

The Christian Life

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My Soul is Exceeding Sorrowful, Even unto Death

The longer I live the Christian life, the more I am utterly convinced that not one of us is anywhere near truly understanding what it's really all about.

We Christians love Christ, and we want in our hearts to follow Him more than anything else. With the Lord's help, we try our best to do His will in everything He gives us to do. And that's good. But in reality, we're still so far short of what we ought to be. And that's because we don't fully understand about the Christian life being one of complete sacrifice:

Romans 12:1

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

The life of Christ is at least our example in this. He spent His entire life as one of complete sacrifice. At the age of twelve, he's not playing with all the other children of His age. He's in the Temple hearing the doctors and asking them questions. And in His adult life, whilst He did go to parties - weddings and other feasts - He's not the usual party animal. He wasn't (God forbid) laughing, eating and drinking, like everybody else. He always had a far more serious message to give to the people.

And towards the end of His life, He had His most solemn, and difficult, time of all. In Gethsemane, He said:

Matthew 26:38

My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death.

Luke tells us that He even sweat great drops of blood there:

Luke 22:44

And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.

And we are told that, in His human nature at least, the Lord of Glory even needed an angel to strengthen Him:

Luke 22:43

And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him.

None of this was sin. He was sinless. But the fact that God manifest in the flesh suffered and therefore - dare I say it - found these things so difficult, proves to us how different the Christian life is to the natural desires and instincts that we all have. The Christian life involves serving God and serving others. We are no longer to serve ourselves any more. Self-abasement is not a popular doctrine today, but it's the Christian way.

The Bible tells us that Christ was made perfect through sufferings:

Hebrews 2:10

For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.

Of course, He was always perfect. What is meant here is that in His human nature He had to undergo a whole life of suffering, simply in order to live the perfect life that He lived. He had to continually deny Himself. And that culminated in Him eventually going to the cross, and laying down His life for His friends.

And we're called to live such a life ourselves. In fact, we've got it a lot easier. We're not called to suffer anything like as much as He did. He took upon Himself the sins of all His people on the cross. We will never be able to enter into that. And thankfully we don't have to. But we all do have our own little crosses to carry, whatever the Lord gives us. And they will never be more than we can bear:

1 Corinthians 10:13

There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.

So, once we begin to follow Christ, our life becomes a life of difficulty, and therefore suffering. We are no longer living for ourselves, our own comforts, any more. Instead, we are called to follow Him, which by definition means suffering for His sake:

Philippians 1:29

For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake.

1 Peter 2:21-23

For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously.

And we're not to think it strange that we are called to a life of suffering either. We're called to it and must, with the Lord's help of course, endure it:

1 Peter 4:12,13

Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.

And if even our sinless Saviour needed the help of an angel to strengthen Him, how much more do we sinful creatures need the Lord to strengthen us as we pass through this great tribulation:

John 16:33

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

At the same time as we are called to present our bodies a living sacrifice, we're also called to count the cost:

Luke 14:27,28,31-33

Whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish.... Or what king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is yet a great way off, he sendeth an ambassage, and desireth conditions of peace. So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple.

But I don't think we can count the cost. If we really knew how much we would have to suffer for Christ in the Christian life, none of us would ever begin to choose to follow Him at all. I don't think this parable is about counting the cost in order to make a decision whether to follow Christ or not. It's about realising that it is too much for us, we really can't do it, and so sending "an ambassage" and desiring "conditions of peace" (v.32). In other words, of coming to an end of loving our own lives, realising living for ourselves is vain and empty, and crying to God for mercy. Crying to Him to take over our lives so we can use them for His purposes, and not ours any more.

And then we find that, even when we've sacrificed everything, we are told we don't even get a reward for it. We've only done our reasonable service:

Luke 17:10

When ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.

So the Christian life is a life of absolute sacrifice, constantly crying to God for help because we can't live it ourselves. And that inevitably means suffering. Why would anyone want that?

But once we see the emptiness of living for ourselves, our own pleasures, our own glory, who would want anything else?

Ground to Powder

Matthew 21:44, Luke 20:18

And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.

This statement of Christ's is mentioned twice in the Bible, in parallel passages in Matthew and Luke's gospels. In both accounts it comes straight after the parable of the householder who plants a vineyard then goes away for a long time. Occasionally he would send a servant to check on the vineyard, but the husbandmen would always beat them and send them away. Finally he sends his son whom they put to death. This is a parable, of course, about the Jews' dealings with all the prophets throughout their history and then finally with Christ. After telling this parable, Christ quoted from Psalm 118:22,23:

Matthew 21:42,43

Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes? Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.

The Jews had so many privileges. They were miraculously saved from slavery in Egypt by Moses, taken through a parted Red Sea, and kept for forty years in the wilderness before being taken by Joshua into a fertile land on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea. On the way they were given the Law of God written on tables of stone. They were given the Scriptures. They were sent the prophets. And finally, the greatest privilege of all, through them the Saviour of the world was to be born in due time.

But they didn't recognise Him. And they despised the prophets and all the other means of God's intervention. Not only that, but throughout their history, they neglected to keep the very Law that God had given them. The Bible chronicles all of this.

All along they thought that their pedigree would be enough to save them. How proud!

John 8:39

They answered and said unto him, Abraham is our father. Jesus saith unto them, If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham.

I am not getting at the Jews for this. If God had chosen any other nation to bestow upon them His special privileges, they would have done exactly the same thing. It is the pride of man that is the problem.

1 John 2:16

For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.

And actually, the more we look into this subject, the more dominant a theme pride is found to be in Scripture.

Genesis 6:4

There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown.

In the very beginning of history, after the fall of Adam, and Cain murdering Abel, we come across this brief mention of believers marrying unbelievers. The children they produced became "*men of renown.*" i.e. men full of themselves and their own status in the world. God calls this "*wickedness*":

Genesis 6:5

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

Later on, Job wanted to dispute with God as to why many unpleasant and painful things had come upon him, for what he thought was no reason. But when God finally answered, He challenged Job:

Job 40:11-14

Cast abroad the rage of thy wrath: and behold every one that is proud, and abase him. Look on every one that is proud, and bring him low; and tread down the wicked in their place. Hide them in the dust together; and bind their faces in secret. Then will I also confess unto thee that thine own right hand can save thee.

And even King Nebuchadnezzar came to discover how the Lord was working:

Daniel 4:37

Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment: and those that walk in pride he is able to abase.

God's primary work in the world is to abase all those that walk in pride. Only God can do this. Man is so proud, he is totally incapable of bringing himself down. Yet that is exactly what the Lord requires of him:

1 Samuel 2:3

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

We don't know much about the fall of Satan, but we do know that he must have fallen before man fell, because it was an already fallen serpent that met Eve in the Garden of Eden to tempt her. There are two passages in Scripture that seem to give us some understanding of Satan's fall. The first is in Isaiah, and is primarily about the fall of the king of Babylon. The second is in Ezekiel, and is primarily about the fall of the king of Tyre:

Isaiah 14:13-15

For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit.

Ezekiel 28:13-15

Thou hast been in Eden the garden of God; every precious stone was thy covering, the sardius, topaz, and the diamond, the beryl, the onyx, and the jasper, the sapphire, the emerald, and the carbuncle, and gold: the workmanship of thy tabrets and of thy pipes was prepared in thee in the day that thou wast created. Thou art the anointed cherub that covereth; and I have set thee so: thou wast upon the holy mountain of God; thou hast walked up and down in the midst of the stones of fire. Thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created, till iniquity was found in thee.

If we apply these passages to the fall of Satan, we see that pride was the first sin. Satan wanted to be greater than God. If we apply these passages to the fall of the relevant kings, we see that pride is the predominant sin in man, the sin from which all other sins proceed.

Given this fundamental problem with fallen human nature, we begin to see something of God's plan for the human race. It is to completely break the pride of man in all its shapes and forms.

Isaiah 2:11,12

The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the LORD alone shall be exalted in that day. For the day of the LORD of hosts shall be upon every one that is proud and lofty, and upon every one that is lifted up; and he shall be brought low.

This is what the Lord is doing with every one of us. His ultimate aim is to completely destroy our pride and to make sure that, in the end, God alone is exalted:

1 Corinthians 1:29

That no flesh should glory in his presence.

And how does He do this? God has provided a "stone." It's mentioned in Psalm 118:

Psalm 118:22

The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner.

Notice here that the "stone" that is going to be rejected by some, is the very same "stone" that will be embraced by others as their head corner stone. Of course this refers

to Jesus Christ, who is at the same time a savour of life to those who are going to be saved, and a savour of death to those who reject Him:

2 Corinthians 2:15,16

For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life.

Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation:

Acts 4:12

Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.

To those who will be saved, He is precious, but to those who will reject Him, He is a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence:

1 Peter 2:7,8

Unto you therefore which believe he is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner, and a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed.

Let's look at our text again:

Matthew 21:44, Luke 20:18

And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.

When I first came across this statement, I thought that the ones who fall on the stone were true believers, because it is good for us to be broken. In contrast, the ones ground to powder are the unbelievers, because they will be destroyed. But I've now completely changed my mind. I now realise that exactly the opposite is the case.

I would suggest that when it says "*whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken,*" it is talking about all those who stumble at the "*rock of offence,*" the disobedient, those who do not come to the Saviour. They will live their lives full of their own importance, full of their own pride in themselves, but in the end they will fall on the stumbling stone of Christ and be broken by the Lord.

On the other hand, those who will have the stone fall on them, to be ground to powder, these are true believers. We should want Christ to fall on us. All right, put it another way – we should want the Holy Spirit to fall on us. Does that sound better? We should want an end of ourselves, our selfish desires and lusts. We, as true believers, should want our pride to be ground to powder. And that is exactly what Christ does in our sanctification.

When we come to the Lord, the rock of our pride is dealt a fatal blow. It has been cracked. No longer will it reign supreme. But there is still so much pride within us that needs to be dealt with. For the rest of our lives, we need to take the fragments of remaining pride and have them ground and ground and ground by Christ, until all that is left is powder.

Moses ground the golden calf to powder:

Exodus 32:20

And he took the calf which they had made, and burnt it in the fire, and ground it to powder, and strawed it upon the water, and made the children of Israel drink of it.

This is what we should do with all false idols and delusions of grandeur in our life.

King Josiah was the only king of Judah who actually managed to get rid of the idols in the land, and he ground them to powder so that absolutely nothing remained:

2 Kings 23:6

And he brought out the grove from the house of the LORD, without Jerusalem, unto the brook Kidron, and burned it at the brook Kidron, and stamped it small to powder, and cast the powder thereof upon the graves of the children of the people.

2 Kings 23:15

Moreover the altar that was at Bethel, and the high place which Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin, had made, both that altar and the high place he brake down, and burned the high place, and stamped it small to powder, and burned the grove.

2 Chronicles 34:7

And when he had broken down the altars and the groves, and had beaten the graven images into powder, and cut down all the idols throughout all the land of Israel, he returned to Jerusalem.

And Isaiah compared the iniquity of Judah to chalkstones, not granite. Stones that can be beaten down and crushed until there is only powder left:

Isaiah 27:9

By this therefore shall the iniquity of Jacob be purged; and this is all the fruit to take away his sin; when he maketh all the stones of the altar as chalkstones that are beaten in sunder, the groves and images shall not stand up.

The Christian's calling is to renounce self, abase self, and be finished with self. Self must be ground to powder, so that eventually God alone will be glorified in our lives:

Matthew 23:12

And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.

1 Peter 5:6

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time.

Isaiah 40:4,5

Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: and the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.

Luke 9:23,24

And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it.

This is the Christian life. It is totally the opposite from the “it’s all about me” philosophy of the world. And God will not finish dealing with us until the last vestiges of pride have been completely exterminated.

That’s why we receive trials in our lives. That’s why God has put us all in decaying bodies that eventually die. Only on a death-bed are we weak and humbled enough for God. Let us therefore live our lives as though we were always on our death-beds.

2 Corinthians 1:9

But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God.

2 Corinthians 4:7-11

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus’ sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh.

Romans 6:6,7,11

Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin.... reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

We are finished with self. Living for God alone is the Christian’s calling.

2 Corinthians 12:9,10

My strength is made perfect in weakness.... For when I am weak, then am I strong.

Only Evil Continually

Genesis 6:5

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

When we’re young, we think far too highly of the human race and just can’t see how wicked and evil human beings really are. Even if we’ve experienced their true nature in some way, for example, by being bullied at school, or taken advantage of, or sexually assaulted, or cheated, or been let down so many times by them, we still have this ridiculous idea that, underneath everything, the human heart is essentially good.

And even when we become a Christian, we still don't fully understand the truth about human nature straight away either. Nearly all newly converted Christians have a problem with believing the Biblical doctrine of hell-fire for eternity. This, the Bible tells us, is the place where we all deserve to go:

Mark 9:43

And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched.

Matthew 25:41,46

Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.... And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.

An unbeliever can never believe the truth that he deserves eternal conscious torment in hell-fire for ever. He just laughs at the concept. He is too proud in himself to ever be able to acknowledge that he, personally, deserves to go to a place like that.

And new Christians can also have a similar problem. Many would rather it not be mentioned in the church. They just want to talk about the love of God. Any suggestion that hell is real, they find uncomfortable.

So, not surprisingly, there's a whole false gospel out there in the churches today, that Satan has invented especially to cater for these people. This false gospel is built around, not only avoiding the mention of such a place altogether, but not even mentioning anything about our sinful nature, and the fact that without Christ we're utterly lost. And it's very attractive to many people. It doesn't involve thinking about our sin and having a need for any kind of repentance. We're just told to accept Christ as our Saviour. That's it. Now we're a believer. We must now realise Jesus Christ dealt with sin a long time ago, so we're not to let sin bother us any more. Just think good thoughts about yourself. You are somebody. You're worth something. This is nothing more than modern secular humanistic psychology with a religious veneer. It's not Christianity at all. It's nonsense. We're sinners. We need salvation, or we justly perish everlastingly. And even after we've come to Christ, there is a need to continually repent of our sin:

Matthew 6:12

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

It's only as we mature in the faith and get closer to Christ, that we see more and more of the filthiness we have inside ourselves. The Holy Spirit is holy, like a shining light picking out all the dirt we never saw before. Growing in the faith involves recognising more and more how sinful we really are, and coming to the realisation that the doctrine of hell-fire is actually true, because it begins to dawn on us that that's exactly the place where I, myself, personally, deserve to go.

We can only really come to an understanding of the true nature of man, by coming to an understanding of the true nature of ourselves. Once we see ourselves for what we really are, we can see others for what they really are. And if everybody else is as bad as we are, then we must be extremely careful whenever we deal with people. Christ tells us:

Matthew 10:16

Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.

John 2:24-25

But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men, And needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man.

We ourselves should be kind, harmless and genuine in everything we do, and by the Lord's grace alone we can do that. But we should always be aware that hardly anyone will treat us in the same way. If we try to be genuinely kind to a vast majority of people, we will always be taken advantage of. Oh yes, they may put on an outward show of kindness themselves, and we can so easily be fooled by that. But underneath everything, they are only ever after what they can get out of us for themselves:

Psalms 146:3

Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help.

Micah 7:5

Trust ye not in a friend, put ye not confidence in a guide: keep the doors of thy mouth from her that lieth in thy bosom.

We should know this already, because we used to be just like that ourselves before we became a Christian.

And not only that, but so many of these wretched creatures have the uncanny ability to attract others and get them to do exactly what they want. Whether it's a forceful politician who can persuade people to vote for him because he's (supposedly) got all the right answers, or a big name evangelist who can fill churches with his (or her) smooth-talking charismatic personality (rather than filling them because of Christ), or an abusive partner, where the one abused will never leave and keep on going back for more punishment time after time.

How is it that other people can have such a hold on us? It is so, so important that we tear ourselves away from anything of that nature. We ought never to get taken in by the deceit of others – by their persuasive abilities, by their dominating personalities, by their controlling methods. Many people become salesmen, because they know jolly well that they have this frightening ability to persuade others to buy something they don't really need or want. And they will abuse you, trick you, deceive you, and pester you, until they have closed the sale. Then you'll never see them again.

Many, many lives have been utterly ruined by the persuasive abilities of others.

Look at Herod:

Acts 12:21,22

And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them. And the people gave a shout, saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man.

We may ask, Who would be taken in by a despot like Herod? And the answer is, just as many as were fooled by Adolf Hitler and so many other dominating people throughout

history. We think we'd never get taken in by that sort of person, but week after week, we hear about so many people, ordinary people like ourselves, who actually are.

But Herod got his come-uppance in the end:

Acts 12:23

And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost.

And that's exactly why we ought to understand and believe in the doctrine of hell-fire for ever. Because, except we repent and genuinely, really, and unfeignedly, turn to the Lord, all of us will eventually get exactly what we deserve. We should never ask God for what we deserve. We should be so thankful to our Lord God that He will judge all men justly at the end of time. And as a result, we have no need to fear or worry about anything or anybody else, no matter how forceful they are.

But, at the same time, we also have to admit that we ourselves are children of wrath, and deserving of such a judgment too. By nature we can do no good thing:

Ephesians 2:2,3

Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.

Romans 7:18

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not.

And God knows exactly how evil we all are by nature:

Jeremiah 17:9-10

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? I the Lord search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.

That's why every single one of us so desperately needs a Saviour. A Saviour to save us from ourselves. Not just from a list of sins (albeit a long list), but from our very sinful natures that we can never get away from by ourselves, even if we had the desire to do so, which naturally we don't.

We must seek reality, and stop pretending that we're not so bad. All of us are:

Revelation 3:17

.... wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.

The sooner we realise this, and call upon the Saviour that God has provided, the better. He is our only hope.

I'm Saved, but I'm not Getting any Better!

Here's a question: What's the minimum amount of doctrine we need to know in order to be saved to eternal life?

Do we need to believe the Trinity, perhaps?

To join the unbiblical, ecumenical World Council of Churches, you do. Unitarians are excluded. Every other theological position under the sun is accepted, but to not believe in the Trinity isn't.

Do we need to believe a creed, perhaps?

Many churches think so. In fact one of the orthodox creeds, the Athanasian Creed, states precisely that:

*"1 **Whosoever will be saved**, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith; 2 Which faith **except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly**. 3 And the catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity.... [then follows a lengthy definition of the Trinity]....*

*28 He therefore that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity. 29 Furthermore **it is necessary to everlasting salvation** that he also believe rightly the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. 30 For the right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man.... [then follows a lengthy definition of the orthodox view on the being of Christ]....*

*44 This is the catholic faith, **which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved.**"*

But the thief on the cross never believed any of this. I didn't believe any of this when I was saved. I only came to an understanding on these things later.

The film "*The DaVinci Code*" opened my eyes to this issue. (It didn't open my eyes to anything else. Don't watch it, it's rubbish). At one point it is complained that, one day Christ was not God, and the next day (after the Nicene Creed had been passed by the Ecumenical Council) Christ was God - so we're now free to persecute those who don't believe this. The passing of a creed in some ecumenical council somewhere, does not define the truth. Christ always was God, whether anybody believed it or dogmatized it in a creed or not.

