

Basic Christianity

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God's Greatest Glory

Genesis 50:20

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

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

Matthew 10:29,30

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

Where the sparrow falls, or the hair lies, is decreed by God, as is what happens to it afterwards. Extrapolate the ordination of one sparrow or one hair to the working of the entire universe, and we can just begin to get some idea as to how all-powerful, all-knowing and almighty God really is. This is the God that all men are duty bound to

worship. He is the only God worthy of worship. Any other god who falls short of this is merely a figment of men's own imaginations:

Psalms 50:21

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

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

Romans 8:28

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

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

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

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

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

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

(2.) The other seemingly insurmountable problem is that of sin. If God is in control of all things, then how is it that there is so much evil in the world? Surely evil can't come from God? Well, sin *has* come into the world. God has ordained it to come to pass, so we must conclude that this is because His greatest glory can only be served by its presence. But sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God. This fact presupposes the existence of rational, created beings with positive laws having been

given them by God. Sin can't exist in God alone because He's not a created being, neither is He under any law. As soon as God created rational creatures and gave them positive laws, at least the theoretical existence of sin (i.e. their breaking these laws) came into being.

Consider the following examples of evil acts:

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

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

Acts 2:24

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

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

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

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

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

Romans 6:1

Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?

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

So, because men are not capable of knowing or effecting what is to God's greatest glory, God has given them another rule to live by instead of the rule of "whatsoever comes to pass." The rule of life given to men is the moral law, which is summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments. This is *always* our rule of life. However, on many occasions, e.g.

the crucifixion of Christ, God does not actually decree what is in keeping with the moral law to come to pass, but what is a transgression of it (i.e. sin). This, only God has the right to do, because only He can see when it is best to decree what is (to men) evil, for the purpose of leading events to His greatest glory in the end. Men can never see or know this. God is perfectly just in consequently judging men for breaking His commandments, even though God might actually decree oftentimes for their actions to come to pass - for His greatest glory.

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

- (1.) Begin to realise all this, and therefore see how great God is.
- (2.) Love God's holy law and live our lives in the light of it, and it alone.
- (3.) Give God all the glory in all things and:

Isaiah 2:22

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

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

What Does God Require of Us?

There is a God

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

We are therefore without excuse

The reason that many people in our day deny this to be the case is not because science has proven otherwise, but rather it is because they don't *want* to believe it. Many people are violently against the idea that there is a God who created everything, because the

consequence of admitting such a God exists must lead to the conclusion that all of us are therefore answerable to Him. We can't escape this conclusion. If God exists, then we are answerable to Him because we were created by Him. Therefore if we continue to ignore the fact that God exists, we are without excuse when it comes to the judgment to which such a God must hold all his rational, created beings accountable.

The Conscience

Creation tells us that there is a God, and by inference that we are accountable to Him. This is all that Creation can tell us in and of itself, but it is enough for us to be without excuse if we neglect to then find out what God requires of us. It is therefore our duty to find out what God requires of us, and we should not be able to sleep until we have not only found this out, but once having found it out, put it into practice in our lives. God has also given all men a conscience, which will not give them rest until they have done this. Men do all sorts of crazy things of their own invention in order to try to placate their own consciences, but in the end none of them work, because of the very fact that they have invented these stupid ideas themselves, rather than gone looking to God Himself for the revelation that He has given mankind to show us what He requires.

God's Revelation

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

The Solution

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

A further problem

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

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

God's Ultimate Solution

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

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

Remember what we have learned so far:

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

Cry for Mercy

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

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

Zephaniah 2:3

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

Becoming a Christian

Misconceptions

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

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

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

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

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

Romans 8:8

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

Isaiah 53:6

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

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

The Problem

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

Psalm 14:2,3

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

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

Matthew 7:13,14

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

This is not helped by the fact that in the church there are many false teachers who pander to this sinful nature and deny the seriousness of the situation, because immediately after the above quote, Christ warns His people to:

Matthew 7:15

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

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

The Solution

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

Mark 2:17

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

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

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

Ezekiel 36:26

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

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

John 3:3

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

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

2 Corinthians 5:17

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

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

Romans 3:24,25

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

Ephesians 1:7

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

Hebrews 9:14

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

Hebrews 9:28

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

The Christian Life

Having been given a new heart, this does not mean that we become perfect straight away. We still have the old nature within us, of which Christians are all too aware that it

drags them back into their old ways time and time again. But once the new heart has been put within us, we can at least begin to please God, and the Christian life from then on is one of nurturing the new heart and mortifying the old heart as we slowly grow in the Christian faith:

Romans 8:13

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

Romans 6:12,13

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

2 Peter 3:18

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

The Word of God

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

John 14:26

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

1 John 2:27

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

The Evil Heart

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

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

Genesis 6:5

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

Psalms 53:2,3

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

Ecclesiastes 9:3

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

Jeremiah 17:9

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

Mark 7:21-23

For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man.

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

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

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

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

about it, God is quite rightly going to judge us, and give us whatever punishment we deserve.

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

Matthew 1:21

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

God sent Jesus Christ, the Son of God, into this world for one purpose, to die on a cross in the place of all those who come to Him. It's very simple. Do we want to be saved from our sins? From our sinful nature? From the evil of our own heart? We can't change ourselves. None of us. It's impossible:

Jeremiah 13:23

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

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

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

Isaiah 55:4,5

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

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

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

The Emptiness of Life

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

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

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

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

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

Ecclesiastes 2:2-11

I said of laughter, It is mad: and of mirth, What doeth it? I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life. I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards: I made me gardens and orchards I got me servants and maidens also I had great possessions I gathered me also silver and gold I gat me men singers and women singers. And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.

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

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

Ecclesiastes 12:13,14

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

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

Proverbs 9:10

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

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

Psalms 14:1

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

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

Luke 10:27

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

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

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

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

Matthew 11:28-30

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

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

Dirty Washing

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Bible teaches us about human nature:

Jeremiah 17:9

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

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

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

That's why we need God.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

John 8:36

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

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

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

God has provided a solution to every situation we may find ourselves in. Jesus Christ can set us free now, today. If only we call on Him, cry to Him. Ask Him to forgive our sins and

change us for ever. Nobody else can help. Call on Jesus Christ in prayer today, and if we are genuine, I guarantee He will not disappoint us.

Can a Christian Lose His Salvation

2 Peter 2:20-22

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

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

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

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

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

Romans 8:38,39

For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Philippians 1:6

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

John 6:37

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

John 10:27,28

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

Hebrews 13:5

I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.

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

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

The Parable of the Sower

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

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

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

Galatians 5:22,23

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

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

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

1 Corinthians 3:15

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

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

We are called to add to our faith, fruit:

2 Peter 1:5-8

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

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

2 Peter 1:9

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

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

Compare these to the stony ground hearers. Christ tells us that these represent those who hear the word and receive it with joy. They join the church. They may be in the church for a long time. They may hold high positions in the church. But they have never been born-again. We're told there is no root in them. Therefore they do not produce fruit of any kind. They are the hypocrites in the church. They can be easily flushed out when tribulation or persecution comes on the church. They'll be off like a shot.

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

Three "Falling Away" Passages

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

will eventually fall away from his profession, unless of course he is truly converted and becomes a true believer in his heart.

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

2 Peter 2:20-22

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

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

But what about this passage in Hebrews 6:

Hebrews 6:4-6

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

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

Hebrews 6:9

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

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

Actually, this passage says a very solemn thing about these people. It says that such people who have “*tasted*” these things, if they subsequently fall away, it is **impossible** to

renew them again to repentance. The least we can say is that they become more hardened against the gospel, and, humanly speaking at least, it is a lot more difficult to reach them after their experience.

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

Well, Christ said:

Matthew 7:21-23

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

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

Matthew 10:1

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

The fact that we can do these things (or at least think we can) is not evidence of a new heart.

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

Hebrews 10:26-29

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

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

The word “*sanctified*” means to be “set apart.” All truly born-again Christians are “set apart” in a special way, and indeed the more they grow in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the more they are continually being “set apart” from the world throughout their Christian life. Christ said:

John 17:17

Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

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

1 Corinthians 7:14

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

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

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

Hebrews 10:39

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

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

Objection

There is one major objection that many people have to the truth that once we have been truly saved, we can’t be lost. They will say that if we are saved and can never be lost, that means that we can sin all we like, and God won’t mind, we’ll still get to heaven. Where is righteousness in that?

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

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

Acts 17:30,31

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

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

John 3:18

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

John 3:36

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

The Bible teaches:

John 3:3

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

Hebrews 11:6

But without faith it is impossible to please him.

Romans 8:8

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

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

John 3:7

Ye must be born again.

Ezekiel 36:26

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

2 Corinthians 5:17

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

Ephesians 1:13

Ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise.

Conclusion

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

And, if we are a true Christian, realise this: the millionth time we fail, and sin against the Lord, yes, it will grieve us, and we will hate ourselves completely for it, but we have the most wonderful comfort in the fact that we can never be lost:

John 10:28

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

Hypercalvinism

“*Hypercalvinism*” is a term of derision that is used in evangelical circles, but when people who use it are asked for a definition, they are not so forthcoming with anything distinct, and many different answers are given. Here, we hope to clarify the several different positions taken by evangelicals, to try to ascertain the correct position on each of the main issues involved, and to ask whether the term “*Hypercalvinism*” can truly be used, and if so, to whom it really refers.

There are several issues involved, the main ones being:

[1.] Whether it is the duty of all men everywhere to repent and believe in Christ.

[2.] Whether the gospel ought to be freely offered to all men everywhere as a promise of salvation conditioned on faith and repentance.

[3.] Whether God loves or “desires to save” or “wills to save” all men everywhere.

There are at least five different church groupings within evangelicalism that take different positions on these issues. These can be summarised as follows:

[A.] denies [1.], [2.] and [3.] = position of the Gospel Standard Baptists

[B.] affirms [1.] but denies [2.] and [3.] = position of the Protestant Reformed Churches of America

[C.] affirms [1.] and [2.] but denies [3.] = the true position.

[D.] affirms [1.], [2.] and [3.] = position of John Murray, Banner of Truth.

[E.] affirms [1.], [2.] and [3.] = position of John Wesley, Arminianism.

Now let us look at these positions in turn:

[A.]

This position denies all the above points [1.], [2.] and [3.]. This is the position of the Gospel Standard Baptists and many Dutch Reformed churches. No less than six of the thirty-five Articles of the Gospel Standard Baptists are relevant here. Let’s take a look at them:

“Article 24. We believe that the invitations of the gospel, being spirit and life (that is, under the influence of the Holy Spirit), are intended only for those who have been made by the

blessed Spirit to feel their lost state as sinners and their need of Christ as their Saviour, and to repent of and forsake their sins.”

Here we are told that the “*invitations of the gospel*” are only to be preached to those who have already been regenerated by the Holy Ghost **before** they hear the gospel. This regeneration is manifested by the fact that they are “thirsting,” “hungering,” “heavy-laden” etc. These people are known as “sensible sinners” and will always respond to the gospel when they hear it because God has already regenerated them and therefore granted them the repentance and faith necessary to savingly embrace Christ. Therefore, in this system, no-one is ever condemned for rejecting the gospel.

Passages such as Isaiah 55:1 or Matthew 11:28 are thought of as only applying to those already regenerate and thirsting after spiritual things, i.e. only the elect:

Isaiah 55:1

Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Matthew 11:28

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

These passages, however, are referring to *unregenerate* people thirsting after *carnal* things, i.e. things that are not bread and that satisfy not (Isaiah 55:2). Indeed the call is to the wicked (v.7). The call is therefore to these people to thirst, buy and eat good things, spiritual things (which by nature they can't do).

How then are the elect saved from amongst this mass of people thirsting after all sorts of things but the truth? It is **through** the hearing of the gospel that they are saved. In the preaching of the gospel, the elect come to embrace the promises and the reprobate come to harden themselves against the promises. This is the true preaching of the gospel. It is the door to the house of salvation. The elect will enter, because God regenerates them and grants them the conditions required (i.e. faith and repentance) **at the time of hearing**. The reprobate may hang around for a while but will always end up walking away.

Only **in the way of** duty is salvation to be received. All men have the duty to repent and believe in Christ. Only **in the way of** doing this are they saved. Of course they could come to Christ many years **after** hearing the gospel, so we should never give up on anyone, but never is it possible to come to Christ **before** or **without** hearing it (the case of elect infants and imbeciles excluded, as these are a special case incapable of being outwardly called, and will be dealt with later).

The man with the withered hand is our example here:

Mark 3:5

And when he had looked round about on them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts, he saith unto the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it out: and his hand was restored whole as the other.

To stretch forth his hand was something physically impossible for him to do. Yet upon Christ's command, he does so and is healed **in the way of doing so**. Similarly, it is **in the**

way of repentance and faith – something impossible for the natural man to do – that we are saved. i.e. only **in the way of** repentance and faith do the elect find that God gives them the repentance and faith necessary to fulfil the command, and not before. The reprobate are condemned by the same gospel because God displays their inability as they reject it accordingly.

The gospel **IS** the power of God unto salvation, not regeneration at an earlier point in time.

