these areas of recent failure in our life that the cycle of guilt will be broken. This may involve confiding in a trusted Christian counsellor who knows how to guide our thinking, our praying and our believing to the specific areas of our life where defeat has been predominant. Know that it was for *that* sin that Christ died for you. Know that he took up into himself on the Cross *that* defeat, *that* failure, *that* evil, *that* particular habit of yours—for which you feel so ‘unforgivable’. Learn to apply Christ’s love and forgiveness quite specifically to your particular need.

Be reminded that ‘Christ bore our sins in his own body

long before we ever committed them'.<sup>4</sup>

## QUESTIONS

1. Why is it a travesty for a Christian not to love? What should be done if our love for others has grown cold?
2. In what way is our love of others important in respect to our own healthy living as a Christian?
3. In what way is God's forgiveness of our sin the only basis for us to be able to truly love others? Why is it that non-Christians can never love as God intended they should?
4. What happens to our conscience if we do not forgive others? What happens to the other person if we don't forgive them? What does God say about unforgiveness on our part?
5. In what way is any unforgiveness on our part a direct rebellion against God? Do we ever have any grounds for not forgiving others? How should we practically deal with any such unforgiveness?
6. Why is it both foolish and unnecessary to say 'I can't forgive myself'? What does this betray concerning that person's understanding of God's forgiveness?
7. Why do some Christians become disillusioned and/or dishonest in matters of faith? What is the remedy?

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<sup>4</sup> James Torrance, NCTM Monthly Pastors' Studies tape, 6 May 1996.

8. What are the implications for you personally when Isaiah 43:25 tells you that God has blotted out your transgressions?
9. How can we be confident that no failure is final? What is the solution when we are conscious of having failed in our Christian walk?

## Hindrances to Liberty—4

### **DELIBERATE DISOBEDIENCE**

Many of our ‘wilderness’ experiences in the Christian life are directly attributable to wilful disobedience. Our Lord wants us to obey him. His indwelling Holy Spirit is always seeking to draw us on in obedience so that our lives will be more and more like Christ’s. When we disobey, we grieve his Spirit, even though it is the Spirit who communicates to us the blessings of the Cross—especially that of forgiveness. If we find that our awareness of forgiveness and the enjoyment of our freedom seems to have faded, then we should ask ourselves if it may be because we have a hidden agenda and do not want to press on in obedience to the Lord’s revealed will. In some way or other we are deliberately going against his word and are being rebellious when it comes to the matter of *doing* what we know to be God’s will for our lives at that particular point in time. Such a position is very dangerous because it invites the Father’s disciplinary hand. It invites his judgment upon us in order to bring us back into line (see Heb. 12:3–11).

The Israelites were often stubborn and rebellious. Many times it is recorded in the Old Testament that they

hardened their hearts against the Lord, even though he had delivered them from the bondage and slavery of Egypt. The Israelites chose to close their eyes to what God had done, not only in that deliverance, but also in their subsequent experience of his power during their trek to the land of Canaan. Often God warned them against disobeying his commands and told them what would be the results of their disobedience. He revealed to them that his commands are ‘the way things are’, and that to go against his word was to go against his creative way of living.

Deuteronomy chapters 27 and 28 are a record of God’s promises to Israel of blessing where there is obedience, and his threatenings where there is disobedience. In contrast to the wonderful fruit and blessings which God promises to the obedient, he says that all disobedience has its dire consequences and no human being is exempt from this fact. Hear his words to his covenant people Israel:

But *if you will not obey* the LORD your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees, which I am commanding you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you . . . (Deut. 28:15).

If you will fear the LORD and serve him and heed his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the LORD, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the LORD your God, **it will be well**; but *if you will not heed* the voice of the LORD, but rebel against the commandment of the LORD, then the hand of the LORD will be against you and your king (1 Sam. 12:14–15).

There are great lessons for us to learn from what happened to Israel. Many of these are highlighted by the New Testament writers. For example, in 1 Corinthians 10:6–12 Paul reminds us that all the children of Israel

were not

only witnesses to, but participants in, God's great acts of kindness to them in the wilderness. Nevertheless, because of their rebellion and disobedience his judgment came upon them and he warns us not to follow in their steps:

Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play.' We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. *So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall*

(1 Cor. 10:6–12).

Wilful disobedience, refusing to love, rejecting conscience—all these actions stifle our enjoyment and experience of forgiveness. It is impossible for a disobedient Christian to live in the wonder and power of liberty. It's a contradiction in terms! What is needed is a return to the enjoyment of forgiveness. That comes through a return to the Cross, an acknowledgment of our rebellion and seeing afresh what God has done there in releasing us from guilt. Only by a return to that same pardon of Calvary which we knew at first, can we be free again. Any continuation in disobedience is deadly dangerous, and at core it is straight-out unbelief:

Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' so

that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end (Heb. 3:12–14).