Assertion of a creed does not determine who is saved to eternal life and who isn't. In Islam, it does. All you have to say is, "Allah is the one true God and Mohammed is his messenger," and you're a Muslim. That's their creed. It's not like that at all in Christianity.

Do we need to believe the gospel, then?

Surely we do. Surely Paul's answer to the Philippian jailor is our minimum requirement:

Acts 16:31

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.

Well, that's the gospel message that we are called to send to the ends of the earth. Let's tell people that message. But how much of it do we actually need to know, in order to be saved?

Do we need to know:

- that Christ died on the cross as a substitutionary atonement to take away sin?
- that Christ died for me personally?
- that I must repent and exercise faith in Christ in order to be saved?
- that we must believe that Christ atoning sacrifice on the cross is the alone and sufficient sacrifice for our sin, without anything of our own, either in whole or in part being at all added to it?

All of the above are true statements, but do we need to know all of them, or some of them, in order to be saved? How much do we actually need to know?

The answer to that question is actually.... nothing!

But, surely we at least need to know about Christ, his atoning work, and put our trust in Him for our salvation? Well, hang on a minute, let me explain.

To be saved to eternal life, you must be born again:

John 3:3

Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

We need the Lord to give us a new heart:

2 Corinthians 5:17

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

Ezekiel 36:26

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

The Bible is quite clear in that we are saved by grace alone:

Ephesians 2:8,9

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

2 Timothy 1:9

Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.

Titus 3:4-7

But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour; That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Jonah 2:9

Salvation is of the Lord.

John 6:44

No man can come to me [Christ], except the Father which hath sent me draw him.

The gospel call is a call to repent and believe in Christ. So, in order to respond to it, we need repentance and faith. But the Bible tells us these are gifts of God:

Ephesians 2:8

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.

Acts 11:18

Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.

We can't whip these attributes up from within ourselves. We need to be born again by the Holy Spirit first, before we can receive and exercise faith and repentance at all. Only then can we respond to the gospel call.

So, does this mean that we can all just sit back in our armchairs and do nothing, thinking that if God wants to save us, He will do so in His own good time, but if not, that's just the way it is? Of course not. God forbid that we should think that way! People use that idea as an excuse not to bother with the things of God at all.

We can at least realise our inability to respond, be bothered by it, and cry to God to grant us these gifts, even though we don't deserve them. Even if God won't hear us and we end up in hell-fire for ever, that's just what we deserve anyway, so God won't have done anything wrong to ignore our cry. But the Bible tells us that He is a merciful God and that He does save sinners. That's a marvellous thing, and it's our only hope.

Am I saying then, that it is possible to come to salvation without even knowing about the Lord Jesus Christ? What about people who practice other religions? Can they be saved even though they never come into contact with the Bible, a church or anything else that proclaims the truth? Again, I say, God forbid!

The preaching of the gospel (which is the spreading of the truth of the Bible throughout the world), and the responding to it (which can only be done if God regenerates the heart), is the ordinary means of salvation. Ordinarily, God uses means. So, it is always the church's job to proclaim the gospel, and to bring people into contact with and to a knowledge of the truth of the Bible.

Ordinarily the Lord works by causing all those that are going to be saved to come into contact with the truth somehow. Whether it be into contact with the Bible itself, or a tract or a gospel meeting or a church. God will make sure that all the elect will come into contact with the truth, through which He can then work by giving them a new heart, repentance and faith.

But God is always free to work without, above and against means if he so wishes. This is the case, for example, for all elect persons who are incapable of being called by the Word, such as elect infants and elect imbeciles (to quote the Westminster Confession of Faith). But we should never presume on this. Ordinarily, the job of the church is to bring people into contact with the truth, tell them about Christ, and leave the rest to the Lord as to whether He saves them or not.

What I am trying to get across is that it is not what we *know* that saves us, neither is it even what we *believe*, but salvation is only of the Lord. Many people go to church for years, and know their Bibles backwards, but they're not saved. Only when the Lord regenerates their heart does the truth of the Scriptures, that they may have known for many years, come alive for them. This is the new birth, and we can do nothing to attain it for ourselves. Neither our faith, nor our understanding, can help get us to heaven, otherwise we could boast that we did something our neighbour didn't do, namely have faith, or understand the Scriptures better. No, no, no. Salvation is of the Lord alone. We learn everything else later.

The Word of God is living and powerful:

Hebrews 4:12

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

The Word of God has power to regenerate hearts. But it's only after we've been born again in the heart that the Scriptures really come into their own.

Christ prayed to the Father (with regards his disciples):

John 17:17

Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

This is the main role of the Scriptures, and the reason we need to stay close to the Word of God for as long as we're in this world. We're justified by grace through faith alone, but we're sanctified through the truth, the Scriptures.

It's here that we learn of the doctrine of the Trinity, and all the other doctrines of truth. And not only do we learn of them with our minds, but if we're born-again we also know them for sure in our hearts, and they begin to change us from the inside.

It is possible to know correct doctrine, without a new heart, simply through reading the Bible. But just knowing the truth can't change anybody. You can say you believe in all the orthodox Creeds, all the orthodox doctrines, and mean it, and still go to hell in the end. It's only after we've been born again that the Scriptures come alive to us. They affect our hearts and change our way of life altogether.

But many Christians make a mistake by thinking that sanctification is me "every day in every way getting better and better." They think that as we mature in the faith, and we learn more and more of how we should behave from the Scriptures, then we really become better people as a result. I'm a lot better than I was, say, ten years ago.

But I find in myself that this is just not true. Try as much as I can, even with the Lord's help, I'm still not getting better and better. Well, I'm in good company. The apostle Paul said:

Romans 7:14-26

I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.

This is not a description of a person before conversion to Christ, because there was no battle going on at all in his soul, then. Neither can we say it was something else not relevant to the Christian today, such as Paul, a Jew, telling us of his experience in relation to the Jewish law. No. It's a description of the truly converted Christian, with the spiritual battle against the flesh continually going on within him until he dies.

Our proper understanding of this, leads us to realise that we're not getting better and better at all, but rather we're coming to see our sins more and more. Our very need of Christ then becomes clearer and clearer as we grow in the faith.

I'm just as much a totally depraved sinner in need of Christ the second before I die as I was the second after I was conceived, even though, in between, I've been born-again and had a new heart put within me. If for one moment I was getting better and better, it would mean that the more mature I got in the faith, the less I'm in need of Christ, which can't possible be.

Christ said of Himself:

John 17:19

And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth.

Sanctification cannot possibly mean our getting better and better, because Christ said that He sanctified Himself, who was altogether perfect and could not possibly get better. Rather, what is meant here is that Christ was setting Himself more and more apart from the world, as He got Himself ready to perform the task He was about to endure on the cross.

To us, sanctification is not becoming better and better, it is a becoming more and more set apart from the ways of the world and from all false doctrine, in order to live for Christ. And this is directly proportional to our knowledge of the Scriptures. Only as the Holy Spirit opens the Scriptures to us, can we become more and more set apart unto the Christian life. The Scriptures are therefore vital for our Christian walk in this world, which is the practical outworking of our faith. The nearer we are to Christ and the truth, the more we can be Christ-like in our daily lives.

Only after death, is sin got rid of completely from our lives (what a glorious thing to look forward to!). But while we are in this world, we are given new hearts and the Holy Spirit within us, to understand the Scriptures, in order for us to mortify the old nature, and nurture the fruit of the Spirit. This is how the Christian should spend his life. As we do this, we become more and more sanctified – i.e. set apart from the world's ways of doing things, and conformed to the Scriptural way of living. But all the time, we're still the vile sinners that we always were by nature.

Upon having a new heart put within us, our slavery to sin is immediately broken, so anyone with an addiction has hope! It can be broken, if you come to Christ! However, sin itself will still be there. We have our slavery to sin broken, but we still need victory over individual temptations as they present themselves to us. The drunkard can have his habit broken if he comes to Christ, but it would still be a good idea for him to avoid the pub.

Christ tells His disciples that they need to pray daily:

Luke 11:4

Forgive us our sins.... and lead us not into temptation.

Job was a true believer throughout the book named after him. But only after his experiences, does he come to the mature spiritual conclusion of a well-exercised believer:

Job 40:4

Behold, I am vile....

Job 42:6

...I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.

Our sanctification gives us victory over sin, as we need it. It doesn't make us better and better people, because then, resisting temptation would become easier and easier. We should never think of sin as easy to conquer:

Galatians 6:1

Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.

In the Christian life, we grow in two things as we mature in the faith. We:

2 Peter 3:18

...grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

The more Scripture we know, as we mature in the faith, the more weapons we have in our armoury, as we fight the world, the flesh and the devil. Overcoming sin does not become easier, but we have more weapons at our disposal in the constant battle that we have against our spiritual enemies – a war which won't end, nor become easier, until we rest and go to be with Christ, which is far better.

One day, in heaven, there'll be no more need for the Bible. Sin will have gone from our lives completely. There will be no more need of setting ourselves apart; we will be apart from our enemies for ever, as they all get thrown into hell-fire and we don't. But while we are here on this earth now, we need the Word of God, for our sanctification:

Romans 12:2

And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

Being Taken Advantage Of

As a new believer begins to live the Christian life, it won't be long before he finds out one of the most common problems Christians will face from unbelievers. Unbelievers will try to take advantage of them.

The Christian is called to love his enemies:

Matthew 5:38-44

Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.

Not only that, but the Christian is also called to be genuine and honest in everything he says:

Matthew 5:37

But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.

2 Corinthians 1:12

For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world, and more abundantly to you-ward.

The unbeliever knows all this very well, so he takes advantage of it. I was on a bus once and two old ladies asked me, "Do you go to church?" I had to be honest, so I told them I did. As soon as they knew that was the case for sure, they were asking for money.

Go to any big church, and invariably there will be beggars outside asking for money. If you invite them into the service, they won't want to know.

The unbeliever will ask the Christian to do all sorts of things for him, with the idea in his mind that, "You've got to do this because you're a Christian. If you refuse to do everything I want, you're not showing love." Of course, that doesn't follow.

Unbelievers know how to use their tongues, through lying and deceit, to get all sorts of things out of people. It doesn't bother them to do this, they have no conscience about it. But it ought to bother us. They know Christians won't act with deceit, so they take advantage of our simplicity. They know we'll never lie to them. They know if they ask for something, Christians are duty bound to give it to them if we can. They play on the Christian's conscience all the time.

And the charities do this as well. There was a Christian lady in Bristol a few years ago who ended up committing suicide because she got so many requests for money in the post from charities, and she became so overwhelmed with them all.

Unbelievers think that if we refuse to go along with them, our conscience will smite us and we'll worry we're not being a good witness for Jesus Christ. So they believe we're easily taken advantage of. So what can we do about this?

The first thing we can do is make sure we never put our trust in men. Christ didn't:

John 2:24-25

But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men, And needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man.

We know jolly well people will try to take advantage of us, because we were like them at one time:

Titus 3:3

For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another.

Ephesians 5:6-8

Let no man deceive you with vain words: for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience. Be not ye therefore partakers with them. For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light.

We should be wise, but harmless:

Matthew 10:16

Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.

Secondly, we should realise that whatever we do or don't do for them, they hate us anyway:

John 15:18-19

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

They'll always think in their minds that we're stupid, no matter how good (or bad) we are to them. They just want a good laugh at our expense. They couldn't care less about us really, they just want something for nothing out of us. So we shouldn't worry about what they think, or whether we're being a good witness to them or not. We're not answerable

to them. It is God to whom we are answerable, not men. We shouldn't allow them to control the situation. We must keep a clear conscience before God. If we think anyone is trying to take advantage of us rather than being in genuine need, we shouldn't feel in any way guilty for walking away.

On the one hand, the Christian, if he can, should:

1 Thessalonians 5:22

Abstain from all appearance of evil.

But on the other hand, our appearance before men doesn't really matter, it's our hearts before God that really counts:

2 Corinthians 13:7

Now I pray to God that ye do no evil; not that we should appear approved, but that ye should do that which is honest, though we be as reprobates.

What God wants us to do is the most important thing. We should not pander to men, regardless of what they might say about us to other people. Even if we have a terrible reputation in the sight of other men (which we should avoid if we can), it doesn't matter as long as our hearts are right with God and that bad reputation is not actually true.

Unbelievers will not understand us, so they will try to make us feel terrible and try to give us a bad reputation. But as long as we don't actually do anything wrong, God will vindicate us. This is how we should behave:

Romans 12:17-21

Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.

Eventually, once you know you are being taken advantage of, and can see through their silver tongue trying to persuade you otherwise, you just have to walk away. And not feel guilty about it. They aren't really in need, so don't worry about it.

It is they who are sinning against us in the first place by trying to take advantage of us. It's not we who sin against them for not giving them what they want all the time. So we should stop feeling guilty. If someone sins against us, this is how we should behave:

Luke 17:3-4

Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.

First of all we must take heed to ourselves. It's not wrong to do that. Secondly we should rebuke them. Tell them straight that they're trying to take advantage of us. Tell them we can see straight through their deceit. Of course, that will probably make them angry because we've spotted their deceitfulness. But that's what we're told to do, rebuke them.

And if they still don't then say "I'm sorry," or "I repent," we can't forgive them anything. That's what this text in Luke 17 is telling us.

There is also a text in Matthew 18 that seems at first glance to teach unconditional forgiveness:

Matthew 18:21-22

Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.

But this doesn't teach unconditional forgiveness at all, because it is followed immediately by a parable that deals with someone who repents:

Matthew 18:23-27

Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents. But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt.

We can't forgive everybody unconditionally all the time, because God doesn't. He only forgives people if they repent. All men are called to repent:

Acts 17:30-31

And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.

In God's case, He grants His people the repentance they need:

Acts 11:18

When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.

But surely, you may say, we should help everyone that we come across who is in need. Yes, that's right:

1 John 3:17-18

But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.

Actually, this passage is dealing with a "brother" in need, i.e. a fellow believer. But even if it was talking about our dealings with all men, it only speaks about someone in need, in genuine need. Men trying to take advantage of us are not in genuine need. Today there is an army of professional scroungers on our streets, who make a very good living by begging. These people are not in need at all. I heard of one case where the beggar had an Audi parked around the corner. When he'd finished his begging for the day, he just

hopped in and drove home. We should always be open hearted to all those in genuine need, but not to those who aren't. The ones who aren't will do a very good job of trying to convince us that they are. But our hearts shouldn't condemn us for walking away from them. They're just trying to take advantage of us.

All this becomes particularly difficult when it comes to dealing with our own unbelieving family members. In the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15, the son asked his father for his inheritance. This was rightly his, although he should only have received it on the death of his father, but his father was generous and gave it to him in advance. He left home for a far country and wasted it all on riotous living. The father didn't follow him, just to see how he was getting on, to find him somewhere nice to stay, and to give him extra cash when he needed it. No! He stayed at home. I'm sure he prayed for his son every day. But only when his son returned in repentance did he forgive him, and then of course he did it willingly, running to meet him. But while the son was still unrepentant for what he'd done, much as the father longed for him, he didn't go to see him, but prayed to God and waited for repentance to appear in his heart.

It is possible that our own families could end up as our greatest enemies. Jeremiah found this out:

Jeremiah 12:6

For even thy brethren, and the house of thy father, even they have dealt treacherously with thee; yea, they have called a multitude after thee: believe them not, though they speak fair words unto thee.

If they never say, "I repent," or "I'm sorry" but keep on demanding of us, there comes a point when we must just leave them to themselves. We can't help them. Of course we should pray for their repentance every day, but until they do repent, we shouldn't, for example, keep throwing money at them, or keep going back to an abusive situation. They'll get used to it and expect us to do this, and all that will do is condone their sinful lifestyle. And when we don't give them what they want any more, they'll complain, "You're not a Christian!" But they hate us anyway. The Bible tells us that:

Matthew 10:34-37

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

On the one hand, we're called to look after our families if at all possible:

1 Timothy 5:3-4

Honour widows that are widows indeed. But if any widow have children or nephews, let them learn first to shew piety at home, and to requite their parents: for that is good and acceptable before God.

1 Timothy 5:7-8

And these things give in charge, that they may be blameless. But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.

But we're also at the same time called to leave them. They are no longer our real family anyway, the people of God are:

Luke 9:57-62

And it came to pass, that, as they went in the way, a certain man said unto him, Lord, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest. And Jesus said unto him, Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head. And he said unto another, Follow me. But he said, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. Jesus said unto him, Let the dead bury their dead: but go thou and preach the kingdom of God. And another also said, Lord, I will follow thee; but let me first go bid them farewell, which are at home at my house. And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.

We shouldn't have many dealings with our families at all, if they're not prepared to say they are sorry in any way for their sinful lifestyle. They'll probably get fed up with us rebuking them anyway.

Luke 21:16-17

And ye shall be betrayed both by parents, and brethren, and kinsfolks, and friends; and some of you shall they cause to be put to death. And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake.

Trying Too Hard

After we have come into a real, saving relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, one thing we are given is a tremendous zeal for the Lord:

2 Corinthians 7:11

For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge! In all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter.

And this is good. We want to tell everybody about what has happened to us, because we want them all to come into the same state of salvation that we have received.

Yes, it is possible to know absolutely that we have had every one of our sins completely forgiven, and will for certain escape the judgment to come. But there is one thing we must realise. We must repent of our sinful way of life and turn completely away from it to God through Jesus Christ our Saviour, or we can't possibly receive this salvation and will instead perish eternally. All men:

Acts 26:20

....should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance.

If anyone truly repents of his sin and turns to Christ for salvation, he shall be born-again, he shall have a new heart put within him, he shall have the gift of the Holy Ghost placed within him and become a new creature:

Acts 2:38

Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

We will know when this has happened to us. It will be a real change in our heart. We will no longer want to sin, we will now hate sin and desire only to flee from it. Cry to God for mercy until you know this change has occurred and that you have truly been granted forgiveness of sin and repentance unto life:

Acts 11:16-18

Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost. Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God? When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.

Anyone to whom this real internal change has happened must consequently have a desire in his heart for that same change to take place in other people. Paul certainly had this:

Romans 10:1

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved.

Acts 26:28,29

Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian. And Paul said, I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds.

But, being pretty stupid creatures, when we are witnessing for the Lord, we so often put our foot in it and ruin our witness by maybe an unwise word or an unwise action. I am sure all of us have done this many times in our Christian walk. I think that most of the time the problem really is that in our zeal for the Lord, we try too hard.

Jehu was zealous for the Lord, and in his zeal he destroyed all the Lord's enemies round about him:

2 Kings 10:16

Come with me, and see my zeal for the LORD.

This God commended, and rewarded Jehu for it:

2 Kings 10:30

And the LORD said unto Jehu, Because thou hast done well in executing that which is right in mine eyes, and hast done unto the house of Ahab according to all that was in mine heart, thy children of the fourth generation shall sit on the throne of Israel.