Romans 1:16

*For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it **is** the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.*

People who believe that regeneration is **before** the preaching of the gospel would call any other position than their own “mediate regeneration,” i.e. regeneration through something other than a direct act of God on the soul (e.g. a response in the sinner to a gospel call), which they would repudiate. But so would we. This would be the position of [D.] and [E.] to be dealt with below, and is the opposite error. We agree that regeneration is immediate, performed directly by God alone, but, ordinarily, **only at the moment of hearing the gospel**, not **before** and not **after**.

“Article 26. We deny duty-faith and duty-repentance - these terms signifying that it is every man’s duty spiritually and savingly to repent and believe. We deny also that there is any capability in man by nature to any spiritual good whatever. So that we reject the doctrine that men in a state of nature should be exhorted to believe in or turn to God.”

This is the denial of what they term “duty-faith” and “duty-repentance” – that is the truth that it is the duty of all men everywhere to repent and believe in Christ for salvation (i.e. point [1.] in the introduction above).

It is rightly pointed out that there is no “*capability in man by nature to any spiritual good whatever,*” but it is wrongly concluded from this that men in a state of nature should therefore **not** be exhorted to believe in or turn to God. Just like the Arminian (position [E.] below), they equate responsibility with ability. In this case, they say that natural man **is not** capable of responding to the gospel therefore he **is not** responsible for doing so, whereas the Arminian says that natural man **is** capable of responding therefore he **is** responsible.

However, the truth is that God **can** command men to do things they have not got the ability to perform. Just because the non-elect have no ability in themselves to repent and believe in Christ (and for that matter neither has God decreed that they should ever repent and believe in Christ), nevertheless they are still commanded to repent and believe in Christ **despite their inability**. It is argued that God would never command men to do something that they have not got the ability to perform as this would make God a mocker of men, but this does not follow because:

Ecclesiastes 7:29

God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions.

When God created the world He made man upright, but man fell in Adam his federal head.

Westminster Shorter Catechism Q.16

The covenant being made with Adam, not only for himself, but for his posterity; all mankind descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him in his first transgression.

Just because man has made himself unable any longer to keep the law of God (let alone repent and believe in Christ), that does not change his duty towards God:

Acts 17:24-27

God that made the world and all things therein.... hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth.... That they should seek the Lord.

Acts 17:30

And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent....

Acts 20:21

And how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you publickly, and from house to house, Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

For example, if we were given some money by a rich landowner to build a house, and instead of building the house we spent it all on a luxurious holiday somewhere and had no money left afterwards to build the house, it would still be our duty to build it with what we had been given, even if we had squandered all those resources elsewhere.

All men are responsible for their not being able to repent and believe in Christ despite their current inability to do these things. It is not God that is at fault in any way for this, because He originally made man upright (even though Adam's fall was within God's eternal decree). Unregenerate men will be punished by God justly for their unbelief and unrepentant ways.

"Article 29. While we believe the gospel is to be preached in or proclaimed to all the world, we deny offers of grace; that is to say, that the gospel is to be offered indiscriminately to all."

Here we see that not only are **commands** to all men to repent and believe denied, but **offers** are as well.

They argue that:

- (1.) God only loves the elect (which is a true statement),
- (2.) God has not provided salvation for the non-elect (which is also a true statement); *therefore* (they falsely conclude) the non-elect can't be offered a salvation that is not available for them.

As we shall be talking more of the "offer" of the gospel when speaking about point [B.] below, we shall forego it here and pass on.

“Article 32. We believe that it would be unsafe, from the brief records we have of the way in which the apostles, under the immediate direction of the Lord, addressed their hearers in certain special cases and circumstances, to derive absolute and universal rules for ministerial addresses in the present day under widely different circumstances. And we further believe that an assumption that others have been inspired as the apostles were has led to the grossest errors among both Romanists and professed Protestants.”

Article 33. Therefore, that for ministers in the present day to address unconverted persons, or indiscriminately all in a mixed congregation, calling upon them to savingly repent, believe, and receive Christ, or perform any other acts dependent upon the new creative power of the Holy Ghost, is, on the one hand, to imply creature power, and, on the other, to deny the doctrine of special redemption.

Article 34. We believe that any such expressions as convey to the hearers the belief that they possess a certain power to flee to the Saviour, to close in with Christ, to receive Christ, while in an unregenerate state, so that unless they do thus close with Christ, etc., they shall perish, are untrue, and must therefore be rejected. And we further believe that we have no Scripture warrant to take the exhortations in the Old Testament intended for the Jews in national covenant with God, and apply them in a spiritual and saving sense to unregenerate men.”

All these three Articles hang together. Again we see a denial that the gospel is to be preached to unregenerate men (or indiscriminately to a mixed congregation) because, to holders of this position, it implies “creature-power,” i.e. it implies that it is within the power of the creature to respond, and would be dismissed by them as Arminianism. This implication is not true, as explained above.

The really worrying aspect seen here though, is the denial of the use of Scripture as a guide to how we should live our lives today. In this particular instance it is the preaching of the gospel which is in view, but the danger is that this argument could be used with regards almost anything, and so all the major truths of the Bible could be denied thereby. We would agree thoroughly that God doesn't work in men any more by direct inspiration. Now we have a complete canon of Scripture, any direct way of God's revealing His will to men is no longer necessary. However, it is very dangerous to then use this truth to say that vast areas of Scripture are not relevant to us any more. We can't use the argument that all direct means of communication by God have now ceased to deny that Scripture is our guide and example in life, because, on the contrary, we have nothing else to guide us – because all other direct means have now ceased. To use this argument to conclude that we can no longer preach the gospel in the way the apostles did, is just an excuse to get rid of the clear passages in Scripture where the apostles command all men everywhere to repent and believe in Christ for salvation.

[B.]

This position affirms point [1.] but denies points [2.] and [3.]. This is the position of the Protestant Reformed Churches of America (PRC). Seeing the error of position [A.] in denying “duty-faith” and “duty-repentance,” they would indeed preach that it is the duty of all men everywhere to repent and believe in Christ, and their gospel consists of the

command that all men everywhere should do so. They see no problem with **commanding** men to do something they do not have the ability to perform, for the reasons given above. However, they would not preach the gospel as a “**well-meant offer**” of salvation to all men, because they again believe that there is no salvation available for the non-elect, and therefore any offer would not be “well-meant” to them.

Consequently we see that, according to the holders of position [B.], **an offer** to repent and believe in Christ implies (to them) power in the creature to respond, which would immediately be classed by them as Arminianism and dismissed accordingly. A **command**, however, is seen by them to be quite orthodox.

This whole position actually sounds very plausible, as on the one hand the denial of “duty-faith” and “duty-repentance” is rejected, yet at the same time the awkward idea of “offering” salvation to men whom it is not for (i.e. the non-elect) is also solved by denying that the gospel is a “well-meant” offer to them, but rather a bare command instead. To make this argument more powerful, it is true that the Bible nowhere uses the word “offer” or “invitation” with regards the gospel. There are passages that may appear as such on first glance, but actually are bare commands:

Isaiah 45:22

Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else.

Isaiah 55:6,7

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

Ecclesiastes 12:13

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

Matthew 11:28

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

Acts 2:38,39

Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.

Acts 3:19

Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord.

None of these are “invitations” or “offers” but commands. The words “offer” and “invitation” are not wrong if used properly, but it is best not to use them because they immediately produce wrong thoughts of God in people’s minds. When we **invite** people to a party, for example, we automatically assume without thinking that we **want** all those we invite to come. This is the usual use of the word “invite” in modern English. Similarly with the word **offer**. Therefore to use these words in relation to God is misleading, not

because the words in and of themselves are wrong – the invitation of a king for example is a command: you had better attend or you get your head chopped off! – but because of the implication the use of them produces in people’s minds today. People will automatically think that all those God *invites* to salvation He *wants* to come, in line with the modern everyday use of the word. This is the mistake. We must not present God as an impotent being who either wants to save all men but doesn’t (which is position [D.] below) or, one who cannot or will not save them unless they respond, which is Arminianism (position [E.], below).

This position [B.] therefore is very convincing, and a breath of fresh air for anyone who has become disillusioned with mainstream Evangelicalism and its quasi-Arminianism. It is so close to the truth. But there is a problem with it.

The PRC suffered a split in 1953, when nearly two-thirds of the total membership left the church. In 1950, before the split, the PRC Synod provisionally adopted a “*Brief Declaration of Principles*,” which was fully adopted at the Synod of 1951. The relevant passages of interest are as follows:

“That the preaching of the gospel is not a gracious offer of salvation on the part of God to all men, nor a conditional offer to all that are born in the historical dispensation of the covenant, that is, to all that are baptised, but an oath of God that He will infallibly lead all the elect unto salvation and eternal glory through faith.”

“This preaching of the particular promise is promiscuous to all that hear the gospel, with the command, not a condition, to repent and believe.”

In April 1951 a PRC minister said from the pulpit to a mixed congregation of elect and non-elect alike: “God promises every one of you that if you believe, you will be saved.” This caused turmoil in the church and eventually in 1953 those who took the side of this minister were put out of the church, and those who remained kept the name “Protestant Reformed Churches.”

The result of all this is such that, for the PRC today to justify their separate position, they have to take a stand that denies that the gospel is a **general conditional promise of salvation** to all men. This would be their definition of an **offer**.

Therefore the PRC would be able to say to an indiscriminate audience “*Repent and believe the gospel*” (which would be a **command**), but they cannot say “*If you repent and believe, you will be saved*” (which is a **general conditional promise**, i.e. an **offer**), because, to them, this implies power in the creature to perform the conditions.

In truth, there is actually no difference between a command and a general conditional promise. Both are legitimate expressions of the same gospel message, because it is **in the way of** repenting and believing in Christ that God saves His elect by granting them the faith and repentance required **at the moment of hearing**. So the proclaiming of a general conditional promise to all men everywhere is not wrong as it doesn’t imply that God has a salvation waiting for the non-elect if only they would respond, neither does it imply they have the ability to do so. It merely calls them to do their duty despite their inability.

So, we see again, like holders of position [A.], they make the mistake of believing that God grants regeneration (and therefore the faith and repentance required) in the elect **before** giving them the gospel at a later date:

Herman Hoeksema, founder of the PRC, in *Reformed Dogmatics*, chapter on Regeneration explaining 1 Peter 1:23, says:

“And when the apostle teaches here that regeneration takes place through the living Word itself, that is, through Christ, it certainly is not proper to replace that living Word simply by the preaching of the gospel. It is true that the preaching of the Word stands in connection with regeneration in the broader sense of the word: for without the proclamation of the gospel it is impossible that regeneration will ever become conscious in the people of God.”

He also says in the same chapter:

“In that deepest sense, regeneration is not even as such a matter of his own experience, seeing that it does not take place within, but below the threshold of his consciousness. It is therefore independent of age and can take place in the smallest infants. We may even take for granted that in the sphere of the covenant of God He usually regenerates His elect children from infancy.”

Here we also see that the PRC believe that it is actually God's ordinary way of working to regenerate His elect from the womb or infancy, particularly those born in the line of the Covenant. However, in the Bible, the ordinary way of regeneration is rather through the preaching of the gospel, otherwise, why bother preaching it at all if most believers are saved before hearing it anyway? The particular cases of infants and imbeciles are mentioned by the Westminster Confession:

Westminster Confession of Faith 10:3

Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth. So also are all other elect persons, who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the word.

The special case is for those **incapable** of being called by the ministry of the Word, not the other way around, as the PRC would have us believe if most of the elect are actually regenerated in the womb or as infant children of believers. Ordinarily, gospel preaching is the usual means of salvation. We are saved as truth is revealed and comes home to us as we embrace it. We can of course only embrace it by God's Spirit working in us.

Romans 10:14,15

How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things.

Another objection is that when such general conditional promises are used, it is very likely for the hearer to conclude that he has got the ability to fulfil the conditions required in and of himself, without grace. This is indeed the case and many people do think that they are saved when they are not. This is what the parable of the sower indicates will happen. The natural man in and of himself will never truly repent or truly believe, just as he will never

keep the law of God, but he could well fool himself into thinking that he has done these things. The command to repent and believe is good, but if people believe they can do these things in their own strength they have got it wrong.

Gospel preaching will therefore manifest three types of persons:

- (1.) those who don't respond,
- (2.) those who seem to respond outwardly, but think they can do these things in their own strength,
- (3.) those who respond fully and properly, because God has given them the faith and repentance required to do so.

We need to distinguish those in group (2.) from those in group (3.). Hence it is always a very useful exercise to look for marks of grace to discern true believers from hypocrites, something the PRC seem very reluctant to do. Experimental religion is not practised in their circles.

So we see that there is no problem as such with proclaiming the gospel as a general conditional promise to all men, so long as we neither imply **ability** in man to respond by himself [E.], nor present a God **longing** or **desiring** salvation in any way without doing anything about it [D.]. The PRC believe that this is not possible using general conditional promises, but only possible using a command.

[C.]

This position is what I consider is the true position. It affirms [1.] and [2.] but denies [3.] above. This position sits firmly between the two "railway tracks" of, on the one hand denying general conditional promises and believing in a regeneration **before** hearing the gospel (i.e. [A.] and [B.]), and on the other hand believing that the only way we can preach a free offer of salvation to all men properly is to believe that God has some sort of desire for the salvation of all men (i.e. [D.] and [E.]). We must stay within these "railway tracks" or we will go astray.