Our Lord wants us to obey him and to enjoy the abundant life he has provided for us. He wants us to live in the good of all that he has done for us on Calvary. He wants us to be showing his nature and character to others and to be reflecting his glory to his Creation. He wants us to be filled with the Spirit and to be living each day in such a way as is honouring to him, *and* as is honouring to ourselves as his creatures. He takes great delight in us when we are obedient. Samuel asked the disobedient king Saul:

Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is no less a sin than divination, and stubbornness is like iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king (1 Sam. 15:22–23).

Because we can so easily rationalise our actions, we should take great care to avoid being deluded about our wilful disobedience. The New Testament writers warn us of the dangers:

Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure person, or one who is greedy (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are *disobedient*. Therefore do not be associated with them. For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light . . . (Eph. 5:5–8).

Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the message declared

through angels was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? (Heb. 2:1–3).

The writer of Proverbs knew the importance of deliberately and consciously obeying the Lord in all things, and of the great blessings that flow from that trust and dependency:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. *In all your ways acknowledge him*, and he will make straight your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. It will be a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body (Prov. 3:5–8).

Clergy kids often have a tough time making it through their turbulent teenage years. They are *supposed* to behave! They are *expected* to be Christians! But as someone has said: ‘God doesn’t have grandchildren: he only has children’. In other words, sons and daughters of ministers and missionaries have to come to faith in Christ for themselves and cannot inherit that experience from their parents, any more than ‘ordinary’ kids can from their believing mothers and fathers.

*Brett was no exception. Although he knew the truth of the Gospel and called himself a Christian, he was basically rebellious at heart. In his late teens he left home to sow his wild oats in a far country, expecting his parents' faith would stand him in good stead. But once out of their company and away from the church where his father was the pastor, Brett's life began to fall apart. Once away from the warm coals of love and faith which had been the background to his life since childhood he began to grow cold. He very soon embarked on a deliberate 'holiday from God', caught*

*up in his idols and entranced by the things of the world.*

*It was a year before he returned home—now more miserable than he'd ever been. He felt lost and dissatisfied with life. He had not found fulfilment in all those pleasures and activities for which he had left home more than twelve months before. Nor could he now see the relevance of all those past associations within the church to which he had previously belonged. He wasn't comfortable there any more, but nor could he deny the void he felt inside. He wanted answers and was desperate for a solution to the aching emptiness that now haunted him day and night.*

*Shortly after Brett's return home, the African pastor and evangelist Festo Kivengere was in town and he went to hear him speak. His subject that night was 'The love of the Cross'. It was God's time for Brett. As he listened he saw clearly what Christ's death on the Cross had accomplished on his behalf. Suddenly a true meaning to his life snapped into focus. As genuine faith was born the prodigal knew that he had come home to the Father.*

*Brett began attending a local Bible study. They had been working through Romans chapter by chapter, and many of those who had been in the group from the beginning were already seeing and experiencing the reality of its great themes. Brett had not had that advantage, nevertheless that afternoon the central teaching of Romans broke through to him with great clarity. The leader was speaking about guilt and the conscience, and was trying to show what it meant for a person to be righteous in God's sight because of the substitutionary work of Christ. One statement hit Brett with such force that it turned him upside down and has*

*never left him: ‘You will never be more righteous in God’s eyes than you are right now’. He looked at the study leader with utter amazement. He genuinely glowed with the joy of discovering that his righteousness in God’s eyes has to do entirely with Jesus Christ, God’s Son, and not with any part of his own ‘performance’ as a believer.*

*Brett’s obedience is now based on who and what he is in Christ. Of course there are times when his guilt floods back and the Cross seems to go out of focus. But it is never long before he comes back to the heart of the Gospel—that righteousness which is his in Christ alone.*

As in Brett’s case, at the heart of all deliberate rebellion and disobedience to the Lord is an *anti-authority* spirit. By refusing to obey, we are saying, ‘We do not want this Man to reign over us’! We do not want Christ to be our Lord. We do not want to come under his authority in our life. We do not want to have him rule and direct our ways. We are determined to do our own thing! The reality is, obedience is a dire necessity. Obedience is the only way to live. It is the only way to be sure that we are ‘functioning’ as God intended, and the only way of knowing his blessing upon our lives. God has structured us for obedience, and so long as we refuse to obey we have to strain against the very fabric of our nature as creatures who should be dependent upon their Creator. Obedience to God is *creationally* the way things are!

This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. *For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful* (Josh. 1:8).

As we have already observed in a previous chapter, obedience cannot be concocted. We cannot cleanse our conscience by obedience. Genuine obedience in the life of a believer is always evoked. True obedience to Christ is therefore known and experienced only as the Spirit opens up the meaning of the Cross and reveals the extent of God's love to us. Genuine obedience came in Brett's life only after he had really seen and understood the cleansing of Christ's love and forgiveness.

### **UNDERESTIMATING THE ENEMY**

During World War 2, the troops in South-East Asia were issued with leaflets telling them all about the weaknesses of the enemy. Unfortunately, almost everything the leaflets said was wrong! Because the troops were misinformed they totally underestimated the enemy's size, strategy and power —and thus suffered a humiliating and disastrous defeat.