Now, we should not go around committing genocide like that today, but the Old Testament pattern of Israel destroying its enemies is a picture of the true believer's spiritual battle in destroying spiritual enemies in his life:

Ephesians 6:12

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

But the warning to us here is that, after all his zeal for the Lord, we find that Jehu was not a true believer after all:

2 Kings 10:30,31

But Jehu took no heed to walk in the law of the LORD God of Israel with all his heart: for he departed not from the sins of Jeroboam, which made Israel to sin.

So remember that zeal in itself doesn't necessarily mean that we've been truly changed in our heart. Let's make sure that the change that has happened to us is real, and our consequent zeal for the Lord is out of a true love for Him and gratitude for what He's done for us.

Now let's look at a believer – the man in the land of the Gadarenes in whom dwelt many devils. Christ cast them all out, and he was changed immediately:

Luke 8:35

Then they went out to see what was done; and came to Jesus, and found the man, out of whom the devils were departed, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed, and in his right mind.

What a change had instantly taken place! No longer was the man unruly, naked and uncontrollable, but he was now "*clothed, and in his right mind.*"

The major part of our witness to the world is not necessarily our words, but our lifestyle. Have we changed like this man had? Can people see the change? Have we started producing the fruit of the Spirit, which no man can produce without having had this real, internal change from the Lord?

Galatians 5:22,23

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

This is our major witness. Many times it would be far better to keep quiet and just let our actions speak louder than any words.

Luke 8:38,39

Now the man out of whom the devils were departed besought him that he might be with him: but Jesus sent him away, saying, Return to thine own house, and shew how great things God hath done unto thee. And he went his way, and published throughout the whole city how great things Jesus had done unto him.

Christ told this man to "**shew** how great things God has done" unto him, in other words display his new life, and how he had changed from what he had been. But at the same time, he was so joyful, that he couldn't help but speak to everyone he met of the things that had happened to him.

And of course, we ourselves often get so excited about what God has done for us, that we also want to share it with everyone around. Which, at times, may overwhelm people a

little, and cause them to reject us. That's one of the problems with trying too hard. We should just try to be sensible:

Isaiah 50:4

The Lord GOD hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary: he wakeneth morning by morning, he wakeneth mine ear to hear as the learned.

But we should also be ready at all times to give an answer:

1 Peter 3:15

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.

Even then, we still fail. A question comes up out of the blue, and we aren't ready to answer it. We mumble some kind of answer, the conversation moves on, then five minutes later we think of what we should have said, and the opportunity has gone. How much better could we have done things! Trying too hard again!

And then sometimes, when we're in a stressful situation, we can so easily lose our temper, or say something unnecessary, or at least not becoming of our status as saints. Every time that happens, we run the risk of our witness to the world being completely ruined.

Just imagine someone who knows we are a Christian, sees our new life, our meekness, our temperance, our gentleness, all of which could not have possibly been produced by ourselves, it has to have come from the Lord. That's good. What a witness! Even without our words, they have seen something different about us. We're not like anyone else they have ever met, all of whom just live for themselves. But then one day, we get stressed and lose our temper. The first thing they will think is: "Aha! They're not different after all, they're just like the rest of us! They're just good at putting on a show of false humility." And consequently, they'll completely dismiss our religion, and the God whom we serve, and believe it's not real. What do we do then? We need to know the answer to this, because it will happen.

Well, firstly, the experience should make us far more careful in future. Yes, none of us will ever be perfect on this earth as long as we live. It is our sure hope for the future that one day we will be given new bodies which will not sin any more. But secondly, we should apologise for our behaviour and try to explain truly the situation to any offended party, if they will listen. If they still ridicule us, we can't do anything about that.

In the end, in every circumstance, we have to leave it to the Lord to deal with others. We find it so difficult to change ourselves – in fact it's impossible, we need the Lord to do it for us. How much more difficult therefore will we find trying to change other people?

Only the Lord can change hearts and get people to understand anything of a spiritual nature, we can do nothing. We have to leave everything to Him. Preachers can't change one soul, no matter how hard they try to persuade others into the kingdom. More of them ought to realise that, rather than shouting the way they do.

However, that doesn't mean that we should just sit back and do nothing. The Lord normally uses means, and so He could well be using us as an instrument for bringing the people that we know around us under His influence.

In Queen Esther's day, there had been a decree sent forth to destroy the Jews. Ordinarily, this decree could not be reversed. But Mordecai, Esther's uncle, told her about this, in her privileged position:

Esther 4:14

For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

So Queen Esther, at the possible risk of her life being lost, approached the king, and the Jews were eventually, as a result, saved from slaughter. If she had done nothing, God would have produced deliverance from somewhere else, but at the expense of her father's house. Inaction on our part will never thwart God's plans, but may have consequences for ourselves.

And so we should recognise our nothingness and absolute inability, and that we need the Lord for everything:

2 Corinthians 4:7

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.

2 Corinthians 12:5

Of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities.

2 Corinthians 12:9,10

My strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

This may be especially significant in the case of a chronic situation. Maybe you have a son or husband who is a drunkard or a drug addict. You have been praying for years and years, yet nothing seems to change. Every so often he would come home in a terrible state and interrupt the peace of the household in some, maybe violent, way. You have tried everything to bring him to the Lord, yet nothing has worked. In the end, we have to stop trying at all, recognise our total inability to change him and just place him in the Lord's hands completely.

I've known several people who have been converted from such a life of sin, after the mother or wife has been praying for years and years, so we should never give up prayer. But I have also known some who have never changed, and died an early death instead. Whatever happens, we must trust in the Lord to deal in the way He sees fit, and acknowledge that the Lord is good.

But one thing we do need to do is to stop trying too hard. Rather, we need to spend more of our time in prayer. That's the only way to get results. We need to trust in the Lord, and

begin to let the Lord work through us, as instruments to fulfil His purposes. So, in whatever circumstance the Lord puts us in, we need to make sure we stay close to Him, pursue godliness, love Christ, and be different from the world.

All this is so that no man may glory, but all the glory goes to the Lord:

1 Corinthians 1:27-29

But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: that no flesh should glory in his presence.

Skeletons in the Cupboard

A very common question against the truth of God is “How can a God of love send anyone to eternal torment in hell-fire forever?” The strange thing is that these very same people also ask the question “How can a God of love create a world with so much evil in it?” So on the one hand, they accept that the world is full of evil, yet they refuse to believe in the just punishment for that evil.

We plainly see that justice is not done by God in this world. So there must be another world beyond death where justice IS done. There must be a place, colloquially known as hell-fire, where all those who practise evil will be punished. Otherwise God ceases to be just.

The real problem people have is not merely in the belief of a place of eternal torment, but in the belief that they personally deserve to go to such a place for ever because of their own sins. No-one thinks that they are that bad by nature. But we are.

The fact of personal sin against a holy God is hidden from us by the world around us. The media, the government and the education system – whatever country we are living in – is feeding you the propaganda that people are generally good at heart. They would say that only a few spoil this theory – the ones that get the headlines in the newspapers. But there seems to be so many of them these days! People you wouldn't even have thought of. Rolf Harris was always that nice man who came into my living room every Friday evening on my television set.

And so the world goes on in its own sweet way, thinking (or at least wanting to think) that most families are “normal.” No problems, all smiles, everything going along quite smoothly. Yes, we have illnesses and death to cope with, but other than that, most people are living a reasonably happy and fulfilled life, so we are told. But I put it to you that everybody, yes everybody, including YOU, has a skeleton in their cupboard somewhere in their family.

We don't like to talk about it of course. When we live our lives, we never speak of that sister who tried to commit suicide last week, or that son who has become an alcoholic, or that drug addict brother who stole money from his grandmother to feed his habit, or that uncle being on the sex offenders register. Oh no, we don't talk about things like that.

And that's how the churches behave as well. They also feel that they've got to put on a show of "normality," a show of what Christian families ought to be like. But that's not reality. When we have a real problem – My uncle is sexually abusing me – I've got this addiction I can't control – my husband wants a divorce – I think my son is a homosexual – the Christians run a mile away. They don't want to know. Unless you are showing the "normal" Christian life, and come to church every week with your cheesy smile, happy attitude and idyllic family life, they will distance themselves from you. They don't want to get involved.

You may think I am exaggerating. Here are a few examples I personally know about:

A friend of mine used to go to a conservative evangelical church. One Sunday morning, she arrived a bit early. She saw one lady already sitting in the meeting hall at the side on her own, quietly praying. This lady was going through a divorce and had already worked up enormous strength just to be there. But an elder of the church turned up, saw her, and called across the hall in a loud voice, "Hello Mrs ***** , We've just come back from our holidays in Switzerland. We had a wonderful time!" That was an elder. He had no idea how to care about the poor lady at all.

Or what about some people I know who thought that their son had become a drug addict. It wasn't true actually, but they really had concerns about him. They spoke about it to an elder who they thought seemed approachable, but ever since then, that elder and his wife have kept their distance from them.

Or how about the two stalwart families in an Evangelical church who were absolutely delighted when one family's son announced that he wanted to marry the other family's daughter. Wonderful! A real joining together of two of the main families in the church. So they got a well-known figure from the denomination to perform the ceremony, and it was a huge event in the denomination at large. The marriage lasted three weeks. They are now divorced, but the point is that the church can't cope when things happen that they think shouldn't. Reality is an embarrassment to them. It can cope with the big, happy events, but not with things they think shouldn't be happening in the church.

I could go on and on with examples. Yes, individuals in the church will care. But the churches as a whole are totally insensitive to any of us having real problems. Yet we all have them. They think that Christians just shouldn't have that sort of mess in their families.

So we have two major applications here, one for true Christians and the other for non-Christians:

True Christians will always be upset by churches having this attitude, and find themselves on the periphery of church life. True Christians would be honest with themselves. They know the problems that exist in their family. But then they see the "perfect" families outwardly displayed by the minister, elders and church stalwarts, and they feel so far from how they are told they ought to be.

But at least true believers have the Lord to lean back on when the church lets them down. What about unbelievers? They also see the “perfect” families put forward by the stalwarts of the churches. And they will run a mile. Such an outward witness has absolutely nothing to do with their real-life situation at all. So they simply walk away. The church has nothing for them.

What a terrible witness the churches are to believers and unbelievers alike.

Let us all be genuine with one another. All of us have some skeleton in the cupboard. Let's all be real. Only then can believers help one another properly, and only then can we all be a true witness to outsiders.

Embracing Self-Hatred

Millions of people in the world today are depressed. The medical profession, with all their knowledge, can't help. All they do is spend lots of money on counselling services, mental health units and putting the patients.... er.... sorry, clients.... on antidepressant tablets, probably for the rest of their lives.

I read an article on depression in a newspaper once, and the writer who had experienced it, said, quite rightly, “Depression is a bout of absolute sanity.” And that's true. If all we have is this world in it's continual state of decay, and we're only here for a very short time anyway, there's no real point to anything. This is a miserable place. Of course it's depressing.

Solomon, the wisest man in all the earth found this out:

Ecclesiastes 1:14

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

Everything in this fallen world is vanity. It's pointless. These things are just fact. It's no good hiding from it all by filling our lives with things of no consequence and pretending it's not true. All of us should get real, and accept truth.

What surprises me is that there are so many people in the world who aren't depressed. So many who think that this world is wonderful, that they can achieve such a lot in it, that there is so much excitement here, so much to do to keep them occupied. Yet they're all going to die soon enough.

Modern psychology hasn't got the answer. All we're told is that we should have a sense of self-worth, self-acceptance, self-esteem and self-confidence. We're told that to conquer depression, we must love ourselves, have pride in our achievements and have a good feeling about ourselves.

Because of this philosophy dominating our education system, our television networks, and, sadly, also our churches, there's an army of people out there in the world who have come to think that there's something seriously wrong with them because, for whatever reason, they don't feel that confident about themselves all the time.

So, for example, people have cosmetic surgery, people go on confidence building courses, and many, many people fill our psychiatric hospitals, all because none of them feel as confident about themselves as the modern psychologists are telling them they ought to be.

Well, the modern psychologists are all wrong. Do you feel bad about yourself? Do you lack confidence? Do you have a low self-esteem? Well, look up! Don't be persuaded by the world around you that that's a bad thing. It's a good thing, because it's the truth. We really are such weak, sinful creatures by nature. To lack confidence or self-esteem is an acknowledgment of reality. Underneath everything, we know it's true anyway, but we're too scared to admit it to anyone else in case they think we need psychiatric help. But all we are doing by acknowledging our weaknesses is being honest with ourselves.

Modern psychologists think that the only alternative to a sense of self-esteem is despair. But it's far better to have a sense of reality about ourselves, because only then can we begin to do something about it. Whipping ourselves up into a false sense of self-confidence is not the answer, but, instead, it's living a lie. The longer we live a lie, the worse we'll become when we find out it was all a sham.

The one thing all depressed people have in common is that they turn inward on themselves. By doing this, they make themselves utterly useless to everyone around them. Not only do they waste their own time, but they waste the time of everybody else who tries to help them. The helpers could be doing something useful themselves instead. I'm sorry to be so harsh, but that's the way it is.

In fact, the problem with depressed people is too much self-esteem, not too little. Me, me, me, my problem, my problems. That's all they can think about. They really think the world revolves around themselves. By nature we are all so selfish.

It was said of Jesus Christ that He:

Acts 10:38

....went about doing good....

A depressed person should be told, "Do something useful. Help a little old lady across the road." Of course, they won't. They might say something like, "Nobody cares about me, so why should I care about anybody else?" Which is a fair comment. But it's still a selfish one.

When I was in the cub scouts, they had a motto that we should try to do one good deed every day. But how many of us actually did a good deed every day, or indeed a good deed at all? None of us. It sounded good, but nobody actually did it.

So, if we find such difficulty by nature to do even one good deed a day when we're well, how much more will we find it difficult to do something useful for somebody else when we're depressed. There is only one hope for any of us. It doesn't matter whether we're depressed or not. We all need a Saviour to save us from this wretched condition, from our

own sinful, self-centred nature. If we don't recognise this as our fundamental problem, we may as well give up all hope now. Everybody by nature is in this condition, whether we recognise it or not. We're all in the same boat.

We must seek the truth about ourselves. Only then can we find a real solution.

The Bible tells us the truth about human nature:

Genesis 6:5

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

Jeremiah 17:9

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

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.

Romans 3:23

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

Nothing we can do is good enough. We're all failures. The psychologists are all wrong. Does that mean we should despair and try to end our lives? No! God has provided an answer, if only we accept it. There's a Saviour to be found in Jesus Christ. But we need to acknowledge that we need Him. We need to acknowledge our real condition. We need to call on God for mercy to save us from our sins. And if we do all that, He will.

Jeremiah 29:11-13

For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end. Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.

Zephaniah 2:3

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

Isaiah 45:21,22

There is no God else beside me; a just God and a Saviour; there is none beside me. Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else.

1 Timothy 2:5

For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.

1 Peter 3:18

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God.

The Christian religion is not irrelevant, as we're constantly being told. Rather, it gives us exactly the perfect remedy for our human condition.

At this point we need to separate in our minds depressed people from those with what the Bible calls “evil spirits.” Both would be treated by a hospital’s psychiatric department, so to this world they are considered very similar. But really they are completely different.

Christ and the apostles came across many people with “evil spirits.”

Acts 16:16-18

And it came to pass, as we went to prayer, a certain damsel possessed with a spirit of divination met us, which brought her masters much gain by soothsaying: The same followed Paul and us, and cried, saying, These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation. And this did she many days. But Paul, being grieved, turned and said to the spirit, I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And he came out the same hour.

This lady spoke the truth. The men she was talking about were indeed the servants of the most high God shewing the way of salvation. In most church circles that would be called good witnessing. But she had an evil spirit, which Paul cast out. If he had not done that, people would begin to equate having an evil spirit with true religion, which of course it isn’t.

A person with an “evil spirit” can never be a true believer. We should never think that they ever could be, even if they are in our churches (which many are). True believers will always be in their right mind:

Luke 8:35

Then they went out to see what was done: and came to Jesus, and found the man, out of whom the devils were departed, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed, and in his right mind: and they were afraid.

True believers will know the truth and the truth will set them free.

But not only do people with “evil spirits” come to church regularly, many depressed people do too. And many true believers can be depressed.

At one point in his life, it is said of Elijah:

1 Kings 19:4

But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers.

David said at one point:

Psalms 88:3

For my soul is full of troubles: and my life draweth nigh unto the grave.

Jeremiah said:

Jeremiah 20:14

Cursed be the day wherein I was born: let not the day wherein my mother bare me be blessed.

Even Job fell into this trap. When everything was taken away from him, he was initially fine, and said:

Job 1:21

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

We are told that up to this point,

Job 2:10

In all this did not Job sin with his lips.

But then when his friends came along to try to help him, Job got depressed, and said:

Job 3:3

Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived.

The key to the book of Job is found in chapter 32. Job's problem was that:

Job 32:1,2

He was righteous in his own eyes.... he justified himself rather than God.

Until he acknowledged that the Lord was righteous and he just a sinful creature by nature, he couldn't be restored.

In all these Biblical cases, the person concerned, got depressed because he took his eyes off the Lord and eternal things, and just focused on this world. That's the big mistake. And that's the case every time a true believer gets depressed. This world is not all there is. We need to keep ourselves focused on things above, not on things on the earth.

Colossians 3:1-3

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

2 Corinthians 4:17-18

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

People criticise Christianity for being narrow and exclusive. But no other religion can save us from our own sinful selves. Every other religion in the world is a glorified self-help group. They all tell us there's something we can do to impress God. Don't flatter yourself. The truth is that there's absolutely nothing we can do at all.

The Lord Jesus Christ was sent into the world specifically to save us from our sins:

John 3:36

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

John 5:22-23

For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son: that all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent him.

So, let's all acknowledge our inadequacy, failure and sinful nature. Let's not be scared of doing that. Only once we recognise the problem can we truly repent of our sins, and pray to God for salvation in Jesus Christ. And we know that's a sure hope, because the Lord has promised that He will not let anyone down who truly turns to Him:

John 6:40

And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day.

John 6:37

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

John 12:25

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

Coming to the Son will make us free indeed:

John 8:34-36

Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. And the servant abideth not in the house for ever: but the Son abideth ever. If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.

The Last Shall Be First

Matthew 18:3-6

Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me. But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.

The more I look around the current church scene, the more I realise how few professing Christians there are who take the above words of Christ seriously. The greatest need in the visible church today is for people to be truly converted and become as little children in their whole attitude to God as well as to everyone around them.

We are all born in sin, so I am not saying by any means that little children are sinless. As any mother would tell you, they're not. But they are simple and trusting in their relationship with their earthly parents, in the same manner that we should be with our heavenly Father.

As children grow older, however, they leave such trusting simplicity behind and mature into the drunkards, prostitutes and unclean, selfish, self-confident people we see all around us.

Psalm 49:20

Man that is in honour, and understandeth not, is like the beasts that perish.