God has His elect. They are a fixed number, and God knows who they are. We don't. We must preach commands or general conditional promises freely to all men indiscriminately, and all the elect (and no more and no less) will be saved **through** responding to this, by God's regenerating them and granting them faith and repentance, which is the only way they can respond. This is the true "free offer of the gospel," and is the ordinary means of salvation. It is an offer free to all men. If they believe, they surely shall be saved. Indeed if they **could** and **would** believe of their own strength (which they can't and won't, because of their inability and unwillingness to do so due to their fallen nature in Adam) they would indeed be saved. So the gospel, in and of itself taken in isolation, is genuine good news to all men, if they would fulfil the conditions. The non-elect will never be willing or able to fulfil these conditions, and God knows that. The elect will fulfil them, because God will regenerate them and grant them the faith and repentance to do so. The PRC say that the gospel is a "*savour of death unto death*" to the reprobate (quoting 2 Corinthians 2:16), but that's not quite true as such. In and of itself the gospel is always a conditional promise of good news – however, the **effect** in the reprobate will always be of death unto death, because they can never fulfil the conditions, neither will God ever grant the conditions to them.

The important point to note here (to distinguish position [C.] from position [D.]), is that the true free offer of the gospel is not based in any way on a perceived desire of God for the salvation of all men, but it is rather based solely on the command to preach the gospel to every creature.

[D.]

This position, just like Arminianism [E.], affirms points [1.], [2.] and [3.], and is the predominant view in most general so-called “Calvinistic” evangelical churches today. People who hold to this position are Calvinists in name, but in reality their theology is wrong because they base it on a desire, or at the very least a “delight” within God for the salvation of all men. They can’t bear to believe the truth that God does not actually love all men or desire the salvation of all men, so they invent ways of trying to pretend that God does have some sort of love for them all, even though they are constrained by their lip service to Calvinism to believe in a limited atonement. They would have God pleading with sinners to come to him. They would say that God “is willing” and able to save sinners, the onus being on the sinner to come. They would invent a “love” in God that embraces the non-elect. These things cannot be. God is indeed **able** to save all men if He wants to. This fact is not in doubt. However, God has decreed that only a fixed number shall display His mercy by being saved, whereas the rest display His justice by going to hell, which is the perfect punishment for their sins - indeed we should all be in hell if justice was the only attribute God wished to display. If one sinner is kept from hell, it is a marvellous thing. But to say that God “wills” or “is willing” that all men are saved is not true, because we know that there is a fixed number only who are saved, a number which can neither be increased or decreased.

Westminster Confession of Faith 3:3,4

III. By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death.

IV. These angels and men, thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number is so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished.

As God decrees all things in this world that come to pass to His greatest glory, so fixed is the number of the elect that if one more or one less than this number were saved, His glory would not be displayed as much in them as a total body as in the fixed number that He *has* decreed. The fact that not all men are saved means that God either is unable to save them (which cannot be as He is Almighty) or is unwilling. God therefore **must be unwilling** to save the ones He has decreed not to save. That is the bottom line. To say that He “wills” all to be saved, but that His holy nature must (reluctantly) punish them in hell if they do not repent and believe makes God a schizophrenic (“*schizophrenia*” from the Greek “*split mind*”) with a will opposed to His nature.

A popular way of trying to get Calvinists to believe that God wants all men to be saved is to attribute two “wills” to God. Now there is a correct way of looking at this, although the use of the word “*will*” is rather misleading. Firstly it is said that God has a “*decretive will*” or “*secret will*,” which is what He decrees, one aspect of which is that there is a fixed number of elect and no more that will be saved (although this fact is not secret, because we know about it. Only the number and names of the elect are hidden from us). This we are all agreed upon. Secondly it is said that God has a “*preceptive will*” or “*revealed will*,”

which is simply the rule of life for the believer, which is the moral law, which is summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments. This also includes the commandment given to all men to repent and believe in Christ. Now it is argued that because God has given this rule to all men, He therefore “delights” when men keep this law, i.e. He “delights” that men repent and turn to him, i.e. He “wants” or “desires” all men to do so, hence it is said that God “wants” all men to be saved. This is not a logical train of thought, and takes what was originally the correct concept (although poor terminology) of a “preceptive will” in God too far. God indeed has given all men a rule of life, which is the moral law, and indeed all men are commanded to repent and turn to Christ. But God knows what He wants, and performs all His pleasure (“desire”), sometimes overruling “right” with “wrong.” For example, the crucifixion of Christ was truly a wicked act for which the perpetrators are fully responsible and will be punished accordingly; but God allowed it to come to pass because He ordained such an evil act to be the means of salvation for His people. In any case, to say that God “desires” or “delights in” anything is really a misnomer because He does not have like passions as we have (Acts 14:15, Westminster Confession of Faith 2:1), but it is possible to use the word when talking about the will of God in that God “desires” all that He wills. He cannot will anything that He does not “desire.”

Isaiah 46:9,10

Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.

Job 23:13

But he is in one mind, and who can turn him? and what his soul desireth, even that he doeth.

God wants some men to display His wrath, e.g. Pharaoh:

Romans 9:17,18

For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth.

Romans 9:22-24

What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory, Even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?

Another twist that is attempted by proponents of position [D.] is to say that Christ has two wills, a divine and a human; in His divine nature He only wants the elect to be saved, but in His human nature He wants all men to be saved. However, that's not true either. Christ, being one Person, only has one will. It is a separate will from God the Father and from God the Holy Spirit, otherwise His sacrifice would not have been voluntary. However, in every point at all times (even in Gethsemane), all three wills of all three Persons of the Trinity work in complete harmony. Christ was no schizophrenic with two opposing wills struggling inside Him.

God cannot have a “desire” that He does not fulfil. This may be possible with men, but can’t be so with God. God commands the reprobate to repent and turn to him (indeed genuinely offering them salvation if they should do so), knowing full well that they don’t have the ability to do so themselves, neither is He ever going to give them that ability (even though He could if He wanted to). Therefore the whole purpose of preaching the gospel to the reprobate is purely to show, display or magnify their guilt before God. This is the effect of what is otherwise a general conditional promise of good news for them. Similarly He says to them, “Keep the law and you will be saved,” knowing that they cannot keep the law and that He is not going to give them the ability to do that either.

Again, many people may object by saying that this is God “mocking” men by commanding them to do something knowing that they will never be able to do it. However nothing could be further from the truth. Man is fallen and no man deserves to be saved from:

Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 29

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

If God sent all of us into hell for ever it would be just and perfect and right for Him to do so, without demanding anything from us or doing anything unjust at all. By nature we are all fallen in Adam. So anyone who is saved from hell is saved by grace alone, they certainly don’t deserve it. In fact it is the people who say that God desires the salvation of all men that are the ones who make God a mocker. If God does desire the salvation of all men then the reprobate are mocked by God because He supposedly “desires” their salvation, but knows they can’t save themselves and neither is He going to save them. The truth is that those who refuse the gospel are not mocked by God at all because He has no “desire” to save them in the first place, neither have they any desire to be saved. They get exactly what they justly deserve.

Another argument used is that there are passages in the Bible that appear to have God longing for the repentance of sinners, e.g.

Psalm 81:13

Oh that my people had hearkened unto me, and Israel had walked in my ways.

However, we run into serious difficulties if we start to think that God “longs” for anything when He has the power to do something about it but doesn’t use that power. God will perform all His pleasure. All things work in His own providence to His greatest glory. Nothing happens in this world without it being decreed of God for His own glory. So He can’t “long” for anything that He doesn’t immediately bring to pass to fulfil that “longing.” There are no unfulfilled longings in God.

Isaiah 46:10

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

Also it is argued that there are passages in the Bible which state that God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, e.g.:

Ezekiel 33:11

Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?

It is commonly thought that the opposite of God's pleasure is His sadness. God can't be sad for the same reason that He can't have unfulfilled longings. The opposite of God's pleasure is His anger, not His sadness.

This position also effectively puts God's act of regeneration **after** the sinner's choice to repent and believe, which is really Arminianism (i.e. [E.]) in disguise. Holders of this position would deny this of course, and call themselves "Calvinists," trying to make us believe that their position is the same as [C.], i.e. that God regenerates **in the way of** faith and repentance. However, in practice, in their preaching of the gospel, they go too far in emphasising the sinner's required response in order to try to push the sinner into the kingdom of God; to urge him, plead with him and beseech him with earnest overtures to embrace Christ. In this, they aren't relying on the power of the Holy Ghost to regenerate at all, but, conversely, the more they urge and plead, the more they are persuading all who hear to believe that it is within their own power to embrace or reject Christ as they will. This view therefore tends towards filling the church with hypocrites who outwardly respond in their own power, without having inwardly responded through the power of the Holy Ghost working in them. The reprobate trying to please God in their own efforts is more abominable to God than if they hadn't bothered, even though it is always their duty to perform good works.

Understanding these simple principles shows clearly that position [D.] is wrong.

[E.]

This is Arminianism. It affirms points [1.], [2.] and [3.], but unlike [D.] it goes further in that it denies Calvinism completely, believing in a universal atonement, which "makes salvation possible" for everyone, now giving all men the "opportunity for salvation" if only they exercise their free will to repent and believe in Christ. The idea is, that God deliberately restricts His power with regards the salvation of men, and leaves them completely free to choose or reject Him as they will. God really wants everyone to be saved (again an identical position to [D.]) but has left it up to them whether they choose him or not. So, in this case, regeneration is again only ever granted by God **after** the hearing of the gospel and responding to it. This is wrong, simply because if God had left us to our own supposed "free will," no-one would ever be saved. Not one of us would choose God, we would always choose our sin. We are all slaves to sin. All we can do is sin. We are vile. God has not left us with "free will" to choose the good at all. Our own experience proves this to us if we are honest with ourselves. Salvation must be of the Lord, God must be the one who grants faith and repentance, there is no other way.

What is Hypercalvinism?

Now we have looked at all five views, we return to the question at the beginning: How do we define Hypercalvinism? Well, the fact is that:

1. Holders of position [E.] define [A.], [B.], [C.] and [D.] as all being *Hypercalvinism*.
2. Holders of position [D.] define [A.], [B.] and [C.] as *Hypercalvinism* and [E.] as *Arminianism*.

3. Holders of position [C.] define [A.] and [B.] as *Hypercalvinism* and [D.] and [E.] as *Arminianism* (This is the correct position).
4. Holders of position [B.] define [A.] as *Hypercalvinism* and [C.], [D.] and [E.] as *Arminianism*.
5. Holders of position [A.] define [B.], [C.], [D.] and [E.] as all being *Arminianism*.

So one's definition of *Hypercalvinism* (and *Arminianism* for that matter) is different depending on where one is on the above spectrum. So when one hears someone using either of these words, we must make sure we know where the person stands on these issues beforehand in order to know what they are talking about.

However, if we embrace the true position, i.e. [C.], we do have a marker that we can use, in that we can look for where regeneration logically comes (ordinarily) in each scheme of things. If regeneration is found to come **before** the preaching of the gospel (as in [A.] and [B.]) we can safely use the term *Hypercalvinism*; whereas if regeneration is found to come **after** the preaching of the gospel upon man's response to it (as in [D.] and [E.]), we can safely use the term *Arminianism*. Only if regeneration ordinarily comes **upon** the preaching of the gospel, as a gift from God granting men faith and repentance to respond, do we begin to have a correct view of things.

Should we Impose Christian Standards on Others?

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

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

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

Romans 8:7

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

Isaiah 26:10

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

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

Revelation 22:11

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

There are several Bible texts to examine on this subject.

Romans 13:1-7

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

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

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

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

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

We're told here that a government's duty is to promote "*good*" and punish "*evil.*" But if the government defines "*good*" and "*evil*" differently from God, what do we do? We

should let them. We should never rebel and should continue ourselves defining “good” and “evil” in God’s way. But this means that we should be prepared at any time to become subjects of unjust punishment. The government is still ordained of God.

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

Daniel 6:10

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

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

Daniel 3:16-18

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

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

1 Timothy 1:8-9

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

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

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

Galatians 3:21-25

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

Deuteronomy 14:21

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

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

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

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

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

on anyone outside the church. We're here simply to make sure we keep ourselves unspotted from the world.

James 1:27

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

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

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

Romans 14:15,16

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

Romans 14:20-21

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

We are told:

Romans 14:23

whatsoever is not of faith is sin.

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

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

That of blasphemy:

1 Timothy 1:19,20

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

And incest:

1 Corinthians 5:4,5

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

But, one may say, the pope blasphemes God every day in every Mass. And the Archbishop of Canterbury breaks the seventh Commandment by allowing brazen, open homosexuals to get into high positions in his church. Surely, these are just the sort of serious crimes that the Bible talks about in these passages. So they should be thrown out, and delivered to Satan that they may learn to repent. Yes, they should. But they've taken over the ruling power in their respective churches, so nobody can't get rid of them.

The apostle John had this problem in a church:

3 John 1:9,10

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

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

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

John 15:18,19

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

Christians are going to be hated by everybody:

Mark 13:12,13

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

So, should we impose Christian standards on others? It's really a hypothetical question, like, "What would the world be like if Adam had never sinned?" Or, "How many angels can you get on the end of a pin?" We are not to bother ourselves with these things:

2 Timothy 2:23

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

Titus 3:9

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

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

Mark 13:9

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

Is Christianity a Political Movement?