As Christians, we need to be well informed as to Satan's power and strategies, otherwise we, too, will suffer defeats at his hand. This does not mean that we become obsessed with Satan and his activity, but it does mean we are to be alert as to what he is trying to do. By being informed and alert we will not allow him to get the upper hand over us.

Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ. And we do this so that we may not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs (2 Cor. 2:10–11).

Satan is a very powerful enemy and never relaxes his

efforts to undermine our faith, pollute our forgiveness with new guilts and destroy our confidence in God's love. Satan constantly sets out to frustrate our plans and to divert us from fulfilling the Lord's goals in our life. Satan will hinder us and put roadblocks in our path at every turn, and he never lets up in seeking to seduce us with a worldly wisdom that has nothing to do with God's true wisdom. It is therefore essential that we recognise what is happening, know how to combat Satan and so be able to press on with a consistent, conquering perseverance.

Paul wanted many times to visit the Thessalonian Christians but was *hindered by Satan* (1 Thess. 2:18). Paul wrote to them expressing his concern for them: 'For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith; I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labor had been in vain'

(1 Thess. 3:5). He warned them to be alert and on the lookout for Satan's devious activities: 'The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders, and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved' (2 Thess. 2:9–10). On another occasion he wrote to the Christians at Corinth: 'But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by its cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ' (2 Cor. 11:3).

Paul knew that Satan could dress himself up and deceive unwary Christians, and warned his converts against 'false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder! Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is not strange if his ministers also disguise themselves as

ministers of righteousness'

(2 Cor. 11:13–15). Jesus himself warned that 'false messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce great signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, even the elect' (Matt. 24:24).

We must remember that Satan is the 'god of this world' who *blinds the minds* of men and women to the truth of the Living God in order to prevent the light of the Gospel from breaking through into their lives (2 Cor. 4:4). As such he manipulates the affairs of men and women to his own ends. If we are not constantly alert, we too can easily become entangled again in these satanic devices, and so get sucked back into the standards, fashions, pleasures and trivia of the world.

If we are not very careful Satan will subtly divert our attention and energies away from the Gospel and away from a whole-hearted devotion to Christ. One of the enemy's prime methods is to get Christians caught in the 'money trap'. He seduces us into thinking we can earn a lot of money 'for the Lord', and that by working hard to have a big bank balance we are being 'good stewards' and will be able to better serve the Lord in the years ahead. Satan knows that if our priority is to earn money (for whatever high and lofty motive) then we will never have a true love-ministry to others.

But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains (1 Tim. 6:9–10).

Satan tried to tempt Christ by misquoting Scripture to him, and he will try the same tactics on us over and over

again (Matt. 4:1–11). If we remain ignorant of Satan's devices and tactics then we will soon become casualties and lose sight of who Christ is and what he has done for us. Our realisation of forgiveness will fade.

The first chapter of Job permits us to see something of what is going on 'behind the scenes' (as it were), and we realise that Satan never lets up in his accusations against us right at the very throne of God himself. Other Scriptures give us a similar picture:

Then he showed me the high priest Joshua standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him (Zech. 3:1).

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming, 'Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God' (Rev. 12:10).

Never underestimate this vicious enemy. Satan will deceive, delude, lie, accuse, slander, threaten, seduce and tempt us, all in an effort to bring us back into bondage. *He knows that a defeated Christian is a powerless Christian.* If he can get us down, burdened by our guilt and crushed by our sense of failure, then we are no threat to him, and he has won! He doesn't care what we say we believe, so long as we don't start living in the good of it. He will use every means possible to rob us of our inheritance and make us ineffective as those who have been set free by Christ.

*Martin is a Christian man who went through a period of deep depression for some months—or, as he described it, 'oppression'. He could not work out what*

*was happening. It was as though a dark cloud was hanging over him all the time. He could not pray with any liberty and reading the Bible had become an onerous task. He had no doubts whatever as to the truth of the Gospel nor of his own salvation in Christ. It was just that the ‘sparkle’ had gone out of everything. Martin searched his heart for any unconfessed sin, but could not put his finger on anything that might be the cause of his malaise.*

*One morning as he was desperately trying to pray, two words suddenly came forcibly into his mind: WHOM RESIST. Whom resist. What did this mean? He then remembered that the two words came from the King James Version of 1 Peter 5:8–9: ‘Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist stedfast in the faith’.*

*In an instant the cause of his state of mind was clear to him. Had Satan confronted him directly he would have known the Scriptures well enough to refute him. But this had been different. It was a subtle assault. It was devious. Martin had not recognised the source. But the instant he saw Satan’s guise and stood his ground to resist him in the name of Christ, it was broken. Instantly his peace and joy and sense of equilibrium returned. Of course nothing had changed in all those weeks as to Martin’s standing before God and he really knew that all along. But Satan had used his devilish alchemy to rob him briefly of his enjoyment of salvation.*

The Scriptures have a lot to say about the need for Christians to take Satan seriously and to stay out of the traps he sets. For example:

Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil (Eph. 4:26–27).

Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm . . . With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one (Eph. 6:11–13, 16).

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you (James 4:7).