When the Lord calls people to Himself, He is calling them to renounce such a self-centred, self-confident lifestyle and become simple and trusting again, but this time not towards their earthly parents (who were not worthy of such trust being placed in them anyway) but towards our Heavenly Father. In fact, here is another forgotten saying of our Lord:

Matthew 10:34-39

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.

We are to love God even more than our own earthly families.

Of course we are to honour our parents:

Exodus 20:12

Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.

And we are to look after our blood relatives:

1 Timothy 5:8

But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.

But our new, real family is now all those who belong to Christ, not blood ties any more. We can't really trust anyone who is not one of the Lord's people. And we sometimes can't trust them either.

Matthew 12:47-50

Then one said unto him, Behold, thy mother and thy brethren stand without, desiring to speak with thee. But he answered and said unto him that told him, Who is my mother? and who are my brethren? And he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.

This reminds me of someone I met once who was a murderer. While he was in prison, he became a Christian. After he was set free (murderers don't stay in prison for long these days) he went back to his parents and told them that he was now a Christian, and they consequently threw him out of the house. It is quite remarkable that they would rather have a murderer living with them than a Christian.

Anyway, childlikeness, in this simple, trusting way, is missing in the church. So many church members want to be seen doing something in the church. So they become ministers, elders, missionaries, or other "full time Christian workers," and there are recruitment web sites out there specialising in such stuff. But try speaking to any one of these people, and all I can say is that I find it very difficult to relate to them. We are supposed to follow them, be impressed by their activity for Jesus, and no doubt throw money at them, but they don't want to know me as a person. I'm obviously not good enough for them.

Compare this with one man I knew in a church I was in once. He had a mild learning difficulty. He had to go to a special school (which he hated) and grew into adulthood with no qualifications whatsoever and had to live his life claiming benefits. He hung around with his friends who had a "Christian" worship band (I am not going into the rights and wrongs of such, that's another article altogether!). The pastor of the church, always wanting to see some talent in all the members of his congregation, told everyone that he was very good at setting up the band's equipment, and that obviously this was his "gift" in life. However, one of the band members told me privately afterwards that that wasn't the case at all, as he was once nearly electrocuted by him! So to all intents and purposes, my friend with learning disabilities was utterly and completely useless at everything. He was no church leader, missionary, full-time Christian worker, or anything of the kind, he couldn't even put a plug in properly, he was practically useless.

However, after I left the church to go to another church (like one has to do occasionally), he was the only one from the whole church who still continued to visit me. No-one else from my previous church bothered with me any more, it was the usual case of "out of sight, out of mind." I ended up having a really good friendship with him, and although I have moved away now and lost contact with him, I will always remember his friendship and, more to the point, the fact that he wanted to take time to know me, which none of the missionaries or "full time Christian workers" ever did. I remember going around to the pastor's house once and he boasted that he had had over 120 Christmas cards (and there they were all hung around the living room to prove it). I didn't tell him I only had two. These people live in a different world from the ordinary people in the pew.

All this reminds me of the several occasions when our Lord talked about the last being first. Let us take a look at them:

Matthew 19:30-20:16

But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first. For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the labourers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, And said unto them; Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way. Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? They

say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive. So when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the labourers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first. And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny. But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny. And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house, Saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day. But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.

This is not about rewards in heaven. The parable of the pounds teaches that in Luke 19:12-27. In this parable everybody gets the same. But the ones who only worked one hour get the same as those who worked all day. Now, does this parable encourage laziness? Of course not. The whole parable was given to illustrate one point, and one point only, stated at the beginning and end, namely that *“the last shall be first, and the first last.”* Those who are seen outwardly to work full time for the Lord and bear the burden and heat of the day in the visible church, only receive the same reward as those who are not really seen, and certainly not appreciated at all.

The parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30 is similar. That shows that we are all given differing amounts of useful ability in this life to start with, the one given five talents to start with has to make five more (a 100% increase) to get the same reward as the one given two talents to start with, who only has to make two talents more. This may again sound unfair, but there's a limit to each's capability to start with. If you aspire to be a great pastor, or missionary, then fine, but expect to have to do a lot more work and have a lot more trouble to get the same reward as the man with learning difficulties who never leaves his home town and is practically useless.

Mark 9:33-37

And he came to Capernaum: and being in the house he asked them, What was it that ye disputed among yourselves by the way? But they held their peace: for by the way they had disputed among themselves, who should be the greatest. And he sat down, and called the twelve, and saith unto them, If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all. And he took a child, and set him in the midst of them: and when he had taken him in his arms, he said unto them, Whosoever shall receive one of such children in my name, receiveth me: and whosoever shall receive me, receiveth not me, but him that sent me.

The disciples knew in their hearts it was wrong to dispute over who should be greatest, because when Christ asked them what they were disputing about, they *“held their peace.”* Christ taught them that if we desire to be first in the kingdom of God, we should try to be last of all, like a little child in fact. Where in the church today are there people striving to be last of all? No, they want their television ministries, deliverance ministries, healing ministries, and leadership responsibilities in their tinpot little churches. No thanks. Let's renounce all such things and desire more than anything to be *“last of all, and servant of all.”*

Mark 10:28-31

Then Peter began to say unto him, Lo, we have left all, and have followed thee. And Jesus answered and said, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, but he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life. But many that are first shall be last; and the last first.

Peter thinks, understandably, that because they've left all to follow Christ, they deserve a reward. And indeed Christ tells them that if they're true believers they will indeed get a reward, both in this life (together with persecutions) and in that which is to come. But He also has to remind them that many who seem to be first in the church in this world will actually turn out to be last in the kingdom. There's nothing wrong in theory with becoming a church leader, but watch out! They'll be a lot more responsible for their actions and words:

James 3:1

My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.

And then we've got the most solemn warning of all:

Luke 13:24-30

Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able. When once the master of the house is risen up, and hath shut to the door, and ye begin to stand without, and to knock at the door, saying, Lord, Lord, open unto us; and he shall answer and say unto you, I know you not whence ye are: Then shall ye begin to say, We have eaten and drunk in thy presence, and thou hast taught in our streets. But he shall say, I tell you, I know you not whence ye are; depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out. And they shall come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God. And, behold, there are last which shall be first, and there are first which shall be last.

Here we see that the phrase about the last being first and the first last is tagged on to the end of a passage about many seeking to enter in to the kingdom of heaven but not being able. Christ is clearly showing that those who always put themselves first in the church in this world, and are seen to be first in the church in this world, may not just simply find themselves last in the next world, but may not even find themselves in glory at all. Let's remember that pride is always lurking at the door:

3 John 9

I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not.

1 Timothy 3:6

Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil.

Let's make sure that we're amongst the childlike, servant-like lowest people in the visible church, and we can then be sure that Christ will exalt us in due time.

1 Peter 5:5-6

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

Growing Old

A few years ago, a friend of mine was telling me about his father who was over 90 years old. He had just had a minor stroke, and was recovering, but, being full of this world, he kept on saying, "I'm looking forward to driving again." Of course, that was now highly unlikely at his age, but what do you say to someone like that? Do you say, "Yes, yes, yes," which would be a lie, or do you say, "Look, get real, it's not going to happen," which would probably be the truth, but upsetting to him?

When I was working in a hospital, I got to know an old lady who kept on coming into the hospital chapel to sit in the quiet for a while. She always said that she was in hospital to visit a friend, but was very economical with any details about this "friend." I actually gave her a lift home once, and she lived over twenty miles away on her own in a little cottage, and did the trip to hospital nearly every day on the bus. She became friendly with another old lady who did the same thing, but lived closer to the hospital. Both ladies had children, but they all lived a long way away in the south-east of England and were more concerned with their successful jobs than looking after their parents. On the rare occasion that they visited, they would maybe stay for a day or so, take mother out for a nice meal, tell her they loved her, then go away again for another year. Anyway, these ladies continued to visit the hospital for many months, far longer than people usually stay in an acute hospital; then it dawned on me that these "friends" that they were supposedly visiting didn't exist. That was their life. Going out nearly every day to visit an imaginary "friend."

These two examples are typical of many people. All they have in their old age is a fantasy. Millions of people live every day:

Ephesians 2:12

Having no hope, and without God in the world.

The older people get, the more difficult it becomes to encourage them to carry on living in this world, because there really is nothing much for them to look forward to here any more. They are so close to eternity, and yet even then, they still refuse to think about their impending, inevitable death and life beyond it. They want to hang on to this vain, empty place for ever.

We're all programmed today to believe that there's nothing after death at all. The logical fallacy that brings people to this conclusion is the same logical fallacy that makes them think there's no God. Just because we can't see, hear, feel, smell, taste or detect God with scientific instruments, therefore, they conclude, He doesn't exist. Similarly, they would say, we can't sense anything after death (apart from a few strange people who think they can), therefore, they conclude, there's nothing. This logic is totally false. There

was a time when we couldn't "detect" nuclear reactions, but that doesn't mean to say that they didn't exist.

But there is life after death. The fact that so many religions teach it, is just proof that:

Romans 1:20

For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.

I was asked once, by a young person in China, what the phrase "eternal life" in the Bible meant. I assumed that they thought there was nothing after death, so I explained as best I could, that death is not the end and we need to prepare ourselves for the next life. But I thought afterwards, what a stupid thing to say to someone from a Buddhist background. They wouldn't have a problem with life after death. To them, after death, we just come back again as something else. In fact Buddhism is an incredibly evil religion. The aim of it, after many reincarnations, is to dissolve away into nothingness. Great. And, if our life here gets so bad we can't stand it any more, that's all right, we can just kill ourselves and even if we come back as a rat, it's better than what we've got now. There's no concept at all of one's own personal sin, and responsibility for it. It's very much like atheism, which also sees suicide as a viable option, because after death they think there's nothing. Come to think of it, it's like the alcoholic too, who just wants to forget reality and drink himself to oblivion. In fact, even true Christians can fall into this trap. Many believe in annihilationism rather than the eternal punishment that the Bible teaches. Their idea is that if we come to Christ we get eternal life, but if we don't we just cease to exist. It's all the same basic idea. No!

Hebrews 9:27

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

We must make our peace with God in this one life that we've got here, because there isn't going to be another one.

Christianity teaches proper, real, sincere respect and care for old people:

1 Timothy 5:8

If any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.

James 1:27

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

All of us, whoever we are, whatever background we've come from, really, truly need to prepare properly for our old age, and indeed our death, because such is the inevitable consequences of sin:

Romans 6:23

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

When we're young, we're physically strong and can do all sorts of things. But as we grow old, we find we can't do as many things physically as we did before. To the unbeliever, this is the worst thing that can happen, and many of them want to be able to "die with dignity," as they call it, at a time they choose. But to the believer, who is maturing in the faith, it's a whole new opportunity. Maybe we can no longer gad about this present, evil world as we used to do, but we can spend far more time in prayer and in preparation for the next world.

Psalms 71:17-18

O God, thou hast taught me from my youth: and hitherto have I declared thy wondrous works. Now also when I am old and grayheaded, O God, forsake me not; until I have shewed thy strength unto this generation, and thy power to every one that is to come.

2 Corinthians 4:16-5:4

....though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal. For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven: If so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked. For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life.

While we're here, we must all make sure we've made our peace with God by repenting of sin and putting our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ:

Romans 5:1

Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 John 4:10

Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Assuming we've done this, and have truly been made a new creature in Christ, Christians then need, not to talk about the weather with each other, but to encourage one another in the faith; not speaking of the things of this world, still clinging on to memories and good feelings here, but speaking of heavenly things:

Hebrews 10:25

....exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

After all, this world is not our home. The next one will be:

John 14:2,3

In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.

Colossians 3:1-3

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

Hebrews 11:13-16

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

Hebrews 13:14

For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.

A few years ago in the city where I was living, there were two Christian men from two different churches, one in his eighties and another in what we call “the prime of life” in his thirties with a young family. Both had contracted terminal cancer at the same time, and both found themselves lying next to each other in hospital beds. What a providence! They spent their last few days on this earth looking forward to eternity. “I wonder what heaven is going to be like!” “Just think, no more sin!” What a joyful time they must have had! And this is how we should be when it is our turn to go.

Are we really ready?

Luke 18:8

When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?

Walk Worthy

Look at these passages of Scripture:

Psalms 62:12

Also unto thee, O Lord, belongeth mercy: for thou renderest to every man according to his work.

Proverbs 24:12

If thou sayest, Behold, we knew it not; doth not he that pondereth the heart consider it? and he that keepeth thy soul, doth not he know it? and shall not he render to every man according to his works?

Ecclesiastes 12:14

For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.

Jeremiah 17:10

I the LORD search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.

Jeremiah 32:19

Great in counsel, and mighty in work: for thine eyes are open upon all the ways of the sons of men: to give every one according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.

Matthew 16:27

For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works.

John 5:28,29

Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.

Romans 2:6

Who will render to every man according to his deeds.

2 Corinthians 5:10

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

1 Peter 1:17

And if ye call on the Father, who without respect of persons judgeth according to every man's work, pass the time of your sojourning here in fear.

Revelation 2:3

And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works.

Revelation 20:12,13

And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works.

Revelation 22:12

And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be.

The Bible is absolutely clear that we will be judged according to our works.

We Protestants are so keen on promoting the truth that justification is by grace through faith alone, that we don't seem to realise that these passages are in the Bible. Protestants are right when they say that we can't possibly keep God's law, so if we are going to be saved at all, it must be by grace. But then many conclude from this, wrongly, that we therefore don't need to bother doing good works at all. But that's a terrible thing to conclude.

We are saved by grace, absolutely. Because we can't save ourselves. But we are saved **for a purpose**, namely, in order to do good works:

Ephesians 2:8-10

*For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus **unto** good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.*

But how can we do any good works at all, when we have a fallen nature? Does not the Bible say that:

Psalms 14:3

There is none that doeth good, no, not one.

The only way it is possible for us to do good works, is if the Lord gives us a new heart. There is no other way:

John 3:3

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

And this is what true religion is all about. Yes, we are saved by grace alone, because we cannot be saved otherwise. But God saving us to eternal life must at the same time involve our receiving a new heart from Him. These two things are inseparable.

But, even though we now have a new heart, we still have a battle going on within us. The old heart is still there, dragging us back all the time. The Christian is called to put this old heart to death, and live by the Spirit, i.e. by the new heart that has been put within us:

Romans 8:11-14

But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you. Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.

To the extent that we no longer live according to the old nature but live according to the new heart put within us, we cannot sin:

1 John 3:9

Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.

But, of course, who of us actually lives like that? Nobody. Even the best of Christians is always failing. All of us always fall short. We daily have to cry to God:

Matthew 6:12

Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

And that is why we ought to readily forgive others:

Matthew 6:14-15

For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

The Bible calls us to walk worthy of our calling in Christ:

Ephesians 4:1

I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called.

Colossians 1:10

That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God.

1 Thessalonians 2:12

That ye would walk worthy of God, who hath called you unto his kingdom and glory.

But how do we do this? The only way is to come to an end of ourselves. We must trust in the Lord to work through us. There is no other way.

We must stop trusting in anything in ourselves. We must bring ourselves down to the dust where we belong. We must allow the Lord to work in the new heart He has given us, and stop trying to help Him in any way ourselves. We can't improve what He wants to do in us, so we should stop trying. Only then, when we have completely surrendered to God's will, can we be said to walk worthy of our calling.

Witnessing

Evangelical churches are very keen on encouraging their members to "witness" for the Lord. Indeed, in many of these churches, as soon as we have "made our decision" for Christ, we are immediately told, "Now go and tell someone." Members of such churches are continually made to feel guilty if they are not overtly, aggressively evangelising and getting fully involved in the church's outreach programme. Such "witnessing," apparently, is the Great Commission to the church:

Matthew 28:18-20

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

Mark 16:16

And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.

Apart from the fact that these two verses are often mistakenly confused with each other when quoted, and apart from the fact that they were actually instructions only given to the eleven disciples and not necessarily for us today, “witnessing” and outreach do play a very major part in the work of Evangelical Christians.

In fact it is the only work most of them do, all their activity being geared towards bringing people into their particular church, so that it may grow numerically. I heard the minister of an Evangelical church once say, “If the church doesn’t evangelise it will die,” conveniently forgetting that Christ Himself said:

Matthew 16:18

I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

In these churches, we are told that we must take every opportunity we can get to tell people about Jesus. So, when we are at work, and our workmates are all talking of something worldly, we should try our best to get the conversation around to religion as often as possible. Or, if we have a day off, we should spend it usefully by going out doing door-to-door work, or distributing tracts in the High Street, or something similar. But is this really what “witnessing” is all about?

Now, of course, please don’t misunderstand me. All of Christ’s people should evangelise. After all, we have good news to proclaim! All the elect need to be gathered in, and the ordinary means God uses for this is the spreading of the gospel throughout the world by His followers:

Romans 10:14-15

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

Matthew 24:14

And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.

However, let me take you to Henan province in China. Henan has been described as “The Galilee of China,” because of the number of churches (legal and illegal) there are in that province, particularly in the rural areas. A church in every village. What a wonderful place it must be! Christians everywhere! Wouldn’t we all like to live in a place like that?

The “Christians” in Henan are very good at doing their bit of “witnessing” to everyone around them, inviting them to come to church and telling them about Jesus. As far as Evangelical churches are concerned, these are exemplary in their witnessing, and prime examples that we should all follow.

My wife recently started talking to an unbeliever from Henan about Christianity. Her response was, “Don’t talk to me about Christianity. There are so many people in Henan and they all say, “I love the Lord,” “I’m born-again,” or “I love Jesus,” and they all try their utmost to get people to go to their churches. But they still lie, cheat and steal like everyone else. I’m better than that!” And she was absolutely right. Plenty of people who aren’t Christian in any way, realise that it is wrong to lie, cheat and steal, and they at least try not to do these things. You don’t have to be a Christian to know that these things are

wrong. But what an indictment on the so-called “Christian” population of Henan. Surely, it ought not to be like this.

What about the **lives** of these Christians? Their lives don’t seem to have changed at all, even though they would tell you vehemently that they are “born-again,” and invite you to share their experience.

If anyone continues to lie, cheat and steal after they have supposedly “become a Christian,” then they’ve not truly been born-again at all. Such people can say that they love the Lord as much as they like, but the fact remains that they don’t. Christ speaks about many who say they are true believers, but are not, in very solemn words:

Matthew 7:21

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.

Yes, we are all called, if we are a Christian, to “witness” for Christ. But that doesn’t simply mean just outward evangelism. In fact, if we continually evangelise in that manner, people will actually be turned off from Christianity completely, thinking that we are just another religious nutcase. Why should we be right? Why should people go to our church, as opposed to any other church? Why should people choose our religion, as opposed to any other? This is no witness at all for Christ.

Of course, if we are asked about what we believe, then we should always be ready to give an answer:

1 Peter 3:15,16

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear: having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ.

But aggressively witnessing in such a way that puts people off the things of the Lord? Do we really realise that that sort of witnessing is vain?

It is our **lives** that are the true witness for Christ, not our aggressive evangelism. So, for example, women with unbelieving husbands are told:

1 Peter 3:1-2

Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives; while they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear.

Timothy was told to be an example to others, despite his youth:

1 Timothy 4:12

Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.