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

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

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

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

Zechariah 9:9

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

Matthew 11:28-30

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

There they can read what Jesus Christ really taught:

Matthew 5:3-12

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

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

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

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

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Isaiah 9:6

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

Luke 2:14

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

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

Matthew 10:34-36

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword.

For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household.

This is not Christ telling us to take up arms and fight for Him. God forbid! If that was the case, this passage would be teaching we should go to war against our own families. No. We're told elsewhere that Christ came to bring peace between God and men. Here, He's simply telling us that because some people won't believe - maybe even some in our own families - there will inevitably be division:

Luke 12:51

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

But what about:

Revelation 19:11-16

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

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

John 14:6

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

Matthew 10:39

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

Luke 14:11

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

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

2 Corinthians 5:10

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

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

Matthew 5:44,45

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

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

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

John 18:36

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

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

Romans 14:17

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

Ephesians 6:12,13

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

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

Ephesians 6:14-17

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

And our best weapon of all is *prayer*:

Ephesians 6:18

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

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

Psalms 118:6

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

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

Jeremiah 9:24

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

Psalms 119:97

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

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

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

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

Revelation 14:6

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

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

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

1 Samuel 15:23

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

Acts 5:39

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

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

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

1 Peter 2:13-15

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

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

1 Timothy 2:1,2

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

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

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

Jeremiah 29:7

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

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

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

Acts 17:26

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

Isaiah 40:15

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

Psalm 2:4,5

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

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

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

Micah 6:8

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

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

James 1:27

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

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

Philippians 2:14,15

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

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

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

Titus 2:11-14

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

Remember the Sabbath Day to Keep it Holy

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

Exodus 20:8-11

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

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

Romans 2:14,15

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

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

1 Timothy 4:1,2

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

Titus 1:15

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

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

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

Romans 1:20,21

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A very popular idea is that we don't need to keep one day special any more. That was for Old Testament Jews, and it was the seventh day of the week, Saturday. The sabbath rest for Christians is not a specific day any more, but the continuous rest we have in Jesus:

Hebrews 4:9,10

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

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

Matthew 11:28

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

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

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

Genesis 2:2,3

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

Of course God doesn't rest:

Psalms 121:4

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

But it's said that God rested on the seventh day to give us a pattern throughout time that we should have six days labour and one day rest. A week comprising of seven days with at least one day's rest is part of every culture in the world, because that's what God gave us originally. When various atheist societies in history have tried to change to a ten day working week, it didn't work, men became less efficient, so they abandoned it. Working six days and resting one is best for our well-being. All of God's Commandments are good for us. They're not rules and regulations because God is a strict taskmaster. No. He gave us His Commandments for our good.

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

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

We don't need pictures. They're not necessary to eternal life. Baptism, the Lord's Supper, the church - these are all pictures, none of which are essential to everlasting life. The thief on the cross never had any of them. The spiritual reality they point to is the most

important thing. And the sabbath day is another one of these pictures. That's maybe why many Christians think they can disregard it, in the same way many Christians disregard baptism and the Lord's Supper, and many don't join a church. The pictures may not be essential, but they're at least useful to us in our walk in this world. It's good to have them.

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

(1.) A pattern that is good for our well-being.

(2.) A picture of the true rest we have in Christ.

(3.) And then there's a third reason for it. It's a specific sign for believers. A sign of our sanctification, our having been set apart from the world by the Lord:

Exodus 31:12-17

And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Speak thou also unto the children of Israel, saying, Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations; that ye may know that I am the Lord that doth sanctify you. Ye shall keep the sabbath therefore; for it is holy unto you: every one that defileth it shall surely be put to death: for whosoever doeth any work therein, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days may work be done; but in the seventh is the sabbath of rest, holy to the Lord: whosoever doeth any work in the sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death. Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between me and the children of Israel for ever: for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.

Ezekiel 20:12

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

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

Lamentations 1:7

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

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

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

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

Matthew 12:8-12

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

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

John 20:19

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

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

John 20:26

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

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

Acts 20:7

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

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

1 Corinthians 16:2

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

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

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

Revelation 1:10

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

By John's old age, the first day of the week had become colloquially known as the "Lord's day."

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

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

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

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

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

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

Mark 2:27

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

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

Isaiah 58:13,14

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

Christian Hatred

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

Psalms 11:5

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

Isaiah 30:30

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

Malachi 1:4

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

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

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

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

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

Romans 12:19

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

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

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

Luke 14:26

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

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

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

Jeremiah 12:8

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

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

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

Acts 10:34

God is no respecter of persons.

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

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

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

Deuteronomy 28:63

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

Psalms 35:8,9

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

Psalms 137:8,9

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

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

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

Genesis 18:25

Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?

Isaiah 46:10

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

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

Westminster Larger Catechism Q.29

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

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

Mark 9:45,46

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

Luke 12:5

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

Luke 16:23

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

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

Genesis 6:5,6

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

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

Genesis 8:21

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

Jeremiah 13:23

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

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

Jeremiah 17:9

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

Psalms 51:5

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

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

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

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

Revelation 16:7

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

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

Jeremiah 16:5

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

As an example, I heard a well-respected "Christian" author and ex-missionary, tell the following story once at a meeting. She said that on Judgment Day, those who never heard the gospel will be going into hell, and as they descend, they will be turning around at those going into heaven shouting "Why didn't you tell us about Jesus?" According to this

theory, those going to hell will be under the impression that it is the fault of those in heaven that they going to hell (for not telling them the gospel), and those going to heaven will presumably be eternally miserable because they think it was their fault that they did not tell the people going to hell the gospel. The truth is exactly the opposite. Those in hell will be in eternal torment, and everyone will know it will be a just punishment for their sins, just as everyone will know the eternal bliss of those in heaven will be all of grace.

Philippians 2:10,11

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

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

Acts 14:15

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

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

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

If we say, as we are doing, that we rejoice in hell, then we are compared to fundamentalists of other religions such as Islam. However the hatred that they whip up in Islam is an unjust hatred, a hatred that hates the wrong objects (i.e. non-muslims). God’s hatred is always perfectly just and clean, always hating that which is hateful, i.e. that which is against His holy law, and nothing else. This is the only type of hatred that we should ever have. There is no excuse at all for hating the wrong object. That is truly sin.

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

But are we not to weep over the lost, after all, Jeremiah lamented over Jerusalem and Christ Himself wept over it? Are we not to have a “burden for souls” or a “compassion for

the lost?" It is a popular misconception that Jeremiah and Christ were weeping over the lost going to hell in these examples. This is not so. They were weeping over the state of Jerusalem, i.e. the visible church, and the fact that truth had been corrupted and God's glory was no longer displayed in it.

Matthew 23:37

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

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

Psalms 119:136

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

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

Exodus 32:32,33

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

Ezekiel 9:8-10

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

Ezekiel 11:13-15,21

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

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

Numbers 16:22,26

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

Jeremiah 7:16

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

Jeremiah 11:14

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

Jeremiah 14:11

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

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

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

Romans 9:22,23

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

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

Matthew 5:44,45

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

But this “*love*” is completely different from any kind of “*love*” that wants them to be saved. God can't possibly think that way towards the non-elect without desiring something that He does not will to come to pass. This would result in a frustrated God, which cannot be. Here we have two definitions of “*love*,” one is a general compassion for all men, and the other, that love which God has for His elect only.

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

Westminster Shorter Catechism

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

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

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

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

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

John 6:26

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

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

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

Romans 12:19-21

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

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

John 7:7

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

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

Matthew 5:22

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

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

(3.) Another reason we are told to “*love our enemies*” is because we have a hard gospel message in the world’s eyes, and we are never to let it seem that we ourselves are hard or not compassionate in our practice of the truth. The only offence we give should be the offence of the cross:

Galatians 5:11

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

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

2 Corinthians 6:3

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

To summarise, we must do good to all:

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

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

Luke 10:21

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

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

Proverbs 10:12

Hatred stirreth up strifes: but love covereth all sins.

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

Romans 12:20

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

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

Psalm 149:8,9

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

Finally, note:

Psalm 92:11

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

Psalm 112:8

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

Psalm 118:7

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

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

Psalm 58:10

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

Revelation 18:20

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

Praise the LORD!!

Healing Ministries in the Church Today

On the church scene today are many, many so-called "healing ministries," which claim to offer miraculous physical healing in the name of Jesus Christ to anyone who wants to avail themselves of it. Sadly, this would include many weak, vulnerable people for whom the usual channels, such as a doctor or hospital, have not worked for them.

The people who set up these "ministries" get their ideas mainly from personal experience. What Biblical basis they have for their ministries they get from such verses as:

Isaiah 53:4,5

Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

They believe, wrongly, that this talks about physical healing rather than spiritual healing from the burden of our sins.

I have a problem with all these so-called “healing ministries” in the church.

Firstly, it is important to note that every time we are healed, it is a miracle. I had a cold last week, but it cleared up. That in itself is a miracle, and we should be thankful.

Psalm 139:14

I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well.

However, when we talk about miracles in the context of a healing ministry, we are talking about extraordinary healing above and beyond the usual, natural means God normally uses. Of course, only God is free to do this:

Westminster Confession of Faith 5:3

God in His ordinary providence maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them at His pleasure.

Secondly, we must realise that no-one anywhere has miraculous powers to heal in this way, despite many churches claiming that people do. Jesus Christ had this power. Upon Christ healing a man born blind, the man said:

John 9:32

Since the world began was it not heard that any man opened the eyes of one that was born blind.

Men having the power to physically heal miraculously was unheard of up to that point. Christ coming along and really having these powers was such a wonder. In fact, Christ called these abilities of His, “*signs and wonders*,” which were only there for one purpose, namely to point to Him as being the Messiah:

John 6:26

Jesus answered them and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles [i.e. what the miracles were pointing to, i.e. that He was the Messiah], but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled.

For most people who came to Christ, all they wanted was the physical healing. They couldn't care less about His teaching. Of ten lepers Christ cleansed, only one came back to give thanks:

Luke 17:15-18

And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, and with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down on his face at his feet, giving him thanks: and he was a Samaritan. And Jesus answering said, Were there not ten cleansed? but where are the nine? There are not found that returned to give glory to God, save this stranger.

In Matthew chapter 10, Christ delegates some of His miraculous powers to His disciples, but it was only for a short evangelistic campaign to the lost sheep of the house of Israel:

Matthew 10:1,5-8

And when he had called unto him his twelve disciples, he gave them power against unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all manner of sickness and all manner of disease.... These twelve Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give.

Note their main task was to preach “*The kingdom of heaven is at hand,*” and the miracles were a sign that this was the case. Very many Christians today think this power to miraculously heal is for us today, but this is nowhere spoken of in Scripture, it was just given to the disciples for this short campaign. In fact in a later campaign, when Christ sent out seventy into all the villages where He Himself would later come, the disciples were again given some miraculous powers, but Christ rebuked them afterwards for boasting of them:

Luke 10:19,20

Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you. Notwithstanding in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven.

After Christ’s ascension, some of the apostles were also given power to heal, but this was limited to the apostles only, as they were specifically called the “*signs of an apostle*”:

2 Corinthians 12:12

Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds.

But in the last letter that Paul ever wrote, to Timothy, we see that even the miraculous powers that he had, had disappeared by that time, because he couldn’t even heal his friend:

2 Timothy 4:20

Trophimus have I left at Miletum sick.

After that, no more men performing miracles. Just enough around the time of Christ coming to this world to prove that He was the Messiah, and to point to the fact that it was His teachings that we need to follow.

So, no-one has magic powers to heal today, in fact no-one has ever had magic powers to heal at all, apart from Christ and some of His disciples for a short period of time. So Benny Hinn, Peter Popoff, Morris Cerullo and the like, not to mention all the Nigerian and African so-called faith-healers conning vulnerable people out of lots of money, are all fake.

Having said all that, of course God can heal. So, if aunt Bessie is sick in bed, one thing we should not be doing is laying hands on her and saying "Be healed, in the name of Jesus." Such action won't work. However, we *can* sit beside her and pray. The Lord *can* heal. We are powerless to do anything, but the Lord can heal if He so wishes, and as Christians, we have access to His throne of grace:

Hebrews 4:16

Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

But we must remember that we shouldn't presume on the Lord to heal every time.

Many times, it is NOT God's will for someone to be physically healed. This is a shocking thing to say to people in these "healing ministry" circles, but it is true. The man born blind was born blind....:

John 9:3

....that the works of God should be made manifest in him.

This doesn't only refer to the moment Christ healed him, but to all of his life while he was blind.

Also, Paul prayed three times that a "*thorn in the flesh*" (what this was we don't know exactly) should be removed from him, but God did not remove it, but rather said:

2 Corinthians 12:9

My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.

Paul acquiesced to God's will after the third time of praying, and did not bother the Lord about it any more after that.

The Psalmist too says that there was a very good reason for him to be afflicted:

Psalm 119:67

Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word.

Many times the Lord is gracious and will heal us when we ask, but even then, there is only one thing certain about life:

Hebrews 9:27

....it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.