No matter what we may be experiencing of Satan's attacks, we need to keep firmly in mind two fundamental truths:

- 1.** If we have been so foolish as to allow Satan to gain an advantage over us, know that he cannot *ultimately* harm us. 'We know that those who are born of God do not sin, but the one who was born of God protects them, and the evil one does not touch them' (1 John 5:18).
- 2.** God has given us all the resources of the indwelling Holy Spirit to enable us to stand our ground and be victorious over Satan. 'Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world' (1 John 4:4).

Be alert! Be sober! Be vigilant! Don't remain ignorant of Satan's tactics. Don't permit him to rob you of your enjoyment and experience of God's love and forgiveness.

## QUESTIONS

1. Why is disobedience to God so dangerous in the life of a Christian?
2. What lessons can be learned from the disobedience of Israel? What are some of the ‘dire consequences’ of their disobedience as shown in Deuteronomy 28?
3. In what way is the matter of authority at the root of our disobedience? What does it mean to ‘acknowledge him in all your ways’?
4. Christ *is* Lord. Do you own him as Lord in all that you do and say and think?
5. Why is it so important for a Christian not to be ‘ignorant of Satan’s designs’? Why is it dangerous to underestimate Satan’s power and activity in the world?
6. What is the best method of informing ourselves of Satan’s tactics and so being able to withstand his advances?
7. What are some of the methods that Satan uses to hinder us in our Christian walk?
8. Satan has been defeated at the Cross (see Heb. 2:1–15). How then should we combat his attacks on us? To what extent can Satan ‘harm’ a Christian?

## Conclusion

I said in the first chapter that every human being needs to know God's total forgiveness. A partial forgiveness from God, or a grudging forgiveness, or a conditional forgiveness, or an uncertain forgiveness would be useless. These would only tantalise and mock us. The Cross is God's final and only answer to the problem of our sin and guilt. But it *is* the answer. There is no other way in all the world by which we can be free. There is nothing other than the Cross that solves or satisfies man's moral dilemma. There is nothing beyond the Cross to which we may turn.

The reality is, God's total, unconditional forgiveness as shown at the Cross is the greatest blessing a human being can know in this life. We have already seen that the great wonder and mystery of the Cross breaks through to us only as God's Spirit opens its truths to us. *Our understanding of these spiritual realities cannot come by virtue of our own intellectual reasoning.* That's why the wisdom of the world is totally inadequate when it comes to knowing and living in God's great grace. It must always be by a revelation of the Spirit, and must go on being his gracious work of revelation to us, and in us, each day.

The ongoing, day-to-day walk of the Christian is therefore a matter of ongoing faith. It involves a consistent trust in what God has done in the finished work of the Cross. It means persevering in the midst of the battle when everything around us is seeking to undermine our confidence in him. It means that we must not give up just because the going gets tough or we feel we are not being what we know we should be. We must stick at it!

Christians often come into a wonderful understanding and experience of the truth at the time of their conversion, but for some this gradually fades. These studies have indicated possible reasons for this. There is no alternative but to press on. *The great battle will be to trust God's word when all else seems to contradict it.* Our own hearts will often deceive us. Never mind, keep believing! There will inevitably be times when we will feel overcome by our failures. But nothing has changed. God's word still stands. Go on trusting! This means we need to be knowing more and more of his truth as we go on soaking ourselves in his word. But mere intellectual accumulation will never be adequate in and of itself. *We must be living each day in the good of all that he has done.* If not, then our experience of God's grace will surely become sullied and dull—the freshness of his love will seem to have faded and the joy of forgiveness will evaporate.

The studies have discussed possible roadblocks to our continuing in realised forgiveness. We need to be always on guard against possible spiritual decline. It can come at any time and sweep over us. It will always be due to our own failure to adequately 'watch and pray'. It will come when we are off-guard and perhaps 'resting on our laurels'—thinking we are standing firm when we are not!

No matter what sin may throw at us, no matter how violently Satan may rage against us, we must keep going! Never relax in the fight. Even when it seems pointless to go on—GO ON ANYWAY!

As Christians we would be wise to always keep in mind the fact that both sin and Satan are stronger than we are. We can never lick them in and of ourselves. At the same time we must keep firmly in our mind the reality that we are ‘in Christ’ and he has conquered both of these deadly foes. His Spirit dwells within us in order to sustain and strengthen us. We are already conquerors through him! Therefore we must not give up just because we have been knocked down a few times! Get up! Keep going! Keep on believing what you know to be true! Don’t be side-tracked or put off by failure. Don’t let sin or Satan intimidate you just because you have failed here or there. The Cross still stands! God has not moved! His love has not altered.

There are several perspectives which we should keep in mind as we seek to go on in our daily walk of faith:

**Firstly:** we rarely see everything of the truth all at once. God goes on revealing more and more of his truth to us over the span of our life. We will come into a deeper understanding and experience of his love and forgiveness and grace as we go on living in the good of what he has already shown. When we live by the light we already have, so more light will be given.

**Secondly:** nothing is certain or fixed or automatic in the Christian walk in and of itself. All is contingent on God’s truth and God’s grace and the operation of his Spirit. It is only by his mercy that we live. It is only by his grace that we will go on maturing and growing in the faith. We

therefore dare not take for granted our utter dependency upon him for all our resources to live the life and walk the walk.