And when people unfairly persecute us, our witness to them ought to be our good conversation in Christ:

1 Peter 3:16

Having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ.

Yes, we need to tell people about Jesus. But by far the greatest witness we can have is to **do** what Christ says. We need to live our lives no longer the way the world does, in the vanity of our mind, but live by the new heart that has been put within us, nurturing the fruit of the Spirit, which the world does not have. Then, and only then, can we be of some use in the kingdom of the Lord, and be true witnesses for Him.

Matthew 7:24-27

Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.

Matthew 12:50

For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.

2 Corinthians 1:12

For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world, and more abundantly to you-ward.

Ephesians 4:17-24

This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart: who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. But ye have not so learned Christ; if so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus: that ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; and be renewed in the spirit of your mind; and that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.

1 John 2:17

And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.

Good Works

My unbelieving neighbour said something very interesting to me the other day. We were talking about religious extremists. He said that all religions are essentially good, but in every religion there are people who take the religion too far and become extremists. He mentioned as examples, extremist muslims who become suicide bombers, and extremist Roman Catholic nuns who abuse young girls.

After our conversation, I began to start thinking on these things.

Firstly, of course, no religion is good, except the one true religion that worships the only true and living God, Lord of heaven and earth. All other gods, indeed all other religions or philosophical systems which do not acknowledge the one true God, or that distort Him in any way, are figments of people's imaginations, and are by definition false and therefore evil.

However, I could see exactly where my neighbour was coming from. All religions, apart from a few obvious ones like Satanism, DO have, as an integral part of their religion, the performing of good works of charity towards their fellow men. By this, we mean kindness to their neighbour, helping little old ladies across the road, looking after the poor, and so on. In this sense, all major religions, including Secular Humanism (the majority religion in the West), are seemingly "good" at least in my neighbour's, and in most of the world's eyes.

Except Protestantism.

Protestantism, on the other hand, emphasises salvation by grace through faith. Can you not see how terrible this seems in the eyes of unenlightened men, who believe so strongly in doing good works to their neighbour? To them, Protestantism believes that all we have to do is say that we believe in Jesus, and we can be saved and go to heaven. No good works, nothing. We can carry on in sin all we like, and then in the end be saved to eternal life anyway. What a terrible religion! God, seemingly, has no interest in our doing good works at all. He saves us whether we do them or not. This caricature of Protestantism is, of course, so far from the truth, but it is completely understandable why unbelievers think that way about us when we emphasise the doctrine of justification by faith alone so much.

We ought to be clear. We are saved by grace through faith, not of anything in ourselves. But we are only saved in a way whereby God grants us a new heart, so that we are then able to perform the good works that God wants us to do, which we could not do otherwise. We are saved **UNTO** good works:

Ephesians 2:8-10

*For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus **unto good works**, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.*

All other religions believe that we are able to do enough good works by ourselves to warrant heaven (or whatever reward the religion has). Protestantism is unique in that it believes, quite rightly, that we do **NOT** have the ability to warrant heaven, no matter how much we try to please God. That's because of the fall of man in the garden of Eden:

Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 19

All mankind, by their [Adam and Eve's] fall, lost communion with God^a, are under His wrath^b and curse^c, and so made liable to all the miseries of this life^d, to death itself^e, and to the pains of hell forever^f.

a Genesis 3:8,24; John 8:34,42,44; Ephesians 2:12; 4:18.

b John 3:36; Romans 1:18; Ephesians 2:3; 5:6.

c Galatians 3:10; Revelation 22:3.

d Genesis 3:16-19; Job 5:7; Ecclesiastes 2:22,23; Romans 8:18-23.

e Ezekiel 18:4; Romans 5:12; 6:23.

f Matthew 25:41,46; II Thessalonians 1:9; Revelation 14:9-11.

Romans 8:7,8

The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.

Hebrews 11:6

But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

So what we need is to see our inability, then cry to God for mercy. Only then could God (if He so wished) grant us the faith and repentance required to turn to Him and become one of His children. Only then will He grant to His people a new heart and an ability to perform the good works that He has before ordained that they should walk therein.

Acts 2:39

For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.

Acts 13:48

As many as were ordained to eternal life believed.

Acts 11:18

Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.

This is the true gospel that we should be proclaiming. However...

The problem is compounded greatly in that most Protestant churches themselves don't believe this, and promote the gospel as simply believing in Jesus with no mention of any good works to follow. God forbid that that should be the gospel!

Romans 6:1,2

Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid.

I heard on television someone say that "We don't need to do anything for our salvation, except believe." But any exception is a work. To believe in the Lord Jesus Christ for our salvation is a work on our part. In reality, faith is a gift of God, therefore it is not really a work but a gift. But if we feel we have to whip it up ourselves, then we are making it a work, and trusting in our faith rather than in the grace of God for our salvation. No wonder such people think we can lose our salvation. If it was up to us, we stand no chance of keeping it.

Consequently, sin is taken so lightly by such people. But the most mature believers in the Bible saw how wretched they really were:

Job 40:4

Behold, I am vile....

Psalms 51:5

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

Romans 7:24

O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?

But an even greater problem in Protestant churches is that people are taught that anyone trying to keep the law is a legalist. People wrongly assume that all such people are doing so in order to curry favour with God and gain salvation by works. Those who do try to keep the law because they think it is a way of salvation (which it never was since the Fall), are wrong. Salvation is by grace through faith. However, there is another kind of person who also tries to keep the law of God, namely all those who have had the new heart put within them, and who consequently try to do good works out of gratitude for the salvation that has been freely given to them in Christ. They want to please God. They outwardly appear exactly the same as those trying to work their way to salvation, but they are not performing good works for the same reason. Simple Protestants who don't understand the new birth properly, don't understand that true believers should love the law and want to keep it out of gratitude and love for God.

Psalms 119:97

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

So there are an army of people in Protestant, Evangelical churches, who think that all we need to do is "believe in Jesus," that thinking about sin is wrong, and that to strive to keep the law is works religion and should be avoided. Are people who believe all this regenerate? I don't wish to speculate. But they are certainly not mature Christians, otherwise they would love good works, want to do them, and be able to see how wretched they are by nature.

May we become such like mature Christians.

Galatians 5:9,10

And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.

One final thought. The unbelieving neighbour who I had a conversation with which sparked me thinking on these things, is a really good neighbour. I have no problem in having him to look after my house when I go away for months at a time. He has a key, keeps an eye on the place, and I can trust him completely with my property. He even did some odd jobs around the house, which I would never even have thought of doing if it was me looking after his house. He is a really good neighbour to have. Contrast this with professing Christians. Lend them a book, and it is almost unheard of that they would give it you back. I used to be involved with publishing Christian books, and I can witness that most Christian bookshops just won't pay their bills. If you eventually remind them, their attitude would be something like, "Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot. But you have to forgive me

because you're a Christian." The sad fact is that professing Christians are hopeless at doing good works, compared to the world.

May we be true witnesses for Christ.

Matthew 5:20

For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.

I know this verse primarily refers to Christ's righteousness imputed to us, but I suggest that, if we truly love God, we should take heed of it ourselves, if we want to walk worthy of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

Colossians 1:10

That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God.

The Doctrine According to Godliness

1 Timothy 6:3-5

If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, Perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself.

Doctrine. What goes through your mind whenever you hear that word?

Many people in the church today hate that word. They would say, "Doctrine divides, but love unites." And maybe they would quote Scripture:

1 Corinthians 8:1

Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth.

But that statement in itself is a dogmatic, doctrinal statement. It is impossible to be without doctrine. Doctrine is useful. Doctrine is the body of truth that we believe. Do we believe that the earth is billions of years old, and that when we are dead that is the end? That is a doctrinal statement, and millions of people live their lives in the light of that statement. But it is a totally false doctrine, and millions of people go to hell as a result of believing in it. It is therefore very important that we have correct doctrine, so we may know what is true.

There are many people that hate the truth:

Romans 1:28

And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient.

Romans 10:2

For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge.

2 Timothy 3:7

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

But we, true Christians, love the truth, and we want to grow in the knowledge of it. God:

1 Timothy 2:4

...will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.

2 Peter 3:18

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

But the purpose of knowing what is true is not so that we can be clever and impress our friends. Or even that we may win theological debates. The purpose of coming to a knowledge of the truth is solely for the purpose of then applying it to our lives practically.

Christ taught doctrine:

Mark 1:22

And they were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one that had authority, and not as the scribes.

And His doctrine came from the Father:

John 7:16-17

Jesus answered them, and said, My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself.

And such doctrine is most important as the only source of all our teaching in the church:

1 Timothy 4:16

Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee.

We need to make sure we have the knowledge of the truth, and that we keep hold of it. But unbelievers can know the truth – after all it is freely available in the Bible – and as a result they can easily become better theologians than true believers, and many of them shame us with their knowledge of the Bible.

There are plenty of people who receive the truth, join the church, and maybe are in it for many years, but they are without a regenerate heart, and consequently their lives don't change in accordance with it:

Hebrews 10:26

For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins.

Many people in the church think that true doctrine and the defence of it against all comers is all that there is to true religion. They love a fight. They love to have a good debate whereby they can defend (what they think is) the truth. And many church splits have occurred because of this.

There are thousands of different denominations in the world now, all living as though they were the only church in the world, having no connection with any other church. This can't be a good witness for Christ. Yet the people who try to defend their denomination, and who feel they are called of God to do this, won't agree with me. They'll say "To keep the testimony to the truth, we must split from the parent church because it has allowed error into its teachings."

Do you know any churches like this? I do. I've been in them. They're very attractive, because the defence of the truth is a very important part of the Christian faith. I can understand people who think this way. But the problem we must face is that no denomination or movement on the face of the earth will ever have no error in it. No matter how many times they split, they will have some wrong theology somewhere.

That doesn't mean that we should not ourselves as individuals continue to seek the truth by studying God's Word, so long as we never think that a time has come when we no longer hold any major errors any more. This is especially a concern when we have been blinded into believing that only one denomination on earth has the truth.

Many people know the truth, but they've never been born-again in their hearts. Yes, it is possible to be sound in your theology and still go to hell. All your theology may be right, but without a new heart, you are still in your sins and trespasses. You can spend your entire life defending the truth, and at the last end up in hell fire.

The most important thing in life is that you get yourself a new heart, that you become a new creature in Christ. That involves humility, crying to God for mercy. These unbelieving truth-defenders don't know what true humility is, they just want to aggressively defend their position in a worldly way, using human means of persuasion.

But we can't do that. Yes, we may, by human persuasion, get followers for ourselves and our own little cause. We may even be able to start a church and see it grow. But that is not what Christianity is about. Our job is to get followers for Jesus, not ourselves.

What truth these people do teach can indeed be used of God to convert people. But it is the truth that converts. The Word of God is living and powerful, not the words or persuasive power of men:

Hebrews 4:12

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

1 Corinthians 2:4,5

And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

The Christian life is not just about defending true doctrine. It is far more than that. It is also about applying the doctrine we know in order to live a godly life. If every time we come to the Scripture, we have no interest in practically applying it, then there is no spiritual life in us at all.

This is also the test we can use whenever we listen to others. Did that sermon, that article, that conversation with that so-called believer challenge me? change me? inspire me to live in a more godly manner? If not, we need to doubt the faith of the person we have been listening to. If all they wanted was to teach:

1 Timothy 1:4

....fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith....

.... then it was a waste of time listening to them. It is “*godly edifying*” that we need. This is the true “*doctrine according to godliness.*”

1 Timothy 1:5-7

Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned: from which some having swerved have turned aside unto vain jangling; desiring to be teachers of the law; understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm.

Here is an example of what I mean. Do we believe that we are bipartite or tripartite beings? There we are, I have lost some of you already. By that I mean, do we believe that man is made up of body and soul (two entities), or body, soul and spirit (three entities)? True Christians disagree on this issue. But the question is not which side do we fall into, but rather, does it affect my way of life whichever of them I believe? If it doesn't affect my way of life at all either way, it is pretty much a waste of time arguing about it.

How many angels can you get on the end of a pin? This is an interesting philosophical question, but does finding the answer to it change my attitude towards loving my neighbour? If not, don't waste time thinking about it.

However, what about this question: Does everything happen by chance, or does everything happen under God's providential control? Now, this question can seriously affect the way we live. If we don't know the answer to it, or if we believe the wrong answer, we will go well astray. It is important that we know the answer to this question.

Nothing, absolutely nothing in this world happens by “chance.” I really don't know how people can live believing this, they must live very anxious lives. Many scientists believe that one day a giant asteroid will crash into the earth and wipe many of us out. What a life. Believing in such a thing as “chance” must make life intolerably miserable. However, if we truly believe in the providence of God, that God is in control of all things, then we can have the comfort of knowing that God knows what He is doing, and we can put our trust in Him:

Romans 8:28

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

And even if an asteroid does come and wipe us out, we can rest in the knowledge that there was a purpose behind it, rather than it being just a random event.

Our belief in sound doctrine should therefore always lead to practical Christian living:

Titus 2:1-8

But speak thou the things which become sound doctrine: that the aged men be sober, grave, temperate, sound in faith, in charity, in patience. The aged women likewise, that they be in behaviour as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things; that they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed. Young men likewise exhort to be sober minded. In all things shewing thyself a pattern of good works: in doctrine shewing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity, sound speech, that cannot be condemned; that he that is of the contrary part may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say of you.

Let us teach sound doctrine by all means, but let it also inspire us on to teaching godly living:

Hebrews 12:14

Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.

The Undetectable God

What is the biggest problem that we come across when we are witnessing our faith to people? Surely it is the fact that everything we have to say to them is spiritual, and therefore invisible to their senses. They therefore conclude that our religion is just “pie in the sky when you die,” and consequently, they will not listen. They want something tangible.

This problem is not just confined to ignorant people. Many very intelligent people, Oxford professors, think this way as well. They can’t detect God with their senses, nor with any of their sensitive scientific instruments (and they never will be able to), so, they conclude that God is just a delusion in the minds of weak people. And they make lots of money writing popular books on the subject.

Ever since the fall of Adam and Eve, all of us are now bound by nature to the things of time and sense:

Westminster Shorter Catechism Q.19

All mankind, by their fall, lost communion with God^a, are under His wrath^b and curse^c, and so made liable to all the miseries of this life^d, to death itself^e, and to the pains of hell for ever^f.

a Genesis 3:8,24; John 8:34,42,44; Ephesians 2:12, 4:18.

b John 3:36; Romans 1:18; Ephesians 2:3, 5:6.

c Galatians 3:10; Revelation 22:3.

d Genesis 3:16-19; Job 5:7; Ecclesiastes 2:22,23; Romans 8:18-23.

e Ezekiel 18:4; Romans 5:12, 6:23.

f Matthew 25:41,46; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Revelation 14:9-11.

God is a Spirit, and so, whether we are fallen creatures or not, He will never actually be seen or sensed with the senses that we have as created beings:

John 1:18; 1 John 4:12

No man hath seen God at any time.

But before the fall, God was at least detectable by man in some way, and Adam could at least commune with Him and have a relationship with Him. Now He is not. From the fall of Adam to Christ's second coming at the end of time, this will be the situation we will find ourselves in.

But, God has not left man in this situation, although He could have done, if He had wished to do so. He left the fallen angels without any plan to save them, why not men? Just let them fall into hell fire, which is where they all deserve to go. But:

John 3:16

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

So, the wonderful news is that a number that no man can number are going to be saved from the wrath to come through the blood of the Lamb. They are going to be regenerated, given a new heart and a new nature, and restored into communion and fellowship with the living God. Are you one of these people? Pray to God for a new heart, and do not give Him rest until you get it.

How do these people now walk, while they are in this world? They are still in these bodies and consequently still cannot detect God by their natural senses. Yet, they now know in their new hearts that He exists and is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him:

Hebrews 11:6

But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

So they:

2 Corinthians 5:7

Walk by faith, not by sight.

The change that has happened to them is spiritual, and therefore invisible to the naked eye. That's why the world doesn't understand them:

Matthew 13:13

They seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.

But true Christians can still have a problem with the invisibility, the spirituality, of their religion.

Sometimes they can feel that God is not with them. But even Christ in His human body had this problem too, actually. Once. Christ on the cross cried:

Psalms 22:1

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

Christ Himself at that point felt utterly forsaken by His Father, but of course, the Father was actually never more pleased with Him than when He was hanging on the cross making atonement for the sins of His people.

And also, quite often, Christians can think along the lines that surely something about God and about true religion ought to be visible.

Surely, we ought to be baptised by water to be saved? No, baptism is merely a physical picture of the spiritual reality that we need to be baptised by the Holy Spirit, i.e. born again, and have a new heart put within us.

1 Peter 3:21

The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Surely we must have to take the communion to be saved? After all, Christ said:

John 6:53,54

Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.

No, this too is spiritual. We must eat and drink Christ spiritually to be saved:

John 6:58

This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live for ever.

Surely we must have to be a church member to be saved? No, visible churches in this world, like all these visible things, are again only ever a physical picture of the spiritual reality:

Hebrews 12:22,23

But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect.

But what about Old Testament saints. Surely they had to be circumcised to be saved?
No:

Romans 2:28,29

For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.

Surely they had to make animal sacrifices to be saved? No:

Hebrews 10:4,11-14

For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins.... And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: but this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; from henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool. For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.

Surely the Jews had, and still have, a piece of real estate at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea as their true home and Promised Land? No:

Hebrews 11:13-16

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

Hebrews 13:14

For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.

Surely in the Old Testament men had to keep the law to be saved, whereas now in the New we just have to believe in Jesus? No, to be saved to eternal life they had to believe in the Messiah that was to come, in exactly the same way that we have to look to the Messiah that has been:

Romans 3:29,30

Is he the God of the Jews only? is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also: seeing it is one God, which shall justify the circumcision by faith, and uncircumcision through faith.

1 Corinthians 10:1-4

Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and did all eat the same spiritual meat; and did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ.

Galatians 3:8

And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed.

Hebrews 4:2

For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.

So we see that absolutely everything about true religion is, and ever has been, spiritual, and the sooner we learn that, the better.

But did not God ordain all these visible things such as animal sacrifices, the law on tables of stone, the Promised Land, baptism, the Lord's Supper, etc., and did He not give instructions in the Bible as to how to order visible churches?

Yes, that's true. But the reason He did that is because we are always going to need visible representations while we are in this world, exactly because we can't see the spiritual reality. But we must always keep in mind that the visible things are merely physical pictures that point to the spiritual reality, and never the real thing. We should at no time let the picture become more important than the reality.

So, how are we to live our lives? We are to live them in the light of the eternal:

2 Corinthians 4:17-5:1

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal. For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

Colossians 3:1-3

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

Matthew 10:28

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

It is because of the invisibility of everything about our faith that the world will laugh at us, ridicule us, ignore us or even may persecute us. But we should humble ourselves and:

Philippians 2:5-8

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Do we really do this? Or are we still hooked onto the things of this world, outward church appearances and the like, and think that these can be our witness to the world?