We must always be aware that maybe, in the Lord's will, it is aunt Bessie's time to die. We all die. Death is the only thing certain about life. Only Enoch, Elijah and all those who will be on the earth at Christ's second coming won't die. That is not most of us. We should all ordinarily expect one day to die. We should prepare for it. We need to embrace Christ as our only Saviour from the consequences of our sins, and make sure we are His, before it's too late. In other words, we shouldn't be obsessed with a "healing ministry," thinking that if only we have enough faith we can be healed every time and live for ever. That is stupidity at its greatest. Who wants to live in this awful, sad, depressing world, full of suffering and trials, for ever, anyway?

John 16:33

In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.

The Christian's true home is in heaven. That is what we should be preparing for, not a long, comfortable life on this earth:

Colossians 3:1,2

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

This is why I have no time for so-called "healing ministries" in the church. However, if a ministry is offering prayer for the sick, of course that is good and useful and should be encouraged. But when people presume on God to heal every time, we have crossed the line. We should be thankful for anything the Lord brings upon us, even death.

1 Thessalonians 5:18

In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.

Christmas: Satan's Greatest Festival?

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

John 1:14

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

1 Timothy 3:16

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

Luke 1:35

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

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

1 Timothy 1:15

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

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

But Christmas is altogether different.

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

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

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

Luke 2:8

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

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

John 1:29

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

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

1 Corinthians 11:26

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

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

1 Kings 12:32,33

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

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

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

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

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

Psalm 27:10

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

John 8:36

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

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

Acts 13:47

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

What A Christian Can Know For Sure

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

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

John 6:37

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

Matthew 7:7,8

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

Jeremiah 29:13

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

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

Romans 3:20

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

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

Psalms 103:12

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

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

Unbelievers without Christ are in a dreadful situation:

Ephesians 2:12

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

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

Romans 1:20,21

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

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

Romans 8:1

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

1 John 4:13

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

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

1 John 2:27

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

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

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

Philippians 1:6

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

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

The true Christian would never think that way. If we've truly been saved by Christ, we'll never think that we deserve what God has given us. We're born no different from unbelievers, we're exactly the same as them. We too were born as unbelieving, self-centred creatures just like they are:

Ephesians 2:3

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

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

Ephesians 2:8,9

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

Romans 3:27,28

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

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

1 Samuel 2:3

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

Isaiah 57:15

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

1 Peter 5:5,6

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

Humility is all we can have before the Lord. But that doesn't exclude coming to know many things *for sure* that the world can never know, including our eternal salvation. We

shouldn't let what the world claims it knows *for sure* to persuade us that they're right all the time, because they're not. The world doesn't know what it's talking about. God does.

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

John 17:17

Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

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

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

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

1 John 5:13

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

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

1 John 2:18

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

1 John 3:2

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

1 John 3:14

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

1 John 3:18,19

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

1 John 3:24

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

1 John 4:6

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

1 John 5:2

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

1 John 5:14,15

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

1 John 5:18-20

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

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

1 John 1:8

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

John explains what he means more clearly in chapter 3:

1 John 3:6

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

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

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

Romans 7:14,18

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

Romans 8:22

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

Romans 8:28

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

Romans 14:14

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

1 Corinthians 8:4

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

2 Corinthians 5:1

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

Philippians 3:10

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

Philippians 4:12

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

1 Timothy 1:8

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

2 Timothy 1:12

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

Hebrews 10:30

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

Hebrews 11:3

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

Job 19:25,26

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

Job 42:2

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

Psalms 39:4

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

Psalms 41:11

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

Psalm 73:16,17

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

Psalm 135:5

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

Psalm 140:12

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

Ecclesiastes 3:12-14

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

Jeremiah 9:24

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

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

Acts 1:7

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

Romans 8:26

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

1 Corinthians 4:4

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

1 Corinthians 13:9,12

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

2 Corinthians 5:16

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

Psalm 71:15

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

Dust Thou Art

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

Genesis 2:7

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

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

Genesis 3:19

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

Ecclesiastes 3:20

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

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

1 Corinthians 7:29

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

Job 8:9

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

Job 14:1,2

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

Psalms 39:4-6

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

Psalms 39:11

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

Psalms 78:39

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

Psalm 89:47,48

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

Psalm 90:9,10

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

Psalm 144:4

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

James 4:14

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

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

Psalm 103:14-16

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

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

Ecclesiastes 1:14

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

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

Ecclesiastes 3:1

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

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

Ecclesiastes 12:7

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

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

1 Corinthians 15:44

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

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

Matthew 10:28

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

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

1 Corinthians 15:36,37

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

John 12:24

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

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

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

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

2 Timothy 3:7

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

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

Isaiah 28:24-29

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

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

2 Corinthians 4:17,18

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

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

Luke 10:41,42

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

Colossians 3:1,2

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

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

Romans 8:19-22

For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.

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

Psalms 56:8

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

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

The Lord has put us all into this condition:

Romans 3:23

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

But He's also shown us the way out:

Romans 6:23

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

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

John 12:25

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

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

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

Mark 8:36

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

Job 1:21

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

1 Timothy 6:7

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

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

Isaiah 26:20

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

Philippians 1:23

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

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

Luke 8:15

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

Luke 21:34-36

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

2 Peter 3:11-13

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

Even a Vapour

James 4:14

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

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

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

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

2 Peter 1:3

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

He hasn't revealed absolutely everything about the universe to us, because, for a start, we wouldn't understand it, and in any case we don't need to know it all. But everything we do need to know has not only been revealed, but has always been clearly available. Firstly, through oral tradition. Adam was contemporary with Methuselah, who knew Shem, who knew Isaac, who knew his grandson Levi, who knew his grandson Amram, who was the father of Moses, through whom the Bible started to be written down. Seven generations of oral transmission was all it took (people lived longer in the early days than we do now) before the truth began to be more permanently recorded for the many future generations scattered throughout the world.

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

1 Timothy 6:20

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

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

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

James 4:13

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

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

2 Peter 3:4

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

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

Mark 13:7,8

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

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

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

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

1 Corinthians 15:32

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

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

Ecclesiastes 12:7

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

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

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

Ecclesiastes 2:17

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

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

Ecclesiastes 12:13

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

If we are here today and gone tomorrow, then we can live how we like, it doesn’t matter, there would be no eternal consequences to pay for our actions. But if we have immortal souls that live forever, we are responsible to the God who made us. No longer ought we to

be busying ourselves with our own pathetic, inconsequential little matters. Our only motivation for living now, must be to live our lives to the glory of God:

1 Corinthians 10:31

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

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

Luke 12:20

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

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

2 Thessalonians 1:8,9

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

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

Luke 16:26

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

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

John 3:16

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

If we repent of our sins against God and embrace the Lord Jesus Christ to save us from them, if we pray to Him, trust in Him, and acknowledge Him as our Saviour, we can be saved from the eternal consequences of where our sins would otherwise inevitably lead us. Everything else we do in this world is absolutely pointless in comparison to making sure we have Christ as our Saviour:

John 3:36

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

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

2 Corinthians 6:2

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

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

James 4:14

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

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

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

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

1 Corinthians 15:35-38

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

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

Revelation 21:4

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

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

Revelation 14:13

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

We know that God alone will be the focus:

Revelation 4:2-8

And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne. And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald. And round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold. And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices: and there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal: and in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne, were four beasts full of eyes before and behind. And the first beast was like a lion, and the second beast like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast was like a flying eagle. And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.

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

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

Psalms 50:21

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

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

Psalms 103:12

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

Hebrews 8:12

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

Hebrews 10:16,17

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

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

Revelation 5:6

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

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

Revelation 7:9,10

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

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

Philippians 1:22-24

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

1 John 3:2

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

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

1 Corinthians 7:29

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

How should we then live?

1 Corinthians 15:58

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

2 Corinthians 4:17,18

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

We Have Sinned

Jeremiah 3:25

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

1 John 1:10

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

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

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

Jeremiah 29:13

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

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

2 Chronicles 6:28-31

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

And the church should be leading the way in this. Surely the role of the church is to get people to recognise their sin before God and to show them the remedy. Not only to call nations to repent, but also to call each one of us, as individuals, personally to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ to save us from our sins. After all, that’s what Christ came

into the world to do. He is a Saviour to all those who call upon Him. Our national church used to be a lot better at calling men to do these things than it is now.

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

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

The Communion service prayer of confession goes further:

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

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

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

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

Isaiah 64:5

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

Jeremiah 14:7

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

Daniel 9:8

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

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

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

Ephesians 2:12

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

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

2 Samuel 14:14

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

Genesis 47:9

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

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

Philippians 3:13,14

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

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

Firstly, take a look at this bunch of likely lads: Pharaoh, Balaam, Achan, King Saul, Shimei and Judas. What have they all got in common? All of them mouthed the words "*I have sinned*" when they found themselves in a sticky situation, yet none of them truly meant it. They only said those words to get out of the mess they were in at the time. There was no

true heartfelt repentance in any of them. They knew jolly well they'd go back to their old ways again as soon as they were free from their temporary difficulty.

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

1 Kings 21:25

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

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

1 Kings 21:27-29

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

There's no record of him acknowledging his sin in words, but in his actions, he humbled himself, and at least outwardly showed some kind of repentance. And what's more, the Lord saw it and recognised him for what he'd done. He didn't actually commend Ahab personally, but through Elijah, He gave a promise that the evil to come wouldn't be in Ahab's lifetime, but in that of his son.

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

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

And then there's Manasseh. He was the most wicked king the southern kingdom of Judah ever had:

2 Chronicles 33:9,10

So Manasseh made Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem to err, and to do worse than the heathen, whom the LORD had destroyed before the children of Israel. And the LORD spake to Manasseh, and to his people: but they would not hearken.

The evil things he encouraged Judah to do, were the tipping point that caused the Lord to judge the whole nation by sending them into exile:

Jeremiah 15:4

And I will cause them to be removed into all kingdoms of the earth, because of Manasseh the son of Hezekiah king of Judah, for that which he did in Jerusalem.

But, after fifty terrible years of his reign, he was taken in chains to Babylon, and there he humbled himself and truly repented:

2 Chronicles 33:11-13

Wherefore the LORD brought upon them the captains of the host of the king of Assyria, which took Manasseh among the thorns, and bound him with fetters, and carried him to Babylon. And when he was in affliction, he besought the LORD his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, And prayed unto him: and he was intreated of him, and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD he was God.

But how do we know that his humility wasn't just outward and superficial, like Ahab's? We know it was true repentance for three reasons: Firstly, we're told he "*knew that the Lord, he was God.*" In other words, he came to know the Lord personally for himself. Secondly, just as in Saul's conversion, he became a man of prayer:

Acts 9:11

Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth.

Thirdly, we're also told that during the last five years of his reign, he desperately tried to reverse all the evil things he had done in Judah. It didn't work, because the nation didn't go along with him. The land of Judah was so seared in heart by now, that not even the reign of good king Josiah, Manasseh's grandson, could turn them back to the Lord again, and they had to reap their judgment. But Manasseh saved his own soul by humbling himself and crying to the Lord. That's always the way.

And then there's king David. He mouthed the words "*I have sinned*" more than once in Scripture, and we find that every time he meant it from the heart:

2 Samuel 12:13

And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the LORD. And Nathan said unto David, The LORD also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die.

2 Samuel 24:10

And David's heart smote him after that he had numbered the people. And David said unto the LORD, I have sinned greatly in that I have done: and now, I beseech thee, O LORD, take away the iniquity of thy servant; for I have done very foolishly.

We have many psalms written by him to prove beyond doubt that his repentance was real:

Psalms 51:1-6

Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine

iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest. Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me. Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom.

He, just like Manasseh, was given a true view of himself by the Lord. And that's what we need to have - a true view of the sinful, self-centred state of our own soul. A true view of ourselves can only humble us to the dust. After the Lord comes into our lives, there should be no more room for pride in our hearts ever again:

1 Samuel 2:3

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

Only the Lord can change such hardened creatures as we are, and break our pride altogether. Then our attitude will be totally changed for good, and for ever.

Many people feign repentance, and it may bring tears, but it's only in order to try to avoid some kind of judgment. True repentance, on the other hand, would never attempt to avoid any judgment for sin, it would accept it as just and right. And that in turn would cast us solely upon God's mercy. Here are some examples of true repentance in the Bible:

Joseph's brothers:

Genesis 42:21

And they said one to another, We are verily guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the anguish of his soul, when he besought us, and we would not hear; therefore is this distress come upon us.

David:

2 Samuel 24:17

And David spake unto the LORD when he saw the angel that smote the people, and said, Lo, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly: but these sheep, what have they done? let thine hand, I pray thee, be against me, and against my father's house.

Job:

Job 40:4,5

Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth. Once have I spoken; but I will not answer: yea, twice; but I will proceed no further.

Job 42:5,6

I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.

Jonah:

Jonah 1:12

And he said unto them, Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you: for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you.

May we all recognise our sinful, selfish nature, and the judgment we personally deserve for it. But may we also come to the Lord, and truly repent in our hearts:

Luke 18:13

And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.

Repentance Unto Life

Acts 11:18

When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.