**Thirdly:** there is great benefit in recording what God shows us day by day. Just how this is done will vary from person to person. But keeping a record of God's dealings with us and of the truths he shows us can be of immense personal value to us in the years that follow. We will look back (as I do) with great thankfulness and encouragement of heart. It is a constant reminder that every day I live by God's goodness alone. (Some of the contents of this book are very much the product of many years of my own day by day journal entries.)

**Fourthly:** we must persevere! We must not stop and be put off by our failure or the failure of others. We must press on whatever, come wind come weather. This must involve discipline (as we have already seen) but it also means that we must have a long-term view of things. We must have our eyes on eternity. We must see where we are headed, and build our lives on the solid foundational truths of the Scriptures. Thus, when the winds of testing and trial and temptation come (and come they will in the life of every believer), we will be enabled to stand. We will have a sure hope in the midst of a hopeless and dying generation.

Realised forgiveness is not therefore just a good biblical doctrine to get under one's belt. Rather, it is the very heart of all that it means to be a genuine Christian. Living in God's forgiveness is to be our way of life. God's forgiveness is the air we breathe, the very life upon which our life depends. Nothing ultimately makes

any sense if we do not know and live in the fullness of his total, unconditional forgiveness as was forged on our behalf on the Cross by the Son of God.

For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and *it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me*. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:19–20).

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal (2 Cor. 4:16–18).

This great message of forgiveness is for the world. When Paul wrote to the Roman believers, he said he hoped to be able to come to them in order to impart some spiritual gift to strengthen them, and that both he and they might be mutually encouraged by each other's faith (Rom. 1:11–12). Later in the same letter he expressed his conviction that when he came it would be 'in the fullness of the blessing of Christ' (Rom. 15:29).

My job has taken me all over the world and it has been my privilege to visit dozens of countries over some four decades. Although these have been primarily business trips, I have never travelled to another country without asking that I might go 'in the fullness of the blessing of Christ'. I have always wanted my life to touch the lives of others and that even 'chance' encounters would be used of the Lord for his glory. Thankfully, my friends at home have prayed expectantly for me each time I have been away. As a result, the Lord has been good. Some of these 'chance' encounters have been rich indeed. I

conclude with a number of true stories from these overseas encounters.

### **THE MAN WHO NEEDED HEALING**

The North American 'Signs and Wonders Conference' was a new experience for me. I was curious but also believed I needed to find out for myself what went on and what was being taught. Since friends at home would be asking for my opinion of the movement, first-hand exposure would be very valuable. Of course I also hoped to be personally blessed and encouraged before returning to Australia.

The meetings proved to be wonderfully refreshing. Much of the teaching was exceptionally encouraging, and I was deeply moved by the many stories of conversions and healings. There were times of laughter and times of great solemnity. There were times of deep concentration on the word of God and other times of hushed stillness as the Spirit of God gently touched each heart. There were also beautiful times of worship.

Most evenings there was prayer for healing. On one such occasion a man in the seat in front of me put up his hand. Team members came over and, after talking briefly with him, laid hands on him and prayed. After the meeting had concluded I stood up to leave. The man in front turned and greeted me cheerily. We began to talk. I was interested to know what had transpired as the team had prayed. He said, in a disappointed voice, that he was not conscious of anything having happened. He then began to tell me his problems. His main concern was chronic back pain for which he had sought medical help over some years, though without any improvement.

We sat down again and chatted on for some time. He said that he was a Christian and believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. I asked what he meant when he said he 'believed in Christ'. He seemed somewhat vague, and so we began to talk about the Cross and specifically about what Christ had done for us in his death and resurrection. The more we talked, the more excited he became. It seems that he may never have really understood the heart of the Gospel. Perhaps the totality of God's forgiveness had never really dawned on him. He now began to see it—apparently for the first time. He began to see that his earlier request for physical healing was quite secondary—this was a far more important need. He seemed genuinely appreciative of the things we shared. I hoped that I might have done him some good.

I learned an important lesson that night. I saw first-hand how easy it is to bypass the Cross and concentrate on issues that are secondary. I have no question in my mind about the importance and rightness of asking for physical healing, but I saw how prone we are to emphasise and attach importance to techniques and formulas for 'healing' *rather than focusing on God's Cross*. There is no greater need than for men and women to be healed in their souls of sin and guilt through the blood of Christ as it was shed at Calvary. When we look for relief beyond the Cross, thinking there is some other way, we will inevitably be disappointed. We must see that the Cross is central to God, and therefore it must be so to us.

I have no idea what really happened to my friend at that conference. God may well have healed his back in subsequent days. Praise the Lord if that be the case. But how sad to have a healed back but not know that one has been entirely forgiven! Better to be cleansed of guilt and

pardoned by the Living God than to be only relieved of some physical malady. I thought of the paralytic man to whom Jesus said: ‘Son, your sins are forgiven’. And *then* he healed him (Mark 2:5ff.).