1 John 2:15-17

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.

Everything under the sun is vanity:

Ecclesiastes 2:11

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

This is the message we need to get across to others. Many people already know it. Here in China, every day I see many young people on the underground, slumped in their seats, going to work for 12 hours a day, getting on the underground again in the evening to go home, again slumped in their seats (yes, they get a seat, so they must travel a long distance), then they spend all night in their internet cafes gaming, before doing it all again the next day. Regularly there are reports of one of these pathetic creatures throwing themselves out of the window from a high building because they can't face it any more. These people KNOW that "*all is vanity and vexation of spirit.*" We don't have to tell them. But at the same time they refuse to come to an invisible Saviour who is the only one who can help them.

John 5:40

And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life.

We must face eternity. We are only here in this world for a time:

Hebrews 9:27

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

There is nowhere else to go to. The disciples realised this:

John 6:67-69

Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away? Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God.

Let us make sure that we do too.

Psalms 73:25,26

Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.

The Lost Art of Suffering Wrongfully

Acts 26:25

I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness.

I used to work in a hospital, and I often went to the hospital chapel during my tea breaks for some quiet time to read my Bible. However, I had to give up in the end and go elsewhere, because I was so frequently interrupted by patients from the psychiatric ward coming in and disturbing the peace. Many people with psychiatric illnesses are “religious.” Consequently, the world thinks that all “religious” people, even those who have truly been born-again and have the true religion, have got something wrong with them.

Christ and the apostles had to confront this problem as well. On several occasions in the Bible we are told about someone with an unclean spirit who was actually speaking the truth, but because their lives did not reflect godly living, they were told to be quiet as their verbal witness was not in line with their lifestyle, and therefore not a good witness at all:

Mark 1:23,24

And there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, saying, Let us alone; what have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God.

Mark 1:34

And he healed many that were sick of divers diseases, and cast out many devils; and suffered not the devils to speak, because they knew him.

Mark 3:11,12

And unclean spirits, when they saw him, fell down before him, and cried, saying, Thou art the Son of God. And he straightly charged them that they should not make him known.

Mark 5:7,8

And cried with a loud voice, and said, What have I to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of the most high God? I adjure thee by God, that thou torment me not. For he said unto him, Come out of the man, thou unclean spirit.

Acts 16:17,18

The same followed Paul and us, and cried, saying, These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation. And this did she many days. But Paul, being grieved, turned and said to the spirit, I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And he came out the same hour.

This, primarily, is a warning to us all. Our lives should never be at odds with our testimony. Now we have a new heart put within us, we Christians are no longer like the world, indeed we will, and should, be different from the world, and this difference is our witness before men. As soon as we, who profess Christianity, make one mistake, the world will be after us and conclude that our religion is false and that all their psychologists are right. They will instantly dismiss us as having a religious “delusion,” and consequently they won’t listen to us.

But we make mistakes and fall all the time. How can we possibly be a credible witness to those around us? Whenever we give in to our carnal nature and behave like them, they get what they want. As we are sadly doing this all the time, it can truly be said that:

John 7:7

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

However, it is important that we should not let this bother us.

Firstly, let us look positively at how we are to be different from the world:

We are to be sober, children of the day:

1 Thessalonians 5:6-8

Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation.

1 Peter 1:13-16

Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance: but as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy.

1 Peter 4:7

But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer.

1 Peter 5:8

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.

We are to speak and live truth at all times:

John 3:21

But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.

John 8:32

And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

John 14:16-17

And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you.

1 Corinthians 5:8

Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Ephesians 4:25

Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another.

2 John 4

I rejoiced greatly that I found of thy children walking in truth, as we have received a commandment from the Father.

3 John 4

I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.

We are to be genuine and sincere:

Philippians 1:10

That ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ; being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 2:15,16

That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; holding forth the word of life.

Joshua 24:14

Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the LORD.

1 Corinthians 5:8

Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

2 Corinthians 2:17

For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ.

2 Corinthians 8:8

I speak not by commandment, but by occasion of the forwardness of others, and to prove the sincerity of your love.

Ephesians 6:24

Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. Amen.

Titus 2:7,8

In all things shewing thyself a pattern of good works: in doctrine shewing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity, sound speech, that cannot be condemned; that he that is of the contrary part may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say of you.

To sum up, our lives should be lives of (and I love this phrase) “*simplicity and godly sincerity*”:

2 Corinthians 1:12

For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world, and more abundantly to you-ward.

And we should be continually producing the fruit of the Spirit:

Galatians 5:22,23

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.

This is impossible for the natural man. We must be born again:

John 3:3

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

Hebrews 11:6

But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

Our calling as truly born-again believers is to be spiritually minded at all times:

Romans 8:6-8

For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.

Romans 8:13-14

For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.

Our true witness to the world takes place whenever we live according to the Spirit. Whenever we fail, and let the carnal nature take over, the witness is gone. People will see inconsistency in our lives and laugh at us and reject our religion. So it is important to understand the necessity of our living according to the Spirit.

Truly the Christian life is such a high calling:

Philippians 3:13-14

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

However, we are also taught in Scripture that even if we do what is right and obey the Spirit of God in our actions, the world will still hate us. We can't win, in their eyes. Even if we do good works, they will still speak against us as evildoers:

1 Peter 2:12

Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation.

But it is still our witness to the world to do good. If we are to follow Christ, this is exactly what He had to suffer. Unlike any of us, He was sinless, yet the world persecuted Him so much it put Him to death. If we are to follow Him, we can expect no better. We must learn the lost art of suffering wrongfully.

Here is an interesting teaching from Christ:

Matthew 5:38-48

Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: but I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.

If we really do live our lives in the manner suggested here, namely to “resist not evil,” and “Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away,” does not that make the Christian a doormat for everyone else to walk all over? Surely, people will ask us for everything we have, and if we say, “No,” they can point to this passage and say that we are not being a very good Christian. So how should we really behave?

Yes, we should, as Christians, love righteousness and hate wickedness, yet at the same time we are told to love our enemies:

Romans 12:19-21

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

But our enemy has wronged us, and we quite rightly hate wickedness. Yes, but here we are told that we shouldn't fight back but leave vengeance to the Lord.

Christ tells us that we should expect persecution in this world, because we love (and want to do) what's right:

Luke 6:22

Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake.

1 John 3:13

Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you.

John 15:18-20

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

The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also.

So, inevitably, we will suffer wrongfully at the hands of the wicked around us. How are we to live our lives in the light of this?

Firstly, we are to realise that suffering at the hands of men for doing well is acceptable before God:

1 Peter 2:19-20

For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God.

Indeed, it is exactly to such a life that we, as Christians, have been called. Why? Because this is the way Christ went before us, and we should expect no better:

1 Peter 2:21-25

For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously: who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed. For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.

Secondly, everything is under the Lord's providential control, and He won't allow us to become destitute as a result of following Him and doing what is right, so we shouldn't worry about such things, but rather put all our trust in Him:

Matthew 5:25-34

Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they? Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: and yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

Therefore we need to realise that the Christian life is going to be one of suffering wrongfully, we can't avoid it.

We are called to go against every last natural instinct in our bodies. Our natural instincts aim at the preservation of self, the promotion and well-being of self. Modern psychologists assume that this is a good thing, and consequently people won't understand us. Like Festus, they will think we are mad. But actually, this is still the witness we need to be:

Acts 26:24-25

And as he thus spake for himself, Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad. But he said, I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness.

Christ did not defend Himself before Pilate but was silent:

Matthew 27:13,14

Then said Pilate unto him, Hearest thou not how many things they witness against thee? And he answered him to never a word; insomuch that the governor marvelled greatly.

Our unjust persecutions are a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God:

2 Thessalonians 1:4,5

So that we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure: which is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God, that ye may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which ye also suffer.

And our not being terrified by our adversaries is also a witness:

Philippians 1:28

And in nothing terrified by your adversaries: which is to them an evident token of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that of God.

All this is a part of our witness to the world around us. Despite everything, we should continue to follow Christ, love the Lord and trust in Him to keep us to the end, and indeed to judge our enemies in righteousness at the appropriate time:

1 Peter 3:14-17

But and if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled; but sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear: having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ. For it is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing, than for evil doing.

1 Peter 4:12-16,19

Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters. Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him

glorify God on this behalf.... Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator.

Matthew 5:10-12

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

What if I am not One of the Elect?

John 15:16

Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you.

Many people have a problem with the subject of God's electing grace. If salvation is solely dependent upon God's choice of who would be saved and who goes to hell, then, they would argue, that is totally unfair. Surely, God is a fair God, and should give all men an equal opportunity to be saved. They would say that it has to be our decision to follow the Lord or not which makes the difference between the saved and the lost, otherwise a loving God is creating people then sending some of them to hell with never any chance of escape. The thought of God sending some people to hell fire and saving others without any merit on their part, without there being any difference in nature between them and those going to hell, many people, including many professing Christians, would find abhorrent. They would say it is unfair and makes God a monster.

However, that is not true. An incident occurred once which may help to show why God choosing some and not others, is not unfair at all.

My wife's sister came over from China recently, and we had to do the tourist trail. I don't like or recommend doing the tourist trail, but we had to be good hosts, and they wanted to see the sights. One place they wanted to see was the palace at Versailles, just outside Paris. We spent the whole day there, mainly because it took three hours of queuing to get in. It was totally unenjoyable simply because of the number of people. However, at about 4.30pm, we decided we had seen all we wanted to see, and made our way back to the railway station. The problem was that thousands of others decided to do the same thing at the same time.

Once at the station, we had to join a long queue for tickets for the train back to Paris. After about half an hour, however, the staff at the station were so overwhelmed with the number of people, that the decision was made to throw all the gates open and let everybody on the train for free. In the huge surge forward, the phrase "Hillsborough disaster" did cross my mind. Give people something for nothing and they'll all want it. Anyway, we got on the train for free.

But while I was on the train I was thinking about all those who had actually paid for a ticket, before the authorities decided to throw the gates open. I had to admit, if I was one

of them I would have been most aggrieved to find out that I had paid, yet thousands of others got on for nothing. In fact I would have been very angry at the train company. "Why couldn't I get on for free as well?" I would be demanding. This is totally unfair!

But was it really unfair of the train company? No. The people who had paid for their ticket, paid the right amount of money, and received the correct service from the train company. The train company had done nothing wrong to them at all. They hadn't overcharged them, or taken them to the wrong place, they had given them exactly what their ticket contracted them to do, at the correctly advertised price. The fact that a lot of people had got on for nothing was completely irrelevant to the argument about the fairness of the train company to those who had paid for a ticket.

Now, translate this argument to God's dealings with men. What does God do wrong by throwing anyone into hell fire for ever? Nothing. They get exactly what we all justly deserve. If He threw every one of us into hell fire for ever, what would He have done wrong? Nothing. Hell fire for ever is the perfect punishment to fit the crime for the utter sinfulness by nature of every one of us. If God ever gave anyone too much punishment, or inappropriate punishment (like letting them off after only a temporary punishment in a place like the fictional purgatory), now THAT would make God unfair, and consequently a monster, because He would be totally unjust. But the perfect punishment to fit the crime? Of course that is fair and just. Only God knows the heart of every individual, and so only God can judge justly:

Genesis 18:25

Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?

Rather than complaining about God, which people are all too ready to do by nature, the real problem is that we don't see the depth of our absolute, utter sinfulness before a holy God, and don't recognise that hell fire for ever is actually what we all truly deserve.

The reality is that we all need a Saviour because we can't save ourselves. While we are in this world, God has thrown the gates to heaven open. He has provided a Saviour in the Lord Jesus Christ. But we must also be granted repentance and faith by the Lord to put our trust in that Saviour. If we sit around doing nothing, not bothering about our sinful nature other than giving in to it all the time, what do you expect from God? Of course He could rightly eventually drop us into hell fire, the place we all deserve to be for eternity. He would have done nothing wrong in doing so. The fallen angels never had an "opportunity of salvation" after they had fallen, so why should we?

Jude 6

And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day.

The prerogative is always with God as to whether He will save us or not. We can do nothing. But does that mean that we should just sit back and actually do nothing? No. Our sins before a holy God ought to bother us. If they don't bother us, we have a serious problem. We can never be good enough to please the holy God who created us and rules all things by His providence. We must at least recognise this, and be concerned about it, not least because of the fact that we are utterly unable to do anything about it. Such concern is what we need, because it is the only thing that will make us cry to God for mercy. If you have such concern, look up! God may be working in you to bring you to salvation. Cry to Him! Call on Him! He is a merciful God.

John 6:37

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

How many people realise any of this and rush through the gates onto the train to heaven for free? None. People just laugh at such a religion and ignore it, because they are quite happy in their utter sinfulness. This is always going to be our response unless the Lord intervenes and changes our heart. We all deserve to justly reap the wages of sin, and God will have done nothing wrong if we end up in hell fire for ever. But if the Lord sees fit to open the eyes of some people to see their predicament, and enables them to call on Him to have mercy upon them, He will indeed save them by giving them a new heart that is now able to respond to His calling and can now begin to keep His commandments. As well as being a just God, He is also a merciful God. Both His justice and His mercy need to be displayed in order to show the true extent of His glory. One without the other would not do this. He has sent a Saviour into the world to save a certain number from the consequences of their sin by punishing their sin in the Saviour instead, i.e. some people get on the train to heaven for free. Others are left on the train to hell that they have fully paid for by their own sinful ways:

Romans 6:23

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

Which group of people are you in? Only God can tell you. If we are one of the elect, with a free ticket to heaven, and the Lord has delivered us from the wrath to come, how then should we react? Should we be proud, claiming that we are better than those who didn't receive such mercy? God forbid! We are no better than them at all. The only difference is that the Lord has been merciful to us. This should humble us to the dust and give us such a thankful heart for all the benefits that the Lord has showered upon us. Pride has been destroyed. Boasting is excluded. Praise the Lord!

Daniel 4:37

Those that walk in pride he is able to abase.

Romans 3:27

Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith.

If we are not one of the elect, what about us? If there is no hope for us, why not sin all we like? Why not hate God more and more and ridicule true religion? If there is no hope of salvation for us anyway, why not riot to excess? Hang on a minute.

No-one can know whether they are elect or not while they are in an unregenerate state, i.e. neither the elect nor the non-elect can know such a thing without the Lord regenerating them and giving them a new heart. One can only know of one's election after having been regenerated. So someone concerned about whether they are elect or not before regeneration is concerned about the wrong thing, because he can't possibly know such a thing. Knowledge of our election or otherwise is not our warrant for coming to God. The command of the gospel is our only warrant to come to Him. If one is elect, one will respond to the gospel command to repent and believe in Christ, because the Lord will grant the faith and repentance required; if one is not elect, one will never respond to it.

And just because someone on one particular occasion rejects the gospel, this doesn't prove that they will never come. Many of the elect reject the gospel for a time, maybe a long time, but in the end they do respond, so we can never give up hope in this world and say about anyone, "You're not one of the elect, I am not preaching the gospel to you!"

All men, whether elect or not, are commanded to repent and turn to Christ. This is the duty of all men, as it is the only way of salvation, because no man now, since the fall, is able to keep God's holy law. The command is to all men to perform that duty. No man can do this of himself, but needs the Lord to regenerate him, so only the elect will ever respond. But the command is to all men everywhere. To the elect, God will grant the faith and repentance required to keep it. Then they will know their election of God:

1 Thessalonians 1:4

Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God.

To the non-elect, God will never do so, so the non-elect will never fulfil the command, and therefore be justly left in their sins and punished for them. The non-elect can never know in this world whether they are non-elect or not. They are lying if they tell you otherwise. While they are here, they are indistinguishable from the unregenerate elect, of whom it is said:

Ephesians 2:2-3

In time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.

The non-elect only find out they are non-elect when they arrive in hell fire, and then it will be too late to cry for any kind of mercy from the Lord.

The only thing any of us, elect or non-elect, can do now, today, is to cry to Him for mercy whilst we still have life and breath in this world. He may not answer, we may never be given the inclination to do this. He does not have to answer and will not have done anything wrong if He doesn't answer, but this is the only hope any of us has:

Zephaniah 2:3

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

Matthew 25:46

And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.

2 Thessalonians 2:13

But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth.

The End does Not Justify the Means

I want to start this article, uncharacteristically, by giving an example from football.

There was once an occasion in the World Cup when Argentina played England, and Argentina won 2-1. It became clear on the television replay, that in the process of scoring the first Argentinian goal, the goal-scorer handled the ball. However, the referee didn't see it and the goal was allowed. Afterwards, the goal scorer admitted he handled the ball by calling it "the Hand of God." If he's reading this, I'd like to tell him, GOD DOESN'T CHEAT.

Now, the reason I'm using that example is to show one of the most important differences between Protestant Christianity and most other religions. To that goal-scorer, having the goal accepted by the referee was far more important than how he did it, namely by handling the ball where the referee couldn't see it and not telling him what he'd done. In other words, the end was far more important than the means. And most religions would hold to that way of thinking.

Some Muslims (thankfully not many) think that the glory of Allah is served in silencing unbelievers. So they strap bombs to themselves and set them off in public places, trying to kill as many unbelievers as possible, really believing they have glorified Allah by doing that. The end (of silencing as many unbelievers as possible) has been achieved, and they have simply been martyred in the process to go to a far better place. They think they know what Allah wants, they think they know the end, the means whereby they achieve that end, by killing and maiming, doesn't matter to them, it's irrelevant.

Roman Catholics have as their end the glory of the pope and their church. At one time they thought it was just and right to burn Protestants at the stake because they were opposing their glorious church. Again, they thought the end, silencing Protestants, outshone the means by which they did it, by killing them.

I know that most muslims and most Roman Catholics today would never dream of doing such things as this. But the fact remains that a fundamental part of both religions is the philosophy that the end justifies the means. They can cheat, lie, steal and kill, as long as the glory of Allah, or the pope, is in their mind upheld. That is not the way we should behave.

In Protestant Christianity, it's all the other way around. The means are far, far more important than the end. We must not cheat, lie, steal or kill. We must not sin. God has given us a moral law to live by, which is summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments. That is our rule of life. And the fact is that, most of the time, we don't know the end God has in mind anyway, we don't know what God wants to bring to pass, we leave the end to God. We just stick to the means, keeping the Commandments, and rest in the fact that whatever comes to pass is in God's hands and is always to His own glory.

We all need to get away from living for ourselves in this world. It is a wretched condition we are born into by nature. We need to see the far, far bigger picture, and love God and want to see Him glorified in all things, regardless of our own personal circumstances.

Psalm 86:12

I will praise thee, O Lord my God, with all my heart: and I will glorify thy name for evermore.

Isaiah 24:15

Wherefore glorify ye the Lord in the fires, even the name of the Lord God of Israel in the isles of the sea.

John 13:31-32

Therefore, when he was gone out, Jesus said, Now is the Son of man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God be glorified in him, God shall also glorify him in himself, and shall straightway glorify him.

John 21:18-19

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not. This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me.

Romans 15:5-6

Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus: That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Romans 15:9

And that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy; as it is written, For this cause I will confess to thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name.