I'm sure we're all agreed that there is room for improvement in our lives. We all need to be kinder to people, more generous, more willing to help others, more loving to our neighbour and so on. And whatever church door we enter, we'll more than likely hear sermons and homilies encouraging us to do these things. After all, Jesus Christ Himself taught us exactly the way we should live:

Luke 6:27-31

But I say unto you which hear, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you, Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you. And unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek offer also the other; and him that taketh away thy cloke forbid not to take thy coat also. Give to every man that asketh of thee; and of him that taketh away thy goods ask them not again. And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.

This is all very good. We need teaching like this. And we should all be making more of an effort in this regard. But none of this is exclusive to Christianity. The imam, the rabbi, the living buddha and the atheist politician will all give fairly similar advice. Be kind to your neighbour. Give to the poor. Do good to everybody, even to those with whom you find it difficult. So, the question we may ask ourselves is: Why should we have to embrace Christianity to understand that this is the way we should live? And here is where we must realise that Christianity is far more than just moral teaching.

Simply trying to pull our socks up doesn't work, because we can't. Christianity is all about salvation. Being saved from the consequences of where, if left unchecked, our sins would inevitably lead us. It's not about anything else. It's this that sets Christianity apart from all other faiths and belief systems. They all teach self-help. We teach the absolute necessity of believing in and putting our trust in one glorious Saviour, who specifically came into this world to save His people from their sins. And that is Jesus Christ:

Matthew 1:21

And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.

Acts 10:43

To him [Jesus Christ] give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins.

Jesus Christ is certainly a moral teacher:

Matthew 23:8

But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren.

But He's far more than that. He's a prophet:

Deuteronomy 18:18

I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him.

He's a King:

John 18:36

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

He's our great High Priest:

Hebrews 9:11,12

But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us.

And, as He said Himself, He is the Son of God:

John 9:35-37

Jesus heard that they had cast him out; and when he had found him, he said unto him, Dost thou believe on the Son of God? He answered and said, Who is he, Lord, that I might believe on him? And Jesus said unto him, Thou hast both seen him, and it is he that talketh with thee.

So, the fundamental principle of Christianity is that we shouldn't trust in ourselves, thinking ourselves good enough to be able to get to heaven. Rather, we are to trust and believe in Jesus Christ as our Saviour to get us there. There are many calls in Scripture to do this:

John 8:24

....if ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins.

Acts 2:21

And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Acts 13:38,39

Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: And by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses.

Acts 16:31

And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.

1 John 3:23

And this is his commandment, That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment.

Sadly, there are many churches out there that really don't teach this gospel message of the absolute necessity of believing in Jesus Christ for salvation at all. They stop at a self-improvement religion. Thankfully, however, there are still many churches that do preach this. And that's good, as far as it goes. However, it has to be said that in most of these, there's still something missing from their message. The gospel call is not just to "believe in Jesus." The gospel call is to "**repent** and believe in Jesus." We only have to look through the Bible to see the importance of repentance:

Matthew 4:17

*From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, **Repent**: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*

Matthew 9:13

*....I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to **repentance**.*

Acts 2:38,39

*Then Peter said unto them, **Repent**, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.*

Acts 3:19

***Repent** ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord.*

Acts 17:30,31

*And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to **repent**: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.*

Acts 20:21

*Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, **repentance** toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Acts 26:18

*To open their eyes, and to **turn** them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which*

are sanctified by faith that is in me.

Acts 26:20

*But shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judaea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should **repent and turn** to God, and do works meet for **repentance**.*

2 Peter 3:9

*The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to **repentance**.*

A church which does not call its hearers to both repent **and** believe, is only preaching half a gospel.

And there is something further we need to understand too. It's very easy to misunderstand the gospel call altogether. The gospel calls all men everywhere to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. But we may mistakenly think that implies we have the ability to do these things in our own strength. That doesn't follow, but we can easily think it does. So it is possible to end up outwardly professing Christianity as our faith, but, I have to say this solemnly, it's not real, it's not in our heart, because we're still trusting in ourselves. The whole concept of the Christian life is to be finished with self altogether, and trust in the Lord alone.

The faith and repentance we need can't be worked up from within ourselves. Too great a change is needed. It must not be just "faith," but "*faith unto salvation*":

1 Peter 1:5

*Who are kept by the power of God through **faith unto salvation** ready to be revealed in the last time.*

Hebrews 10:38,39

*Now the just shall live by faith.... But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that **believe to the saving of the soul**.*

Similarly, our repentance should not be merely trying to make an effort to change, but a "*repentance unto life*":

Acts 11:18

*When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles **granted repentance unto life**.*

And this can only be granted by God:

Acts 5:31

*Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to **give repentance** to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.*

2 Timothy 2:25

*In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God **peradventure will give them repentance** to the acknowledging of the truth;*

The only way to receive “*faith unto salvation*” and “*repentance unto life,*” is to come to an end of self. We must recognise our utter inability to whip these things up from within ourselves, and call upon the Lord to grant them to us. Only then can the Lord work in us. And He promises to do so to all who call upon Him:

Psalm 145:18

The LORD is nigh unto all them that call upon him, to all that call upon him in truth.

Isaiah 55:6,7

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

Matthew 7:7

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you....

The Bible speaks of a world of difference between the sorrow of the world, which leads to a false repentance, a repentance in our own strength which is no good to us, and “*godly sorrow,*” which is the only kind that leads to true repentance:

2 Corinthians 7:9,10

*Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing. For **godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death.***

In order to shew this difference more clearly, take a look at these Biblical characters:

Pharaoh:

Exodus 10:16,17

Then Pharaoh called for Moses and Aaron in haste; and he said, I have sinned against the LORD your God, and against you. Now therefore forgive, I pray thee, my sin only this once, and intreat the LORD your God, that he may take away from me this death only.

Balaam:

Numbers 22:34

And Balaam said unto the angel of the LORD, I have sinned; for I knew not that thou stoodest in the way against me: now therefore, if it displease thee, I will get me back again.

King Saul:

1 Samuel 15:24

And Saul said unto Samuel, I have sinned: for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD, and thy words: because I feared the people, and obeyed their voice.

1 Samuel 15:30

Then he said, I have sinned: yet honour me now, I pray thee, before the elders of my people, and before Israel, and turn again with me, that I may worship the LORD thy God.

Judas:

Matthew 27:3-5

Then Judas, which had betrayed him, when he saw that he was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood. And they said, What is that to us? see thou to that. And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself.

Esau:

Genesis 27:38,41

And Esau said unto his father, Hast thou but one blessing, my father? bless me, even me also, O my father. And Esau lifted up his voice, and wept.... And Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing wherewith his father blessed him: and Esau said in his heart, The days of mourning for my father are at hand; then will I slay my brother Jacob.

Hebrews 12:16,17

Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.

What have all these examples got in common? None of these characters obtained “*repentance unto life*.” But why not? Why did the Lord not grant repentance to these folk? They repented. They were clearly remorseful. It even brought tears to Esau, and caused Judas to kill himself. Surely the Lord ought to have had compassion on such heartfelt repentance? But all these people mentioned here made one big mistake. They only sought repentance in order to try to avoid some kind of punishment or consequences. It’s not genuine. As soon as the situation eased, they would have been off again following their evil ways just like before. It’s not real. And no repentance we think we can muster up from within ourselves is ever going to be real.

On the other hand, the “*repentance unto life*” that only God can give is altogether different. We see our sin for what it really is before God. We cry to God alone:

Psalms 51:4

Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.

Jeremiah 31:18

....turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for thou art the LORD my God.

Only then can the Lord work and grant us the “*repentance unto life*” that we so desperately need. And once we have it, it completely changes our attitude toward ourselves, particularly in two ways: Firstly, it brings self-loathing:

Jeremiah 31:19

*Surely after that I was turned, I repented; and after that I was instructed, I smote upon my thigh: **I was ashamed, yea, even confounded**, because I did bear the reproach of my youth.*

Ezekiel 6:9

*....and they shall **lothe themselves** for the evils which they have committed in all their abominations.*

Ezekiel 7:16

*But they that escape of them shall escape, and shall be on the mountains like doves of the valleys, all of them **mourning, every one for his iniquity**.*

Ezekiel 20:43

*And there shall ye remember your ways, and all your doings, wherein ye have been defiled; and ye shall **lothe yourselves** in your own sight for all your evils that ye have committed.*

Ezekiel 36:31

*Then shall ye remember your own evil ways, and your doings that were not good, and shall **lothe yourselves** in your own sight for your iniquities and for your abominations.*

Secondly, it brings us to accept our punishment. We're no longer attempting to escape anything. Maybe we do deserve some kind of punishment from this world. We accept it. We certainly deserve eternal punishment from God. We accept that too. If God wishes to throw us into hell-fire forever, so be it. Blessed be the name of the Lord if He should do so. Such an attitude toward ourselves can only make us all the more thankful for Jesus Christ and His salvation, who came for the very purpose of saving all those who come to Him from their just deserts.

Here are some examples of true repentance in the Bible:

Genesis 42:21

And they said one to another, We are verily guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the anguish of his soul, when he besought us, and we would not hear; therefore is this distress come upon us.

2 Samuel 24:17

And David spake unto the LORD when he saw the angel that smote the people, and said, Lo, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly: but these sheep, what have they done? let thine hand, I pray thee, be against me, and against my father's house.

Job 33:27

He looketh upon men, and if any say, I have sinned, and perverted that which was right, and it profited me not; he will deliver his soul from going into the pit, and his life shall see the light.

Jonah 1:12

And he said unto them, Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you: for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you.

This is where we should be. Finished with trying to change ourselves, we call upon on the Lord to do it for us. This is the true repentance which leads to eternal life.

1 John 5:11-13

And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life. These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God.

The Bondage of the Will

We seem to be able to make many free choices in our lives. For example, we can freely choose what colour socks to put on. But, thinking about it, is that really a “free” choice? We “decide” which colour clothes to wear out of pure vanity, which is sin. That’s not a “free” choice at all. There are always reasons for every “choice” we make, most of which are purely self-centred.

And there’s one thing for sure that none of us can choose. Man has not, and never has had, a free will with regards being pleasing to God. Man has only ever been in one of two states: either a slave to sin or a slave to righteousness.

Before Adam and Eve fell, they were given the command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This implies that, before they ate of it, they would not have had this knowledge of good and evil within themselves. They could only do good. They didn’t know what evil was. The idea of stealing or lying or being in any way displeasing to God never entered their thoughts. And they would not have had a conscience either, because it would have been unnecessary. The law was written on their hearts. Their will was only ever to do good. They were slaves to righteousness, as it were.

But God gave them one external law, the command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This external law was not part of the moral law, so God can never be accused of being the author of sin by giving them such an extra, external law:

Genesis 2:16,17

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

This is the only time God has ever given to man a law and some kind of freedom of choice as to whether he kept it or not. But even then, was it really a “free” choice? God knew all along that man wouldn’t keep it. God giving just one external law and any kind of “free will choice” to man, in itself introduces the possibility of sin entering into the world, because the possibility of disobedience is always present:

Westminster Larger Catechism

Q. 24. *What is sin?*

A. *Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, any law of God, given as a rule to the reasonable creature.*

God knew full well that, given any kind of choice at all, it was inevitable that Adam and Eve would disobey. And we know this because God had already prepared a plan of salvation from sin from before the foundation of the world:

Matthew 25:34

Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world....

Luke 11:50

That the blood of all the prophets, which was shed from the foundation of the world, may be required of this generation....

John 17:24

Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world.

Ephesians 1:4

According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love....

Hebrews 4:3

For we which have believed do enter into rest, as he said, As I have sworn in my wrath, if they shall enter into my rest: although the works were finished from the foundation of the world.

1 Peter 1:20

Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you....

Revelation 13:8

And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.

Revelation 17:8

The beast that thou sawest was, and is not; and shall ascend out of the bottomless pit, and go into perdition: and they that dwell on the earth shall wonder, whose names were not written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, when they behold the beast that was, and is not, and yet is.

After Adam fell, we are all now as little gods, knowing good and evil:

Genesis 3:5

For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.

Genesis 3:22

And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil....

The law is no longer written on our hearts. God has now instead given us a conscience:

Genesis 3:7,8

And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons. And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden.

Our conscience can be pricked to know the law, and be condemned by it, but has no power to make us keep it:

Psalms 73:21

Thus my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins.

Acts 2:37

Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?

Acts 9:5

And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.

Our conscience can be seared:

1 Timothy 4:2

Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron....

Our conscience can be hardened or even taken away by God as a punishment for our sins:

Exodus 7:13,14

And he hardened Pharaoh's heart, that he hearkened not unto them; as the LORD had said. And the LORD said unto Moses, Pharaoh's heart is hardened, he refuseth to let the people go.

Exodus 7:22

And the magicians of Egypt did so with their enchantments: and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, neither did he hearken unto them; as the LORD had said.

Exodus 8:19

Then the magicians said unto Pharaoh, This is the finger of God: and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he hearkened not unto them; as the LORD had said.

Exodus 10:20

But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, so that he would not let the children of Israel go.

Exodus 10:27

But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let them go.

Exodus 11:10

And Moses and Aaron did all these wonders before Pharaoh: and the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, so that he would not let the children of Israel go out of his land.

Romans 1:24

Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves....

Romans 1:26

For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature....

Romans 1:28

And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient....

Romans 9:17,18

For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth.