When I arrived back home, I decided to write to the man who led the conference meetings. It occurred to me that there had been very little mention of the Cross, nor had there been any focus on the central message of the Bible—God’s action to deal with Man’s primary guilt. My interchange with the man who had sought healing but who really needed God’s forgiveness only highlighted my conviction.

Some months later the conference leader wrote back, thanking me warmly for my observations. He said that, as a result, he’d come to see that his ministry was lopsided and he was immediately embarking on a series of studies on the centrality of the Cross. Some years later when I visited his church, I discovered that he had indeed set out to teach his own congregation more systematically about the work of Christ in his death and resurrection. He had preached every Sunday on the Cross for four months!

### **MR MASIMBA**

It was a cool Sunday afternoon in central Stockholm. As I wandered though the square I could hear singing. The tunes of the Christian songs were familiar so I tracked their source to a small group of folk in the underground shopping mall. One of them spoke English and immediately invited me to the early evening service in their nearby church.

The building was packed to capacity as I was ushered

by my new friend to the very front row. Of course he acted as my interpreter as the Pastor began the meeting. I learned that they were commencing a week-long series of special services featuring a visiting speaker, Mr Masimba from Africa. Fortunately for me, he spoke no Swedish and had to speak in English. So, while everyone else got the translation, I got the real thing.

The service was very lively with many people dancing and shouting 'Hallelujah' and praising the Lord in tongues (or was it just excited Swedish?). Mr Masimba spoke at length. His message was extraordinary and he became more and more animated as the evening progressed. For my part, I felt increasingly uncomfortable and began to wish I had never come. Since there was no chance of escape from the packed auditorium I had to sit it out.

Afterwards I was pressed to have a cup of coffee upstairs in their lovely lounge. The African brother came over and joined me and we began to converse. I asked where he was from and how he came to be there. I then asked what he had been trying to say during the message. Somewhat surprised, he replied: 'Preaching the Gospel, brother'. Without in any sense being sarcastic or negative I said that I did not think he was preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That remark led to a long and intense discussion about the true nature of the message of Christ. When I talked about the cruciality of the Cross and of what God had done for us in the death of his Son, tears came into Mr Masimba's eyes. He now listened intently as I attempted to open up the Scriptures and explain the wonder of forgiveness and freedom from guilt. We talked long into the evening.

I can't say what Mr Masimba really believed before we met, but I do know that he had only a meagre

understanding of the great doctrines of grace and of God's forgiveness. As we parted he gave me a huge African hug and, with tears in his eyes, told me *he had never heard these things before*. I marvelled at the goodness of God in bringing us together from the two sides of the globe to meet in that upstairs coffee lounge in Stockholm. I wondered what the rest of his talks would be like that week!

### THE BUSY EXECUTIVE

In the course of my overseas trips I have had the opportunity to get to know Christians of many nationalities and to worship with some of them in their local congregations. Often I have been able to spend time in their homes as their guest—a special treat when I have been away on a long and sometimes lonely round of engagements. Angus was one such host. He and his family would always welcome me to stay in their home whenever I was in their country and had the time to visit. I soon began to see that life was not easy for this busy executive. Though he knew and loved the Lord passionately he was often troubled by deep depression and uncertainty. The family were always on edge when he plunged into these dark moods, fearing what might eventuate.

One winter evening we sat talking beside the fire in the lounge room. I had been to their church for Sunday worship on a number of occasions and, although warmed by the fellowship and their enthusiastic singing, had always come away somewhat saddened by their apparently superficial understanding of the great truths of the Gospel. As we talked, I shared with Angus what the

Lord had done in my life in releasing me from guilt and of how I had come to see that all God's mercies are ultimately centred in the Cross of Christ. We talked through the matter of living in a realised forgiveness, of knowing as a daily reality that God has taken up the totality of our guilt through the death of Christ. I sought to help him apply this wonderful truth to his own life so that his mental equilibrium might be stabilised by what Christ has done at Calvary and not be dependent on what he himself could 'work up' by way of a greater faith or love.

I suspect that—without him realising it—faith had become a work. He wanted so much to love and serve the Lord more fully and perfectly, and perhaps felt he had to keep the tide of faith high in order to be able to go on worshipping the Lord aright. I have little doubt that worship had become the focal point in his life and that he *worshipped worship*. His love for the Lord was so deep that he was a delight to be with, but there was an intensity in that love that made me question its basis. As we talked, the glory of God's love at the Cross broke open to him. He saw what he had never seen before: that all of his sin and guilt and failure and inferiority had been taken up into the Son of God when he hung on that Cross. Of course he had always known it, and yet he hadn't! What had been an understanding of sorts now became a revelation to him.

### **JIE AND WIE**

Jie and Wie were assigned as my interpreters for the ten days of an Australian Government Trade Fair in China. It was my first trip to mainland China and I had no idea

what to expect. Jie was an attractive 23-year-old lass who spoke very good English, whereas Wie, a 19-year-old lad, had only a minimal grasp of our language. He was clearly Jie's apprentice!