1 Corinthians 6:20

For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's.

2 Corinthians 9:13

Whiles by the experiment of this ministration they glorify God for your professed subjection unto the gospel of Christ, and for your liberal distribution unto them, and unto all men.

1 Peter 2:12

Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation.

1 Peter 4:16

Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.

Matthew 16:24-26

Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?

Romans 11:36

For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.

Our chief end, the reason why we're all here, whether we know it or not, is to glorify God:

The Westminster Larger Catechism Q.1.

Q. What is the chief and highest end of man?

A. Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God^a, and fully to enjoy Him forever^b.

a Romans 11:36; 1 Corinthians 6:20; 1 Corinthians 10:31; Psalm 86:9,12.

b Psalm 73:24-28; John 17:21-23; Psalm 16:5-11; Revelation 21:3-4.

We should long to glorify God more than anything else. But most of the time we don't know what God actually wants. But we do know how He has asked us to live, and we must just stick to that, and leave everything else to God.

Here's a Biblical example, which in fact is unusual in that Abraham did actually know what God wanted. Abraham was promised that he would have a child:

Genesis 12:1,2

Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing.

Genesis 13:16

And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth: so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered.

Genesis 15:3-5

And Abram said, Behold, to me thou hast given no seed: and, lo, one born in my house is mine heir. And, behold, the word of the Lord came unto him, saying, This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir. And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be.

This promise was a glorious end in view for Abraham and his wife Sarah, not least because of the fact that one day, many generations later, the Saviour would be born through that promised child's line. However, Sarah could not ordinarily have children. For years and years she was barren, and now she was past child-bearing age. So she concocted what she thought to be a way of Abraham having the child God had promised:

Genesis 16:1-3

Now Sarai Abram's wife bare him no children: and she had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the Lord hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai. And Sarai Abram's wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife.

Sarah had a good end in view, namely the child God had promised Abraham many years before. She knew that was the end God wanted. But she tried to take things into her own

hands. Was the means that God would use really going to be through an adulterous union with Hagar the servant girl? God forbid! The point is that God would NEVER ask us to use unlawful means to achieve the end He wants to achieve.

This is the difference between real Christianity and any false religion. True Christians always make sure they keep the commandments, and leave the achieving of the right end to the Lord to bring about in His overarching providence. This is why it is so important to believe in the providence of God, and not to pretend that we know what God has in mind as an end:

Colossians 1:17

He is before all things, and by him all things consist.

True Christians do not try to force an end to come about by their own means, because we usually don't know what God's end is. Abraham was an exception here.

Who would have thought that the death of Christ would be what God wanted? We know now that without it, there would be no salvation for the Lord's people. But we would never have thought that that was the way God intended to do it at the time. The people who killed Him will still be punished according to their own sin:

Acts 2:23-24

Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it.

Any time we think we know what God wants, and try to force it to come about by our own efforts, we will invariably end up doing something stupid. True Christians leave the end to God, and concentrate on making sure they don't sin. We are just unprofitable servants:

Luke 17:10

So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.

What servant should have to know **why** his master has told him to do something before he does it? The master *may* tell him, but there is no obligation on his part to do so. Our duty is to do what we are told in all the circumstance of providence that come our way. And what we are told to do is summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments.

Many times we may be put into a dilemma (in the Lord's providence) whereby it would be so easy to sin, for example if someone, such as the government, tries to force us to sin or risk heavy consequences. In such circumstances it is always the right thing to do to not sin. If that means imprisonment or death or some other kind of totally unjust punishment, then so be it. In such a case, that is the way the Lord wants us to glorify Him. Of course this is easier said than done if we find ourselves in such a circumstance, but nevertheless, to not sin is always the right thing to do. Our job is to make sure we do not sin. Only then we need not fear the Lord's blessing on our actions.

Let us hate sin with all our heart, and never let a supposed end justify the means:

Psalms 119:11

Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.

Psalm 129:97

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

John 14:15

If ye love me, keep my commandments.

Spiritual Growth

We all know that the Bible gives us specific instructions on how to build up and run an outward manifestation of the church:

1 Timothy 3:14,15

These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly: But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.

There are many different ideas as to the interpretation of what the Bible teaches on these things, and men disagree with each other profoundly. For example, some think that the Presbyterian church system is the Biblical one, others think that we should be Congregational, or Baptist, or more like the Brethren churches.... er.... sorry, assemblies. Whichever one is the true Biblical outward pattern for the church (and there is only one true interpretation of Scripture), even though men disagree, we all must still agree that the Bible does speak about this matter, and so it can't be unimportant.

We also know, as true believers, that we need spiritual food to grow in the faith:

1 Peter 2:2

As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby.

We all differ as to what food we think necessary, but nevertheless, whatever we think, the fact remains that we need the good nutrition of the Word of God. It is vital for our spiritual health. True believers have also been given the Holy Spirit to lead them into the truth whenever they read the Scriptures. Spiritual growth is vital to our sanctification, and so this too can't be unimportant.

Hebrews 5:13,14

For everyone that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

So the question arises: Is it more important to be in a church where the outward pattern is Biblical but the spiritual food is wanting, or to be in a church where the outward pattern is not completely Biblical but the spiritual food is excellent?

This is particularly a dilemma in the modern age, where we have so many different Christian denominations, and we are all free to choose which one we attend on a regular basis.

There are many, many people who fully believe that the church they are attending has the correct Biblical pattern, and they will not leave for anything (whether they were born into the church or whether they have come into it at a later point is not an issue here). They will not leave, even if, just up the road there is another church belonging to another denomination, with far more spiritual food available, where they would grow in the faith a lot, lot more.

Of course the opposite extreme is that we should just follow the best preachers all the time, no matter what the church organisation. This is idol worship. Even the best of communicators of the Word are fallible and can teach wrong things. We must pray for the spirit of discernment wherever we go.

Spiritual growth is the most important thing that the Christian needs, and he should be thirsty for it. We all need to:

2 Peter 3:18

....grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Because no church is perfect, and indeed no preacher is perfect, our condition in this world is that we will always be foraging for our spiritual food, which we can only find ultimately in Christ:

John 10:9

I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.

Where can Christ be found today? In good teaching, yes, but also in good spiritual fellowship with other true believers. We need to weigh things up, wherever the Lord has placed us in this world. If we can find all these things in one particular congregation, then fine. Otherwise, we may need to move around a bit to find good pasture. Does this mean an outward Biblical pattern for the church is not important? No, it is there in the Bible. But our spiritual growth is by far the most important thing to us, and this can only be found if each one of us seriously asks the Lord to guide us into where we ought to be going to church, what we ought to be doing for the Lord, and who we can have true Christian fellowship with. With each one of us this will be different, depending on the situation the Lord has put us in.

Outward form is important, but far more important is our inward, spiritual life. If this is being starved due to lack of good teaching or fellowship, we need to do something about it and move on.

Hebrews 13:9

Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines. For it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace; not with meats, which have not profited them that have been occupied therein.

Romans 2:28,29

For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.

The Guidance of the Holy Spirit

Not unlike today, the church in Corinth in Paul's day were dividing into factions:

1 Corinthians 1:10-13

Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul.

Our situation today however is far worse than that of Corinth. At least in Corinth there was still one visible Christian church:

1 Corinthians 1:2

Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours....

In our day we have many visible churches, all of which have absolutely no connection with each other. And one can begin to understand why. After having been involved with several of them, it is obvious that they are separate because they just can't work together. Each of them have their own cosy way of doing things, and nothing and no-one can change them (humanly speaking, of course).

What a terrible situation! How can the Christian church be effective in its witness to the world if this is the case? We should never cease to be amazed at how genuine, true believers – who are collectively the one body of Christ – can become, over time since their conversion, so different from one another, all of them believing that they are growing in the faith, and that the others are not.

We all know that there are hypocrites in the church, i.e. people who have never been born again, have never had a new heart put within them, and who therefore are not the Lord's true people. And many are in high places in the church. Christ warns us of these:

Matthew 7:21-23

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils?

and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

But we have gone far beyond the right understanding of this phenomenon, and decided for ourselves that many who are truly born-again are really not, and we exclude them, or at least marginalise them, from our fellowships because they are not like us. Five-point Calvinist churches think they are so superior to all the others and look down on the rest for their inferior understanding of theology. Pentecostal churches look down on all the rest because they don't speak in tongues, and so cannot possibly have been filled with the Holy Spirit. Brethren assemblies think they are so superior because they alone have the New Testament outward pattern for the church. All these profess to be Christian, and indeed can be mainly populated by true, genuine believers, but their vision of the body of Christ is so limited. How can their attitude ever be called a Christian one?

We are talking about real, true believers that can so easily get caught up in such things. We are not speaking here of the hypocrites who we will always have with us. Paul found this problem:

Galatians 2:11-13

But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation.

A false teaching was coming in, and even the apostles were succumbing to it. James was totally convinced of it, because we're told these false teachers "came from James." Barnabas was "carried away with their dissimulation" for a time. And even Peter "was to be blamed." How can this be? Surely true believers – especially apostles – have the Holy Spirit within them to lead them into all truth:

John 16:13

Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come.

The above passage is often thought of as referring to all believers, but it was only actually spoken by Christ to the apostles, and only refers to them. But even so, this did not stop even Peter and James, who were apostles, still being led astray for a time by false doctrine.

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.

This verse does apply to all believers, and so we see that all of us should be able to discern the truth clearly to some degree, because we all have the Holy Spirit within us to guide us. But we still see so many true believers being led astray by what they are convinced is the Holy Spirit, yet it is not.

I knew an old lady who doesn't believe in hell, yet if you challenge her, she will say "The Holy Spirit has told me this." How can we argue against that?! I heard a lady on television once say, "I really felt the Holy Spirit moving in the studio when that music was played." The tune referred to was an instrumental with no words. Yet we are clearly told in Scripture, with regards the Holy Spirit:

John 16:8

And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.

A tune with no words can stir us emotionally, but it can never reprove the world of anything.

I have no reason to suspect that either of these ladies is not born-again, I can't presume that. In other respects they are good Christians, but in the end, we find it very difficult, if not impossible, to work with such people because of their completely different understanding of how they have been guided by the Holy Spirit.

Oftentimes we true believers can be led into by-path meadow. Of course the Lord allows this for a time to teach us things – no experience is useless in the life of a Christian. But we should be aware of how easy it is even for mature Christians to be led astray. We need constantly to keep close to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who uses the Word of God as His main instrument, and make doubly sure we are not being led astray by other things – our own feelings, the teachings of a powerful, persuasive human being, and so on. In every decision we need to make, we should be so very careful that it is the Lord who is leading us, and not something or someone else.

Let us all stay close to Him and His Word, and not be led astray by anything. This involves true humility of mind.

Proverbs 3:5,6

Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.

Rejoice in the Lord

There are many exhortations in Scripture to rejoice in the Lord, particularly such passages as:

Philippians 3:1

Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not grievous, but for you it is safe.

Philippians 3:4

Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice.

1 Thessalonians 5:16

Rejoice evermore.

However, most sermons I have heard on this subject are very vague about why we should rejoice, and most end up being no more than a simple positive thinking exercise, telling us that we ought not to be negative, but rather accentuate the positive and be happy.

Such a sermon is of absolutely no use to anyone. By nature all of us are born in sin:

Psalm 51:5

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

Ephesians 2:1-3

And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.

As a result of this, nobody can ever have anything to truly rejoice about at all in this world:

Ecclesiastes 1:2

Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.

1 Corinthians 15:19

If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.

James 4:14

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

For any of us to have anything to rejoice in at all, we need to have an eternal hope, not just one for this world. Yet so many people all around us are quite happy here, living their cosy little lives. And when the Lord intervenes with a sore trial, such as a family death or what we term a “natural disaster,” rather than turning to the Lord, they turn away from Him and hate Him even more:

Amos 4:6-12

And I also have given you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and want of bread in all your places: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the Lord. And also I have withholden the rain from you, when there were yet three months to the harvest: and I caused it to rain upon one city, and caused it not to rain upon another city: one piece was rained upon, and the piece whereupon it rained not withered. So two or three cities wandered unto one city, to drink water; but they were not satisfied: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the Lord. I have smitten you with blasting and mildew: when your gardens and your vineyards and your fig trees and your olive trees increased, the palmerworm devoured them: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the Lord. I have sent among you the pestilence after the manner of Egypt: your young men have I slain with the sword, and have taken away your horses; and I have made the stink of your camps to come up unto your nostrils: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the Lord. I have overthrown some of you, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and ye were as a firebrand plucked out of the burning:

yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the Lord. Therefore thus will I do unto thee, O Israel: and because I will do this unto thee, prepare to meet thy God, O Israel.

It actually takes a lot of will power and positive thinking to turn away from God, but this is exactly what the world wants to do, and they would rather listen to sermons and encouragements to think positively about themselves, than messages telling them that they are sinners in need of a Saviour.

We can't just try to whip up rejoicing outwardly, when there is no inner motive for doing so in our hearts. In the end it won't work, and, no matter how much of a show we are able to put on for others, we will fail in ourselves eventually. In order to truly rejoice, we need a sure, concrete reason for rejoicing, deep within our hearts and minds. And only true believers have this in the Lord.

The Bible mentions two sure reasons, which give true believers the motivation to rejoice continually. The first one is the knowledge of their own personal salvation:

Matthew 5:12

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

Luke 6:23

Rejoice ye in that day, and leap for joy: for, behold, your reward is great in heaven: for in the like manner did their fathers unto the prophets.

Luke 10:20

Notwithstanding in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven.

Acts 2:26

Therefore did my heart rejoice, and my tongue was glad; moreover also my flesh shall rest in hope.

Romans 5:2

By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

1 Peter 1:6,8

Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations.... Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.

1 Peter 4:13

But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.

Do you have the full assurance of hope in your heart that you personally are saved to eternal life? Pray and pray again until you have this, because it is most certainly attainable, but only from the Lord.

Isaiah 32:17

And the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever.

Colossians 2:2

That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ.

1 Thessalonians 1:5

For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake.

Hebrews 6:11

And we desire that every one of you do shew the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end.

Hebrews 10:22

Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.

2 Peter 1:10

Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall.

The second sure reason that the Bible gives the Christian for rejoicing, is God's upholding all things in His providence.

There is a very popular (but false) teaching around which speaks of God being in control of some of the world, with Satan in control of the rest, both of them battling it out for overall control – although we who have read the Bible know that God wins in the end. This is a terribly wrong way of thinking. Let there be no mistake: God is in control of all things in His over-arching providence, yes, even over all the sins of men.

Job 1:12

And the Lord said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand. So Satan went forth from the presence of the Lord.

Job 2:6

And the Lord said unto Satan, Behold, he is in thine hand; but save his life.

Acts 2:23

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

Genesis 50:20

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

To begin to think of the fact that God is in control of all things, despite the trials we all go through and all the sin that is in the world, is another sure source for our rejoicing in Him:

Romans 8:28

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

So, Christian, for these reasons we can exercise the spiritual fruit of joy, which the world cannot have. Exhortations to rejoice in the Bible are so much more than merely an exercise in positive thinking, but rather they are there because true Christians have a sure hope of eternal life that can never be taken away from them. Hallelujah!

2 Timothy 2:19

Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.

Cry to God for Mercy

The other day I came home from church praying for real Christian fellowship. It is few and far between. Even though we go to church every week and mix with others of supposedly like mind, church can be a very lonely place. Anyway, I am sure that sometimes the Lord has a sense of humour, because just after praying this prayer, I had a knock on the door, and there stood two Jehovah's Witnesses.

The lady then started her aggressive evangelism, as they usually do, not letting me get a word in edgeways. This should be a lesson to us all that when we evangelise, we should actually listen to others, and be willing to respond to them, rather than just going through a pre-planned speech. Anyway, she then suddenly asked me, "How do you think we can obtain eternal life?" Now, I knew that whatever I said, she would ignore it and tell me what she thought regardless, but what an opportunity! Such opportunities don't come along very often, and when they do, we are usually taken aback and suddenly become tongue-tied, not being able to find the words to say.

On another occasion, I was in church, and a visitor came and sat in the seat behind me. After the service, one of the elders came up to him to ask the usual questions, "Are you on holiday? Where are you from?" and so on. He didn't respond, but just took a deep sigh and said from the heart, "How can I be born again?" What another wonderful opportunity! Such occasions are so very rare. The elder, just like me with the Jehovah's Witnesses, was so taken aback, he just waffled, he couldn't find the words to say either.

In response to the JW lady, I said that we need to repent and turn to Christ, to which, to my consternation, she agreed! What she meant by that statement and what I meant, were two completely different things. Anyway, after the Jehovah's Witnesses had gone, I felt my complete inadequacy, and racked my brains as to what I should have said. I came to the conclusion that in both the above situations, whether the enquirer is genuine as in the case of the man in church, or whether not, as in the case of the JW's, the answer must always be: ***Cry to God for mercy.***

This statement would immediately imply that we can't save ourselves, we need a Saviour outside of ourselves, our own efforts are worthless, and that we need mercy, lest a worse thing come upon us. The openings this answer could then lead to are immense.

So next time, I will have a bit more of an idea as to what to say. May the Lord grant such occasions again. In the meantime, as it was the Lord who brought those JW's across my path, I can at least pray for them, even if I never see them again. Who knows how much their hearts will be disturbed, and maybe opened, by the Lord as a result of them being prayed for!

Luke 18:13

God be merciful to me a sinner.

The Loneliness of the Serious Christian

We are such base, worldly creatures, aren't we? The other day I spent far too long watching television. Then the day after, I was in my local supermarket. While my wife went to fight with others over the contents of the reduced items shelf, I stood there with the trolley looking at all the other people around me. They were full of themselves, their own little lives, walking:

Ephesians 4:17-19

...in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.

And then, I realised that I myself couldn't concentrate. I could only think for a few seconds before images from last night's television came popping up in front of my eyes all the time. I had become just like them, my mind filling with this-worldly garbage, of no consequence and no use whatsoever. Of course, I should have realised this would happen, because this is what I too was like all the time before my regeneration by the Holy Spirit:

Ephesians 2:1-3

And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.

So I realised how important it is to stay close to the Word of God. Only by the Word of God can we be sanctified, i.e. set apart from the ways and thoughts of this world unto a far far better life:

John 17:17

Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

We need to be set apart in this manner so we can begin to be Christ-like in our walk in this world. Only then can we produce fruit worthy of our calling:

Colossians 1:9-10

....to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God.

But this experience begs the question, What is the church to do? If we have services with hour-long Bible-based sermons – which would suit nicely the more mature Christians – then the people who only have an attention span of a few seconds will be driven away. But on the other hand if we dumb down the church to try to appeal to all these people with attention deficit syndrome, then no-one in the church will ever grow in the faith at all.

Sadly, the church of this modern age tends to the latter of the two extremes. Hence, for anyone who really loves the Lord and wants to grow in the faith, it is a lonely time. We love the Lord, and want to grow in the truth. We ideally want to attend a church where the sermons stick close to the Biblical text, the truth is taught in all seriousness, and the people genuinely love one another. But such churches hardly exist. The modern-day Christian has to forage for his food daily, wherever he can find it. In the end of course, this can only be found in Christ, not in any one human institution:

John 10:9

I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.