Since Adam fell, we now only have God's moral law externally. It is no longer written on the heart. So none of us can now please God by nature, we are all born into this world slaves to sin:

Psalms 14:2,3

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

Psalms 51:5

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

Ecclesiastes 7:29

Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions.

Romans 8:7,8

Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.

1 Corinthians 2:14

But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

Hebrews 11:6

But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

If, however, we are born again by the Spirit of God, we can be freed from this bondage and become slaves to righteousness again. That is the good news of the gospel. In the following passage the word “servant” in all cases is “*doulos*” which means “slave”:

Romans 6:16-23

Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness? But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness. I speak after the manner of men because of the infirmity of your flesh: for as ye have yielded your members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity; even so now yield your members servants to righteousness unto holiness. For when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness. What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed? for the end of those things is death. But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

God’s moral law is now given to us externally, not to see whether we would keep it or not, but as a schoolmaster to show us our inability to keep it and to bring us to Christ:

Galatians 3:24,25

Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.

When we are born again by the Spirit of God, our hearts are completely changed:

2 Corinthians 5:17

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

Galatians 6:15

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.

We now love God’s law:

Psalms 119:97

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

John 8:34-36

Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. And the servant abideth not in the house for ever: but the Son abideth ever. If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.

Romans 8:5

For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit.

Romans 8:14,15

For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.

And we now have God's moral law written on our hearts again, just as Adam and Eve had before they fell:

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD: But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

But the Christian still sins. Despite the fact that the law is now written on our hearts, we still remain as little gods, knowing good and evil. We are still in possession of our fallen nature, and we can never get rid of that in this life. But the law written on our hearts now makes us hate the evil. That's the difference:

Psalms 97:10

Ye that love the LORD, hate evil: he preserveth the souls of his saints; he delivereth them out of the hand of the wicked.

Proverbs 8:13

The fear of the LORD is to hate evil: pride, and arrogancy, and the evil way, and the froward mouth, do I hate.

Amos 5:15

Hate the evil, and love the good, and establish judgment in the gate: it may be that the LORD God of hosts will be gracious unto the remnant of Joseph.

There is now a battle going on within the Christian which wasn't there before. We are slaves to sin in our sinful bodies, and can't help sinning; but this battles against our minds which are slaves to righteousness, which makes us hate being like this:

Romans 7:14-25

For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall

deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.

2 Peter 2:8

For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds....

When Christ came into this world, He was sinless. He was like Adam before he fell. He had the law written on His heart, and could not sin, or even think about sinning:

Psalm 40:7,8

Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart.

Christ had a separate will from the Father, which proves that He went to the cross voluntarily:

John 10:17,18

Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father.

Matthew 26:39,42

And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.... He went away again the second time, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done.

But He never thought for a moment about disobeying, even when tempted by the devil:

Matthew 4:3-10

And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God. Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.

Christians have the law written on their hearts, and also have a conscience to guide them:

Romans 2:14,15

For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the law

*written in their hearts, their conscience **also** bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another...*

This verse is not speaking about all Gentiles, but only those who “*do by nature the things contained in the law*”, i.e. believers. This is confirmed by the word “*also*.” Believers have the law written on their hearts and *also* a conscience. Adam, before he fell, only had the law written on his heart, a conscience wasn’t necessary for him. Unbelievers only have a conscience and not the law written on their hearts.

When Christians get to heaven they shall finally be free from their sinful natures, and will not be able to sin any more:

1 John 3:2

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

Even those in hell will not be able to sin any more:

Philippians 2:10,11

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

But, unlike Christians, they’ll be hating every minute of it:

Luke 16:23,24

And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.

Everlasting Burnings

Isaiah 33:14

The sinners in Zion are afraid; fearfulness hath surprised the hypocrites. Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?

Probably the most unpalatable doctrine we ever have to come to terms with in the Christian life is the doctrine of hell-fire. The usual question that everybody asks - Christians and non-Christians alike - is this: How can a God of love send anyone to eternal conscious torment in body and soul in hell fire for ever and ever? The two don’t seem to be compatible.

Well, we can explain that not only is God a God of love, but He is also a God of justice, and He hates sin with a perfect hatred:

Psalm 11:5-7

The LORD trieth the righteous: but the wicked and him that loveth violence his soul hateth. Upon the wicked he shall rain snares, fire and brimstone, and an horrible tempest: this shall be the portion of their cup. For the righteous LORD loveth righteousness; his countenance doth behold the upright.

Psalm 5:4-6

For thou art not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness: neither shall evil dwell with thee. The foolish shall not stand in thy sight: thou hatest all workers of iniquity. Thou shalt destroy them that speak leasing: the LORD will abhor the bloody and deceitful man.

In fact, sometimes it's God's mercy we have a problem with, and not His justice:

Habakkuk 1:13

Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?

Jonah 3:10-4:1

And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry.

So, how can we bring these two aspects of God's character together? Only in Jesus Christ:

Romans 3:26

To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.

Christians have experienced at first hand the love of God. He has revealed Himself to them personally in their hearts as the Saviour who has saved them from what their sins deserve. So, it's understandable that the concept of God being anything other than loving can appear at first glance to be a problem.

Men have made up many extra-biblical ideas as to what happens after death. Some have invented a place called purgatory. Like hell, it's a place of torment as a punishment for sin, but it doesn't last for ever, and we'll all get out eventually. That's not right. We have to face the fact that the Bible describes hell-fire as eternal:

2 Thessalonians 1:9

*Who shall be punished with **everlasting** destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power....*

Matthew 18:8

*Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into **everlasting** fire.*

Matthew 25:41

*Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into **everlasting** fire, prepared for the devil and his angels....*

Mark 9:44 (also v.46, v.48)

*Where their worm **dieth not**, and the fire is **not quenched**.*

Revelation 14:11

*And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up **for ever and ever**: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name.*

Many try to argue that this idea of everlasting torment was never in the Old Testament. But it is:

Deuteronomy 32:22

For a fire is kindled in mine anger, and shall burn unto the lowest hell, and shall consume the earth with her increase, and set on fire the foundations of the mountains.

Psalms 21:9

Thou shalt make them as a fiery oven in the time of thine anger: the LORD shall swallow them up in his wrath, and the fire shall devour them.

Isaiah 1:31

*And the strong shall be as tow, and the maker of it as a spark, and they shall both burn together, and **none shall quench them**.*

Isaiah 33:14

*The sinners in Zion are afraid; fearfulness hath surprised the hypocrites. Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with **everlasting burnings**?*

Isaiah 66:24

*And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm **shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched**; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh.*

Jeremiah 4:4

*Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, and take away the foreskins of your heart, ye men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem: lest my fury come forth like fire, and **burn that none can quench it**, because of the evil of your doings.*

Daniel 12:2

*And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and **everlasting contempt**.*

Malachi 4:1

For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch.

Another way of trying to deal with this seeming problem is to say that those who don't embrace Jesus Christ as their Saviour are simply annihilated, snuffed out. They quote verses, such as:

John 3:16

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

There you are, they say. They "perish," in other words, they just cease to exist. But in order for this idea to work, they have to explain away all the references to eternal fire, which Christ quite clearly taught. They would argue that He was referring to the valley of Hinnom, just outside Jerusalem, which was the rubbish tip and continually burns. But His references have absolutely nothing to do with the city of Jerusalem:

Luke 16:23,24

And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.

In any case, the Bible tells us that the wicked are not simply destroyed after death. All of us have eternal souls which will continue on for ever, whether we're Christians or not. There is going to be a resurrection of the unjust as well as the just:

John 5:28,29

....the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.

Acts 24:15

And have hope toward God, which they themselves also allow, that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust.

What is the point of preaching the gospel, if the alternative to being in heaven with Christ, is simply annihilation? Sinners would be quite happy with nothing after death. That's what most of them try to convince themselves of anyway, so they can carry on in their sin:

1 Corinthians 15:32

If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not? let us eat and drink; for to morrow we die.

Thinking they'll never be punished in any way after death means that they can do what they like. If they get caught for doing something wrong in this world, they can always evade men's punishment by committing suicide. And by doing so, they think they'll be escaping punishment altogether. Except they won't escape, because there most surely is a judgment after death, and it will be a righteous judgment with a just punishment:

Genesis 18:25

....Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?

The main problem we have here is the idea of a God of love tormenting people for ever. We can't fathom that. So we need to ascertain where this torment actually originates.

Is it from the devil? No. The medieval church has given us a very distorted caricature of hell-fire. They depicted it as a place of flames with the devil in charge, demons running riot and sinners being poked back into the fire with pitchforks if they ever attempted to escape. The devil isn't in charge of hell, God is. The devil and his minions are it's most notorious inmates:

Matthew 25:41

Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels....

Revelation 20:10

And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

So, is it God that deliberately stokes the fire and fans the flames? No. I don't think hell-fire is an external flame at all.

Many people think that they'd quite like to go to hell, because they don't like the idea of heaven. They think that in hell they'll see all their mates again and be able to carry on sinning with them for ever. But it's not like that. Do we really think God has created a place in eternity where people can sin forever? That's just what they want. They'd look forward to going to a place like that. God has created this temporary world, where He allows people to sin for a short time. And even then, He allows sin in a very limited way by only bringing to pass what He purposes to turn to His own glory in the end. In eternity, it can't be anything like this. Nowhere in eternity will men be able to carry on sinning. That surely cannot be. Eternity is altogether clean and holy:

Isaiah 57:15

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

This might sound odd, but I suggest that hell is actually quite a nice environment. It's a place where nobody will be able to sin. And it's a place where everybody will be bowing the knee to Jesus Christ:

Philippians 2:9-11

*Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and **things under the earth**; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

The only thing that will ruin hell are the people that God populates it with.

Christians will be going to an identical place after death. We too won't be able to sin any more and will also be bowing the knee to Christ. But Christians are going to love it there, whereas those in hell will be hating every minute of it.

So, where does the torment come from? Within themselves. After death, God merely puts them in the same kind of environment as the Christian. So He does nothing wrong. He's not stoking any fire. But they'll hate it and we'll love it. And those in hell will know it's their

own fault that they're in that predicament. They won't be shaking their fist in God's face saying, "I hate you God. It's your fault I'm here." No. They'll know exactly whose fault it is. They'll only have themselves to blame.

There are other passages in Scripture which have nothing to do with hell-fire, but which describe a burning as coming from within:

The Word of God in a believer's heart is likened to a burning:

Luke 24:32

And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?

Jeremiah 20:9

Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay.

Unfulfilled desires before marriage are likened to a burning:

1 Corinthians 7:9

But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn.

So, burning is a familiar term to describe something emanating from within ourselves. It doesn't necessarily depict anything external, such as a flame or punishment inflicted from the outside. The burning, fire-like quality, in hell doesn't come from God lighting a fire to deliberately torment anybody. It originates entirely from within those who go there.

Although the environments of heaven and hell are identical, they are also very separate. A great gulf has been fixed between the two:

Luke 16:26

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

The wicked, who persecuted the Christians in this world, will never be able to reach them in the next. Believers will be eternally blissful in heaven:

Revelation 21:27

And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Revelation 21:4

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

So, God isn't tormenting anyone in hell, those there are tormenting themselves. That's the just punishment they have brought upon themselves. Yet still some people think this a bit too harsh. And that's caused many to believe that there will be a "second chance" to hear

the gospel in the next world, especially for those who didn't have the "chance" to hear it here. And they use verses like these:

1 Peter 3:18-20

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water.

1 Peter 4:6

For for this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.

They claim that, in these verses, Christ is preaching to those in hell to give them a "second chance" to be saved. But that's not so. In any case, if that was what these verses were teaching, it undermines all missionary work. If Christ is going to be preaching the gospel in the next world anyway, I'm not going to preach to anybody at all here. He'll do a far better job than I ever could. I'll just leave it to Him. No. These verses teach that when Noah, and others throughout history, preached - to those who are now long since dead - it was Christ they were preaching. Before Christ actually came to earth, the gospel was exactly the same as it is now. The call, then, was to put their trust in a Saviour that was to come. Now, the call is to put our trust in a Saviour that has been, and we know exactly who He is.

1 Corinthians 10:1-4

Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; And did all eat the same spiritual meat; And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ.

Hebrews 4:2

For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.

So there is only one "chance" to hear the gospel, and that is while we're in this world:

2 Corinthians 6:2

For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

Hebrews 9:27

it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment

Those to whom the gospel never comes, God knows that they would never have believed anyway. God sends His missionaries where He sends them. He makes the best use of His resources:

Acts 16:6,7

Now when they had gone throughout Phrygia and the region of Galatia, and were forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia, After they were come to Mysia, they assayed to go into Bithynia: but the Spirit suffered them not.

Wherever we are sent, it most likely means that there will be some of His people to gather in. Our job is simply to make sure we are where God wants us to be.

Those in hell are there because they chose the lifestyle they chose while they were in this world. It's their own fault. But we who get to heaven, will only be there by the sheer grace of God. Because, we have to admit, if left to ourselves, we'd also have chosen the lifestyle of the wicked.

But when God comes into our lives, He changes our hearts so we no longer desire that evil way we were born into and naturally grew up in. We are given a new heart and a new spirit, so instead of loving sin and hating God, we now hate sin and love God. A complete change. And that fits us perfectly for the next world, which we will then enjoy to all eternity.

That does mean we'll now have trials and tribulations in this world, because we'll realise how full of sin it really is. But that'll only be for a short time, and it will be all worthwhile in the end:

John 12:25

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

2 Corinthians 4:17,18

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

It is therefore imperative that every one of us has our heart changed by the Lord, here in this world, so that after we die, we'd fit into and love the beautiful place the Lord has prepared for all of us in eternity. Once there, change will no longer be possible.

Ezekiel 18:31

Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel?

More Than Conquerors

We, as Christians, have been given the most wonderful news anyone could possibly imagine. Our sins have been forgiven by God, and we'll no longer be punished for them:

Romans 8:1

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

If we don't think that's good news, just think of all those sins we've committed in the past. Those selfish decisions we've made. Those selfish actions. Things we can't undo. They've happened. We can't do anything about the consequences now, it's too late. Yet:

John 3:17

God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

If we come to Jesus Christ, put our trust in Him for our salvation personally, stop trusting in ourselves for anything, then we too can know for sure in our hearts the forgiveness of sins for ourselves. That's good news. And before we think that means that now we've been forgiven we can sin all we like and still get to heaven, the Lord changes our hearts so we just wouldn't think that way any more.

But no matter how many times we're told that this good news really is true for us, we still find it difficult to believe. In Romans 8:31-39 we've got a remarkable list of every possible objection we could ever think of, that might get in the way of us being assured of our salvation and of the love of Christ for us:

[31] What shall we then say to these things?

The "*things*" here, refer to everything previously mentioned in chapter 8. And the first "thing" we must acknowledge is the reality that, by nature, no matter how hard we try, we simply cannot please God:

Romans 8:7,8

Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.

That's the state we're all born into, and we need to accept that. We shouldn't hide from it. But all is not lost. If we've come to the Saviour God has sent into the world, our Lord Jesus Christ, we've been given the Holy Spirit to dwell in us, to change us, and to help us begin to live a life that will be pleasing to God:

Romans 8:9,10

But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his. And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

And the Holy Spirit even prays for us when we don't know what to pray for ourselves:

Romans 8:26,27

Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God.

Prayer can only work because God is in control of all things. If that wasn't true, we could argue God might want to help us, but He couldn't do anything about it. That's not God:

Romans 8:28

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

Because of these things, we can be confident every aspect of our salvation is assured:

Romans 8:30

Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.

So, what shall we say to these things? What is there that could possibly still concern us?

If God be for us, who can be against us?

If God is in control of all things, and He has set His love upon us, then nothing and nobody can be against us. But what about when things, in our mind, "go wrong"? Earthquakes, famines, illnesses, pandemics, the loss of loved ones. These things occur, but it doesn't mean God has lost control. Joseph was sold by his brethren. He was imprisoned unjustly for 3 years. But he became a leader in Egypt, and saved Israel and Egypt from famine. He said to his brethren afterwards:

Genesis 50:20

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

God works through our difficulties, and works them all together for our good. And what was the greatest thing the Lord has ever done in the history of the world?

[32] He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?

God's own Son was put to death by wicked men. But it was all in God's plan:

Acts 2:23

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

Men hated Christ so much, they put Him to death. That was a wicked act, and those who were responsible will be punished eternally for it, unless they repented before they died. They had absolutely no idea that their wicked actions were going to be used by God to redound to His glory. Without Christ's death on the cross, there would be no salvation for any of His people:

John 3:16

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

If the most wicked act to have ever occurred on earth was turned around for good by the Lord, how much more shall He not freely give us all things? Paul is arguing from the greater to the lesser. If He gave such a precious gift as His only Son to such undeserving creatures as we are, all other things are so much smaller. Of course He'll give them to us. The "*all things*" being, not everything we want, but everything we need:

2 Peter 1:3

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

[33] Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth.

Even though we know we've now passed from death to life, we still sin, and our continued sinning can be a genuine concern to us. We read verses in Scripture such as:

1 John 3:6

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

And this can make us wonder if we're one of the Lord's people at all, because we do sin. But the writer, John, also said this, earlier in the same letter:

1 John 1:8,9

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

So, John can't be saying Christians don't sin any more. What he is saying is that **if we abide in Him**, we won't sin. To the extent we abide in Him, we don't sin, but to the extent we rather follow our old selfish desires, yes, we do certainly sin. But we have an advocate with the Father:

1 John 2:1,2

....these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins....

So, because we continue to sin, we might think the Father can still bring charges against us. And Satan, the accuser of the brethren, knows this and tries to take full advantage of it. But, "*it is God that justifieth.*" Nobody, not even Satan, can lay any more charges against us because we've been freely forgiven by the One who matters, the Lord of Glory.

[34] Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.

There are three things here: Christ's death, His resurrection and His intercession.

We've been reconciled to God by Christ's death, so nobody can condemn us any more:

Romans 8:1

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

His resurrection is proof of this. Without the resurrection, we wouldn't know whether God the Father had accepted Christ's atoning sacrifice or not. We'd still be in the dark.

And He "*maketh intercession for us.*"

We've already seen that the Spirit makes intercession to the Father for us:

Romans 8:26

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

We're told here that Christ also makes intercession to the Father for us:

Hebrews 7:25

Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.

So, we've got the whole Trinity involved in our upkeep. That's remarkable. Why should a holy God, Creator of the universe, Lord of heaven and earth, be bothered with you and me? Jesus Christ the Son and the Holy Spirit both know what we need more than we do ourselves, and both pray to the Father on our behalf. What more could we want? But what we must do is accept the Father's will, rather than seeking our own will all the time.

[35] Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

This is another rhetorical question, the answer is nobody. Christ died for His people. If only one person was going to be saved, He'd still have gone to the cross for them.

1 John 3:1

Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not.

And then we've got a list of other things which we may think could separate us from Him:

....shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

And the answer again is that neither can any of these separate us from the love of Christ to us. Some of these refer to what we call "natural disasters," such as famine. Others are more sinister - cruelties man would inflict on his fellow man. And we are called to be patient in tribulation, whether "natural" or not.

Most people won't understand why anyone would be patient in any of these unpleasant situations, when they certainly wouldn't be. They'll try to explain Christians away using

their own ideas. They'll think we've just got some psychological problem, or we've been educated badly or brainwashed. And we've got to put up, not only with the persecutions, but also with these false accusations against us. The apostle Paul was told that he was mad by the Roman governor Festus. But Paul replied gently:

Acts 26:25

But he said, I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness.

Often, when people come across something they don't understand, they will react violently against it. Maybe we'll end up in prison unjustly, like Joseph, Paul, Silas and many others. Maybe we'll be killed, like Stephen, or our Saviour Himself. Whatever anyone does to us, our duty is to glorify God. We don't look for persecution, but if the Lord sees fit to send it, He'll also send grace to endure it:

1 Corinthians 10:13

There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.

[36] As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.

This is a quote from Psalm 44:22. It is inevitable that we are going to be treated unfairly. Welcome to the Christian life. We don't look for it, but the Lord often takes His people through the valley of the shadow of death, as the way He wants us to glorify Him.

We know we ought to glorify God in our good works:

Matthew 5:16

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

But we should also be prepared to glorify God in our sufferings too:

1 Peter 4:16

Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.

[37] Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.

Whatever happens to us, whether pleasant or not, nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. Still difficult to believe?

In the seven letters to the churches in Asia, to every one of them, God's promises were given to the individuals within each church who overcome:

Revelation 2:7

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh....

That doesn't mean we must make an effort ourselves to overcome all obstacles. Because we can't do it. We can't even forsake one sin, let alone anything else. No, but through Jesus Christ, we are more than conquerors. The only way we can overcome any obstacle, including the biggest one of all, our own sin, is by asking Jesus Christ to do it for us. We can't trust in self, that would be a disaster. But Christ alone can conquer all things.

And then, if that wasn't enough, we've got another list of possible objections:

[38] For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, [39] Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Can you spot the difference between this list and the previous list in v.35? The previous list contained things that could happen to us in this world. But here, this list goes beyond this world:

“Death” can't separate us from the love of God in Christ. We're told not to fear the death of the body:

Matthew 10:28

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

“angels, nor principalities, nor powers.” Supernatural beings can't separate us from the love of Christ. Not even Satan.

We're not told much about spiritual beings in the Bible, and that's a good thing, otherwise we might start worshipping them or taking an unhealthy interest in them. But we are told about their existence. We're told that angels serve God's people, although some fell:

Hebrews 1:14

Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?

But those who fell are reserved in chains for judgment:

Jude 1:6

And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day.

And we're told about the *“principalities and powers”* that are mustered against us:

Ephesians 6:12,13

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

But we're also told that Christ has already defeated these on the cross:

Colossians 2:15

And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it.

“nor things present, nor things to come.” If we're worried about anything now or in future, we can never be separated from Christ. We can't lose our salvation. It's secure forever:

Philippians 1:6

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

John 10:27,28

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

“Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature.” “Any other creature” includes our own worst enemy, ourselves.

What's missed out in this list? Either in this physical world or in the spiritual realm? Nothing, anywhere *“shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

The only objection I can think of now is that we might say, “Maybe I'm not one of the Lord's people after all.” If that was the case, yes, I agree, none of these promises would apply to us. These promises are only for Christians. So we need to examine ourselves:

2 Corinthians 13:5

Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?

Philippians 2:12,13

....work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.

2 Peter 1:10

Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall....

Have we been changed in the heart? Do we no longer chase after the things we used to? Do we love God? Do we hate sin, especially our own continued sinning? That didn't bother us before. Do we love the Lord Jesus Christ more than anything for what He has done for us? When we look back at our lives, can we see the countless occasions when the Lord has truly helped us? Only each one of us as individuals can answer these questions. If the answer is “No,” or “I'm not sure,” call on Him in prayer. He will make

everything clear. He is the only One we have who is able to give us true assurance. And He is willing to save all who come to Him:

John 6:37

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

And if we know that we are His, then all these promises are ours. Why do we still think they're not? Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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2:3. What a Christian Can Know For Sure
2:8,9. What a Christian Can Know For Sure
2:12. What a Christian Can Know For Sure; We Have Sinned
6:11,13. Is Christianity a Political Movement?
6:12,13. More Than Conquerors
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Philippians

1:6. Can a Christian Lose His Salvation?; What a Christian Can Know For Sure; More Than Conquerors
1:22-24. Even a Vapour
1:23. Dust Thou Art
2:9-11. Everlasting Burnings
2:10,11. Christian Hatred; The Bondage of the Will
2:12,13. More Than Conquerors

2:14,15. Is Christianity a Political Movement?
3:10. What a Christian Can Know For Sure
3:13,14. We Have Sinned
4:12. What a Christian Can Know For Sure

Colossians

2:15. More Than Conquerors
3:1,2. Healing Ministries in the Church Today; Dust Thou Art

1 Thessalonians

5:18. Healing Ministries in the Church Today

2 Thessalonians

1:8,9. Even a Vapour
1:9. Everlasting Burnings

1 Timothy

1:8,9. Should We Impose Christian Standards on Others?
1:8. What a Christian Can Know For Sure
1:15. Christmas - Satan's Greatest Festival?
1:19,20. Should We Impose Christian Standards on Others?
2:1,2. Is Christianity a Political Movement?
3:16. Christmas - Satan's Greatest Festival?
4:1,2. Remember the Sabbath Day to Keep it Holy
4:2. The Bondage of the Will
6:7. Dust Thou Art
6:20. Even a Vapour

2 Timothy

1:12. What a Christian Can Know For Sure
2:23. Should We Impose Christian Standards on Others?
2:25. Repentance unto Life
3:7. Dust Thou Art
4:20. Healing Ministries in the Church Today

Titus

1:15. Remember the Sabbath Day to Keep it Holy
2:11-14. Is Christianity a Political Movement?
3:9. Should We Impose Christian Standards on Others?

Hebrews

1:14. More Than Conquerors
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James

1:27. Should We Impose Christian Standards on Others?; Is Christianity a Political Movement?
4:13. Even a Vapour
4:14. Dust Thou Art; Even a Vapour

1 Peter

1:5. Repentance unto Life
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1:20. The Bondage of the Will
1:23. Hypercalvinism
2:13-15. Is Christianity a Political Movement?
3:18-20. Everlasting Burnings
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4:16. More Than Conquerors
5:5,6. What a Christian Can Know For Sure

2 Peter

1:3. Even a Vapour; More Than Conquerors
1:5-8. Can a Christian Lose His Salvation?
1:9. Can a Christian Lose His Salvation?
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2:20-22. Can a Christian Lose His Salvation?
3:4. Even a Vapour
3:9. Repentance unto Life
3:11-13. Dust Thou Art
3:18. Becoming a Christian

1 John

1:8,9. More Than Conquerors
1:8. What a Christian Can Know For Sure
1:10. We Have Sinned
2:1,2. More Than Conquerors
2:18. What a Christian Can Know For Sure
2:27. Becoming a Christian; What a Christian Can Know For Sure
3:1. More Than Conquerors
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5:11-13. Repentance unto Life
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3 John

1:9,10. Should We Impose Christian Standards on Others?

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1:10. Remember the Sabbath Day to Keep it Holy
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19:11-16. Is Christianity a Political Movement?
20:10. Everlasting Burnings
21:4. Even a Vapour; Everlasting Burnings
21:27. Everlasting Burnings
22:11. Should We Impose Christian Standards on Others?