During our first few days of introductions, Jie told me that she was majoring in communications in her course at University. I asked if she knew of Marshall McLuhan's famous statement, 'The medium is the message'. She had only heard of it, but asked rather curiously what that meant. All my attempts to explain a Western concept to an Eastern mind failed! Finally I asked what she had come to know about *me* during our first two days together. What had my life conveyed to her? What message had *this* medium brought to her? Instantly she understood and, to my surprise, answered: 'I think you care about people'. When she then asked why it was that I cared, I told her that it was primarily because I was a Christian. Her interest was immediate. She insisted that I tell her everything I knew about Christianity! Quite a tall order, but nevertheless a delightful request.

For more than a week, every spare moment was spent in sharing with Jie the great truths of the Gospel of Christ. Poor Wie could do no more than look on wistfully, catching words here and there, and feverishly consulting his Chinese-English Dictionary. One day I sat for several hours with him alone and, to his great joy, led him through the fundamentals of the Gospel message entirely by means of his dictionary. When it came time for me to leave, he gave me a long and tearful hug, conveying something of his gratitude and love.

Jie would not allow one spare moment to pass without wanting to hear more about Christ, and scolded me when I arrived back late from lunch one day. All these conversations took place in the crowded Trade Fair Hall

with tens of thousands of Chinese milling past our stand. At one point she pulled me up mid-sentence and changed the subject. Puzzled, I later learned that she had seen some official in the crowd nearby who would have known what we were talking about. The significance eluded me until she explained that our whole week of discussions about Christ were illegal!

The press of the crowds made it difficult to share personally with Jie, but one day the Lord wonderfully provided an ‘officially-sanctioned’ occasion when we could dine together, and it was in that dining room that Jie came to the Lord. The joy that flooded her was amazing, and she rushed off to tell everyone that ‘Father’ loved her and had forgiven her and that her years of pent-up guilt had vanished. She arranged for other interpreters to swap stands with her so that I could tell them the same wonderful Gospel. I believe others came into the kingdom also during those extraordinary days.

I felt at a loss as to how to help her grow since she had never seen a Bible let alone had access to one. Out of a sense of her need, I sat up each night hand-writing major sections of Scripture to form a sizeable document which I presented to her on my last day at the Trade Fair. We were able to correspond briefly until it became clear that the authorities were bringing brutal pressure upon her to recant and our correspondence was only exacerbating the situation. She was disowned by her family, excluded from the University and debarred from having a job. She counted these deprivations as nothing compared to the worth of knowing Christ and of being at peace with the Father:

And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then

the end will come (Matt. 24:14).

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! (2 Cor. 9:15).

## APPENDIX

# Imputed Guilt

The principle of **imputed guilt** referred to in chapter 4 is taught in the following passages (italics and bold type have been added for clarification, emphasis and explanation).

The following quotations are from the *NRSV*, with some amendments):

### Romans 5:12–19

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through **one man** [Adam], and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned [*sinned—past tense—hence when Adam sinned*]—sin was indeed in the world before the law [*given at the time of Moses*], but sin is not reckoned when there is no law [*law is required to tell us what sin is*]. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses [*hence there must have been sin between Adam and Moses and hence there must have been guilt between Adam and Moses*], even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam [*Adam's sin was the primary sin—no other man's sin is like that*], who is a type [or forerunner] of the one who was to come [*Christ*].

But the free gift is not like the trespass (vv. 12–15).

Paul is saying that there is a vast contrast between the nature of that which Adam did and that which Christ did. Let me illustrate this principle. If someone steals my old car then the nature of that one act is mean and despicable

and entirely negative. But suppose someone, on hearing of my loss, gives me four brand new, very expensive luxury cars as a free gift! That would be an incredibly generous single act that would be out of all proportion to the original one act of theft. *The two actions are not of the same order.* Theft and a generous free gift are at opposite ends of the spectrum. This is what Paul is saying when he contrasts the one act of Adam's with the one act of Christ's. The free gift that Christ brings is out of all proportion to the one act of trespass on Adam's part. *They are not of the same order.*

For if *the many* died through the **one man's trespass** [Adam's], much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the **one man**, Jesus Christ, abounded for *the many* (v. 15).

Paul goes on to expand his statement by showing that the *effect* of the two acts (Adam's and Christ's) are not the same either. Just as the theft of my old car would bring me deprivation and significant inconvenience, so the gift of four brand new cars would bring extraordinary benefits and blessings—far outweighing my original loss. The effect or outcome of the two actions would not be of the same order. Again, that is what Paul is saying here when he contrasts the effect of Adam's one failure with the effect of Christ's one act of righteousness.

And the free gift is not like the effect of the **one man's sin**. For the *judgment* following **one trespass** [Adam's] brought *condemnation*, but the *free gift* following **many trespasses** brings *justification* (v. 16).

The outcome of Christ's death and resurrection is so staggering that Adam's failure pales by comparison. That's not to minimise the seriousness of what happened in our fall in Adam, but how can you compare death with *life*?

All Adam did through his one trespass was bring us down into death and condemnation. He did not contribute anything positive to us—only deprivation and injury. On the other hand, by his one act of obedience, Christ has brought us justification, righteousness and true life—and these as an abundant experience! How can you compare the two? They are not of the same order.

If, because of the **one man's trespass**, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. Therefore just as **one man's trespass** [Adam's] led to *condemnation* for all, so **one man's act of righteousness** [Christ's] leads to *justification* and life for all. For just as by the **one man's disobedience** [Adam's] the many were made *sinners*, so by the **one man's obedience** [Christ's] the many will be made *righteous* (vv. 16–19).

The second passage in the New Testament which speaks about our corporate guilt with Adam is in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians:

### 1 Corinthians 15:21–23, 45–48

For since death came through a **man** [Adam], the resurrection of the dead has also come through a **man** [Christ]; for as all die in **Adam** [*those related to him*], so all will be made alive in **Christ** [*those related to him*]. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ . . . Thus it is written, 'The first man, Adam, became a living being'; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. The **first man** was from the earth, a man of dust [Adam]; the **second man** is from heaven [Christ]. As was the **man of dust** [Adam], so are those who are of the dust; and as is the **man of heaven** [Christ], so are those who are of heaven.

Notice that these two passages (Rom. 5 and 1 Cor. 15) are both talking about just two men, Adam and Christ. We

are told that God treats each one of us (here and now) on the basis of where we are *in relation to these two men*. Adam represented us in the Garden and we are all related to him by *human descent*. Christ also represented us. He came as another ‘Adam’ and, because of his substitutionary death on the Cross, we are given the privilege of relating to him by *faith*. This is a fundamental biblical principle.

Let me put it another way by reversing the order: Just as Christ represented us on the Cross and our guilt was imputed to him (God accepting him on our behalf), so Adam represented us in the Garden of Eden, his failure being imputed to us (God accepting him on our behalf).

In regard to Adam, one ancient writer has said it like this: ‘We were all in the loins of Adam, and when he sinned, the whole of posterity stood up and applauded’.<sup>1</sup> Another writer says: ‘Adam communicated to those whom he represented what belonged to him, and that Christ also communicated to those whom He represents what belonged to Him’.<sup>2</sup> If Christ communicates righteousness and life to us, then Adam communicated guilt and death to us. Thus Romans chapter 5 teaches that all who belong to Adam—that is, the entire human race—are included in Adam’s guilt: ‘... when Adam sinned, all sinned; when the process of death began to ruin *him*, it immediately affected *the entire race*’.<sup>3</sup>

We find it hard to believe that we would have done exactly what Adam did had we been there instead of him!

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Geoffrey Bingham in a teaching mission at Thornleigh NSW, in 1962.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Haldane, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans*, Banner of Truth, London, 1960, p. 212.

<sup>3</sup> William Hendriksen, *Romans: Volume 1: Chapters 1–8*, Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1980, p. 178.

We think we are morally better than Adam. That is not the case, and it's for this reason that we all share Adam's guilt. Therefore, we were all *born* guilty or, as a friend of mine says: 'We are all born wrong'. No one is exempt. All humanity is 'in Adam'. Hence, 'in Adam' all die. In other words, the prohibition and the sentence of death upon Adam applied to us also. God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree . . . or you shall die' (Gen. 3:3).

Geoff Bingham writes:

. . . in Adam the whole race sinned. This is hard to understand. The difficulty lies in much of our Western thinking. We do not generally see the whole race as a solidary unity. It is up to people like John Donne to tell us we ought not to think of ourselves as separate islands, but as parts of a whole continent. In truth, we are interrelated and interdependent.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, none of us find it easy to realise or accept our culpability in Adam's failure, but that's how it is. If it were not for the Scriptures telling us so, we could never understand that *this is the real cause of our human predicament*. **We have a corporate guilt with Adam.** We are not just individuals but a solidary race that shares in all that Adam was and did. Many passages of Scripture spell this out in different ways:

Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me (Ps. 51:5).

Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? No one can (Job 14:4).

What are mortals, that they can be clean? Or those born of woman, that they can be righteous? (Job 15:14).

. . . all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23).

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<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *Oh, Father! Our Father!* p. 5.

The following diagram may be helpful in illustrating this biblical principle in Romans 5:12–21:<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Adapted from D. N. Steele and C. C. Thomas, *Romans: An Interpretive Outline*, Presbyterian and Reformed, Philadelphia, 1963, p. 44.

The Bible reveals the awful truth that all human beings are born guilty and therefore *born enslaved*. We are born enslaved because the guilt we have inherited from Adam at the moment of our birth paralyses us from ever being

able to obey God's commands and do good *of ourselves*. Thus we are born into a terrible moral bondage from which we have no hope of self-release. We can never extricate ourselves from this situation. It's like being born as an alien in a hostile country. We can't escape. As such, sin is nothing less than tragic. We have no human remedy for our moral pollution, nor any solution for the stain and bondage of our sin. There is no eradication by any human technique. Adam could not escape and neither can we.

Wonderfully, God has provided the answer in his Son Jesus Christ—the second Adam. Only he sets us free from these deadly tyrants: sin, guilt and death.