So how do we reach out to all these people living their lives oblivious to the reality of the impending judgment coming upon the whole world because of our wretched, sinful human condition? Well, the very last thing we should do is try to laugh and joke our way into their hearts. The subject is far too serious for that. Did Christ do that? Of course not. Most sermons these days seem to be a cross between a cosy little chat and a comedy routine. That's not going to impress anything on anyone. They will just laugh back at us and carry on their pathetic lifestyles. No, a genuine and serious demeanour is the very witness we need to be in this world. We need to be genuine, i.e. not putting on a show like all the rest, and we need to be serious, because after all, the subjects of God and eternity are deadly serious. But who is willing to witness for Christ in this manner today?

1 Thessalonians 5:6

Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober.

Titus 2:1-8

But speak thou the things which become sound doctrine: That the aged men be sober, grave, temperate, sound in faith, in charity, in patience. The aged women likewise, that they be in behaviour as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things; that they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed. Young men likewise exhort to be sober minded. In all things shewing thyself a pattern of good works: in doctrine shewing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity, sound speech, that cannot be

condemned; that he that is of the contrary part may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say of you.

Prayer Changes Things

Prayer for the Christian is the most wonderful thing imaginable. The concept that we miserable creatures can have a real, living relationship with the one true living God who not only created us in the first place, but upholds and arranges all things in His providence, is quite overwhelming. Why should the Almighty, ever-living God bother with each and every one of us? We're not only tiny, but we're sinful creatures, continually letting Him down. But He still encourages us to pray to Him. To cast all our care upon Him. What a great comfort it is to know God cares for His people and listens to them:

Psalms 34:15

The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears are open unto their cry.

Atheists have no such concept as prayer at all. They think they can sort everything out by themselves without God. They're welcome to try, but they won't get very far. And to every other religion in the world, prayer is no more than simple recitation. Set words, maybe with set actions, in an empty ritual. No real, living communication at all. That is so sad. To see otherwise devout people going through the motions of some ritual they have learned, and thinking that some deity, somewhere, is somehow impressed with it.

And the saddest thing of all is that there are so many people who call themselves Christian who have exactly the same attitude to prayer. Mechanically going through their church's liturgy without thinking, believing that it's pleasing to God. Merely reciting the Lord's Prayer superstitiously, thinking that's real prayer, and it isn't. The Lord's Prayer was only given as a template for real prayer using our own words:

Matthew 6:9

After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven....

But even many true Christians, with a proper attitude to prayer still don't quite understand what it's all about. We often hear the phrase, "Prayer changes things," but do we really think about what that phrase actually means?

When we use this phrase, we usually mean that the ever-living, almighty God, Lord of heaven and earth, will actually change His mind about something if we pray about it hard enough and persuade Him differently. What a terrible thing to believe!

God ordains all things to His greatest glory, and has ordained exactly what will happen from the foundation of the world. We can't possibly change His mind on anything, because He knows exactly what He is going to do in every situation. He doesn't need us to tell Him what to do. In any case, we have absolutely no idea, in any particular circumstance, what the best thing to do is anyway, even though we might think we do.

And of course, we have the confidence to know that the Lord always does what's best for His people:

Romans 8:28

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

If God did change His mind every time someone prayed, what a terrible life this would be. Everything would depend on who prays the hardest, I suppose. If even one thing in this world depended on us, we would become so proud and arrogant about ourselves and our own ability to influence God.

God cannot and does not repent:

Numbers 23:19

God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?

There are places in Scripture where it is said that God repented. If you want a list of them, here they are:

Genesis 6:6

And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart.

Exodus 32:14

And the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people.

Judges 2:18

It repented the LORD because of their groanings by reason of them that oppressed them and vexed them.

1 Samuel 15:35

The LORD repented that he had made Saul king over Israel.

2 Samuel 24:6

And when the angel stretched out his hand upon Jerusalem to destroy it, the LORD repented him of the evil, and said to the angel that destroyed the people, It is enough: stay now thine hand.

1 Chronicles 21:15

And God sent an angel unto Jerusalem to destroy it: and as he was destroying, the LORD beheld, and he repented him of the evil, and said to the angel that destroyed, It is enough, stay now thine hand.

Psalms 106:45

And he remembered for them his covenant, and repented according to the multitude of his mercies.

Jeremiah 15:6

Thou hast forsaken me, saith the LORD, thou art gone backward: therefore will I stretch out my hand against thee, and destroy thee; I am weary with repenting.

Jeremiah 26:19

Did Hezekiah king of Judah and all Judah put him at all to death? did he not fear the LORD, and besought the LORD, and the LORD repented him of the evil which he had pronounced against them?

Hosea 11:8

How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee, Israel? how shall I make thee as Admah? how shall I set thee as Zeboim? mine heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together.

Joel 2:13

And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil.

Amos 7:3

The LORD repented for this: It shall not be, saith the LORD.

Amos 7:6

The LORD repented for this: This also shall not be, saith the Lord GOD.

Jonah 3:10

And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.

In all these cases, God is not changing His mind. Neither is He acknowledging a mistake and correcting Himself. He is always in control of what is going to happen. The word “*repent*” is used in these passages simply to try to accommodate us. For example, God may see certain people repent, so it is said that He “*repents*” from the punishment He would have given them if they had not repented. But He knew they were going to repent anyway. Or God sees the wickedness in men, and it is said that God “*repented*” that He made them, but His making them was never a mistake. In every case, He knows full well what’s going on, because He planned everything that was going to happen in the first place.

So, we must understand that God is not at our beck and call, every time we decide to pray for something. That’s not how prayer works at all.

God always knows what is best, and we don’t. Let us start there. We can’t change His mind in any way, and it would be a terrible thing if we could. We need to change our way of thinking, God never needs to change His. And this is the key to what prayer actually is.

Prayer does change things. But it is never God’s mind that is changed as to what He intends to do. The sole purpose of prayer is to change us. It changes our minds, from what we think is right, into an understanding of what God knows is right.

To better illustrate this, let’s take an example. Let’s suppose that Aunt Bessie is sick and in a hospital bed. We pray for her recovery. That’s the right thing to do. It’s good to do that. It’s right to pray for the saving of life, that’s the essence of the sixth commandment.

But, after we have been praying for some time about Aunt Bessie, let us suppose that God sees fit to take her away, and she dies. What do we think then? Well, there are one of two attitudes we could take:

We could shake our fist in God's face and say, "I hate you God, for taking her away. You can't answer prayer."

Or, we could say,

Luke 22:42

Not my will, but thine, be done.

Job 1:21

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

The Christian's attitude should be the latter, in which case, we are having our minds changed away from our own will, to fit in with the will of God.

And that is exactly what God wants us to learn to do. That is exactly why God ordained prayer in the first place. Prayer is a mechanism which God has given us to wean us off desiring our own will all the time, and to get us into line with His will. Only then can we truly understand Christ when He said:

John 14:13

And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

John sums it up clearly:

1 John 5:14,15

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

The more we come to understand the Lord's will, and learn to accept it in every circumstance, the more set apart for His work we can become. This is the Christian life.

1 Thessalonians 4:3

For this is the will of God, even your sanctification.

Reluctant Workers

We've become a Christian. We've repented of our sin, and turned to Jesus Christ as our only hope of salvation from the wrath to come. And He has heard our cry, come in to our

hearts and fundamentally changed us from the inside. We're no longer what we used to be. We're altogether new creatures. And we're sure of it.

2 Corinthians 5:17

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

We now have many new desires that we never used to have. We now hate evil:

Proverbs 8:13

The fear of the Lord is to hate evil: pride, and arrogancy, and the evil way, and the froward mouth, do I hate.

We now love righteousness:

Psalms 119:97

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

And we now hate ourselves for always falling short of what we ought to be:

Psalms 119:5

O that my ways were directed to keep thy statutes!

One of the new desires that we're given, is that we want to obey the Lord. The Lord has put an earnest desire in our hearts to please Him. We'll want to do anything for Him. Isaiah had this desire when the Lord called him:

Isaiah 6:8

Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me.

It's good to have this desire in our hearts to go wherever the Lord sends us. We ought to be ready and willing to go anywhere. Although Isaiah's job of calling people to return to the Lord wouldn't quite go the way he thought it would, because at that time it was the Lord's plan to close the people's eyes and ears by his preaching, not open them:

Isaiah 6:9-12

And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed. Then said I, Lord, how long? And he answered, Until the cities be wasted without inhabitant, and the houses without man, and the land be utterly desolate, And the Lord have removed men far away, and there be a great forsaking in the midst of the land.

The Bible tells us:

Ephesians 2:8-10

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

Our salvation is all of grace, we do nothing to deserve it. But we aren't saved to sit back and do nothing. All of us have work to do that the Lord has already ordained for us. So first of all, we need to know what our individual calling is. And we find that out through providence and prayer. Then we need to do it. That's where it gets tricky.

As we read our Bibles, we see that we're not the only ones with a problem here.

In Genesis 11, we read that Terah, Abram's father, left Ur of the Chaldees to take the whole family to Canaan. But they only got halfway and settled down in Haran instead:

Genesis 11:31

And Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran his son's son, and Sarai his daughter in law, his son Abram's wife; and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan; and they came unto Haran, and dwelt there.

They all stayed in Haran until Terah died. Then the Lord came to Abram to tell him to leave his extended family and go to a land He would show him:

Genesis 12:1-3

Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.

But notice it says "*the Lord **had said** unto Abram....*" In other words, the Lord had told him all this before, way back in Ur of the Chaldees, where they'd started from. This was the second occasion God spoke to him, now in Haran. I suggest that the reason the family decided to go to Canaan in the first place was because God had already told Abram to go there, but he'd disobeyed, he'd delayed. So Terah, his father, took things into his own hands and uprooted the whole family with the intention of going to Canaan all together, thinking he was obeying the Lord's call to Abram, but he wasn't. God specifically told Abram to go to Canaan without his family, and he hadn't obeyed. His whole family was now coming with him instead.

After Terah died in Haran, the Lord appeared a second time to Abram, and told him again to leave his family and go. Even then he didn't obey fully, because he took his nephew Lot with him, as well as a load of worldly possessions:

Genesis 12:5

And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran; and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came.

And if we read the story further, the amount of possessions they took with them became a cause of dissension and separation from Lot, who ended up dwelling in Sodom.

Simple obedience to the Lord's calling is more difficult for us than we think, because, like Abram, we all have baggage. In Abram's case, and many of our own cases, separation from family and possessions is the most difficult problem. But the Lord wouldn't let Abram obey on his own terms, it had to be on the Lord's terms. And eventually, the Lord

Himself separated Abram from both his extended family and at least half of his possessions, so he could fulfil his calling.

We find the same with Moses. He was a shepherd in the back side of the desert, when he came across the strange sight of a bush burning without being consumed. As he went to look closer, the Lord spoke to him:

Exodus 3:7,8,10

And the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians.... Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt.

But Moses immediately reacted against this calling and started making excuse after excuse to try to get out of it. And the Lord gave him plenty of signs to prove this was indeed what the Lord was calling him to do:

Exodus 3:11-12

And Moses said unto God, Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt? And he said, Certainly I will be with thee; and this shall be a token unto thee, that I have sent thee: When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain.

Exodus 3:13-14

And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them? And God said unto Moses, I Am that I Am: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I Am hath sent me unto you.

Exodus 4:1-5

And Moses answered and said, But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice: for they will say, The Lord hath not appeared unto thee. And the Lord said unto him, What is that in thine hand? And he said, A rod. And he said, Cast it on the ground. And he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from before it. And the Lord said unto Moses, Put forth thine hand, and take it by the tail. And he put forth his hand, and caught it, and it became a rod in his hand: That they may believe that the Lord God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath appeared unto thee.

Exodus 4:6-8

And the Lord said furthermore unto him, Put now thine hand into thy bosom. And he put his hand into his bosom: and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous as snow. And he said, Put thine hand into thy bosom again. And he put his hand into his bosom again; and plucked it out of his bosom, and, behold, it was turned again as his other flesh. And it shall come to pass, if they will not believe thee, neither hearken to the voice of the first sign, that they will believe the voice of the latter sign.

Exodus 4:9

And it shall come to pass, if they will not believe also these two signs, neither hearken unto thy voice, that thou shalt take of the water of the river, and pour it upon the dry land: and the water which thou takest out of the river shall become blood upon the dry land.

How many more signs did Moses need? Finally, he just told the Lord to send somebody else:

Exodus 4:10,13

And Moses said unto the Lord, O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant: but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue.... And he said, O my Lord, send, I pray thee, by the hand of him whom thou wilt send.

This was probably the truth. He was slow of speech and of a slow tongue. His elder brother Aaron was naturally a lot better at public speaking than he was. The Lord said so Himself:

Exodus 4:14

....Is not Aaron the Levite your brother? I know that he can speak well....

The Lord was so gracious to Moses in that, although He was angry with him for not obeying, He allowed Aaron to be his mouthpiece, but only to the people, not to Pharaoh:

Exodus 4:16

And he shall be thy spokesman unto the people: and he shall be, even he shall be to thee instead of a mouth, and thou shalt be to him instead of God.

And even when the Lord also graciously allowed Aaron to go in with Moses to meet with Pharaoh himself, we read nothing of Aaron actually saying anything to him. He goes in with Moses and waves his rod a few times, but that's about it. As plague after plague comes along, Moses gets bolder and bolder before Pharaoh, as Aaron, in the narrative, disappears more and more into the background.

The calling of Moses teaches us that we shouldn't look to any natural talents we have when we're trying to discern the Lord's will. We must rely on spiritual gifts alone, gifts given by the Holy Spirit individually to the Lord's people for the specific purpose of doing what He has called them to do. The Lord rebuked Moses for still seeing things from a human perspective:

Exodus 4:11-12

And the Lord said unto him, Who hath made man's mouth? or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I the Lord? Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say.

And then we've got Gideon.

Judges 6:11,12,14

And there came an angel of the Lord, and sat under an oak which was in Ophrah, that pertained unto Joash the Abiezrite: and his son Gideon threshed wheat by the winepress, to hide it from the Midianites. And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him, and said unto him, The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valour... And the Lord looked upon him, and said, Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent thee?

He was a farmer, threshing wheat to hide it from the Midianites. Yet the Lord calls him a “*mighty man of valour.*” He tells him to “*Go in this thy might*” and save Israel. But what might? Who was he?

Judges 6:15

And he said unto him, Oh my Lord, wherewith shall I save Israel? behold, my family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house.

Another reluctant worker who didn't want to go, because he saw that naturally he really couldn't do what was being asked of him. But this was the Lord's calling:

Judges 6:16

And the Lord said unto him, Surely I will be with thee, and thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man.

Then Gideon started asking for signs. The Lord gave him one straight away by consuming his offering by fire. That should've been enough. But he wanted a sign of his own. He put a fleece on the ground. If it was wet with dew in the morning and the ground dry, he'd accept the Lord's calling. It was, but still trying to get out of it, he asked for another sign, this time for the fleece to be dry and the ground wet. It was. Gideon too couldn't get away from the Lord's calling, even though he knew he hadn't naturally got the gifts required.

Jeremiah received a call to be a prophet to Israel, and he saw his total inadequacy too.

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Then the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations. Then said I, Ah, Lord God! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child. But the Lord said unto me, Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the Lord. Then the Lord put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the Lord said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth. See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant.

And if we read the rest of the chapter, we'll find the Lord strengthened him and also gave him signs to confirm his call.

And then there was Jonah. How reluctant can you get?

Jonah 1:1-2

Now the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me.

Immediately, without hesitation, Jonah's off in the opposite direction:

Jonah 1:3

But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.

We know the story. The ship hits a storm, the lot falls on him as the cause of it, and the mariners reluctantly throw him overboard to calm the storm. He subsequently gets swallowed by a great fish which vomited him out three days later onto dry land. And if you don't believe that, you'll believe anything. Then the Lord comes to him again:

Jonah 3:1

And the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the second time, saying, Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee.

We can never get away from the Lord's calling. In the whole of the book of Jonah, we see some marvellous revivals. The mariners repent, the Ninevites repent. But the one person who never repents in the whole book is Jonah himself. He quotes Scripture in the belly of the fish, and he's genuinely grateful for being vomited out, but he never actually repents of anything. I suggest he repented later, some time after the events described in the book, because he was a true prophet of the Lord and his story ends up in Scripture. But his repentance is not in the text.

And then we've got the apostles. Just before Christ's ascension, He told them to go into all the world to be His witnesses:

Matthew 28:18-20

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

Mark 16:15

And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.

Acts 1:8

But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

They had to wait a few days for the Holy Spirit to come upon them, which they did, but after that they still stayed in Jerusalem. There appears to have been a reluctance to move out. So the Lord arranged some persecution to try to shift them, beginning with Stephen being stoned to death. And then He raised up a great persecutor, Saul:

Acts 8:1

And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.

Whereas the other Christians in Jerusalem were moved to flee, the apostles still stayed put in Jerusalem. And the Lord blessed this movement of Christians, because by these means the gospel spread abroad throughout Judea and Samaria:

Acts 8:4

Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word.

But where were the apostles? Still hiding in Jerusalem. So the Lord did something else to try to move them, something even more remarkable. He converted Saul. This brought peace:

Acts 9:31

Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.

And finally, the apostles began to get going:

Acts 9:32

And it came to pass, as Peter passed throughout all quarters, he came down also to the saints which dwelt at Lydda....

We don't really know much about what the apostles got up to after this. Tradition tells us they went all over the place, but the Biblical record is fairly silent, the Lord preferring to concentrate on Saul, now Paul's, missionary journeys.

And we see this reluctance to do the Lord's will throughout Scripture. I'm sure you can find many other examples of biblical characters being reluctant to obey the Lord.

God's people often have a reluctance to do His will, but it's not necessarily because they're lazy. Rather it's because they feel so inadequate for the task. And that's exactly how we should feel. We shouldn't think that we're capable of doing anything for the Lord, because we're not. Whatever we do for the Lord, He works it in us anyway. All we have to contribute to anything is our sin. And that just gets in the way. Of course we should feel totally inadequate in doing anything for Him.

2 Corinthians 3:5

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God.

That's what spiritual gifts are for. They're not natural gifts. We all have some natural gifts we're born with. Maybe a gift of being creative, or logical, or athletic or something. Not even natural gifts such as those of being good with languages, or being an eloquent speaker, like Aaron, are necessarily used by the Lord to fulfil His purposes, although they can be. The Lord gives spiritual gifts for spiritual purposes, quite often to people who never had any similar natural gift at all, like Moses.

Our job is to not depend on ourselves, or any natural gift we may have, to do the Lord's work. We are to depend solely on God to give us all the spiritual gifts we require to do what He wants us to do. And if we know His calling, we know we will receive everything necessary for it.

Romans 11:29

For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance.

1 Corinthians 1:26-29

For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the

things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence.