

# **Sermons in the Old Testament**

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## Genesis 4. Cain and Abel

I thought we'd look today at some very early history. It's important we understand that this story of Cain and Abel was real history. A lot of people today suggest that the early chapters of Genesis are just myths. The events didn't really happen. They're just another fantasy Creation story, the kind every ancient civilisation had. We're far more enlightened now. We now know everything started from a big bang billions of years ago. I suggest that's far more of a fantasy Creation story than just taking the plain words of Scripture.

Another thing that puts a lot of people off taking these early passages of Genesis seriously, is the length of time people lived. In chapter 5, we see that Adam lived until he was 930, Seth, his son lived until he was 912, and so on. And people think that's silly, because we don't live that long today. We see people today living to 70 or 80 years old, and we assume it's always been like that. But we don't actually know.

Scientists are always speculating about things they can never possibly measure. They only measure what they can see now, and extrapolate backwards in time to produce their theories. In time, they observe white moths changing into black moths, and conclude that, given enough time, fish can change into men. But that just doesn't follow. They don't know. None of us knows. If we're going to know anything about times long ago, it has to be revealed to us by God Himself. And that's exactly what He's done in the Bible.

There've always been people who scoff at the Bible's account of things:

2 Peter 3:3,4

*There shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, and saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation.*

The first two humans, Adam and Eve, were created by God and given a commandment:

Genesis 2:17

*But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.*

They ate of the tree and broke the commandment. So why didn't God strike them dead immediately? Well, He did. They died spiritually, straight after eating the fruit. They suddenly no longer had the communion with God that they'd had before. But their physical death was delayed for many centuries. Why? Because God was being gracious to them. And He's gracious to every one of us as well.

Whether we realise it or not, we're in the same condition. We're all born dead spiritually. Naturally, we don't know any other way. We don't know God. We don't want to know God. We're born with no higher thought than to live for ourselves and our own desires. And, we're given 70 or 80 years of life in this world before we die physically too. Every second on this earth is a gift from God. And we ought to be thankful to Him for everything we have been given.

***[1] And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the LORD. [2] And she again bare his brother Abel....***

So, Adam and Eve start to fulfil God's original commandment to "*be fruitful and multiply,*" and they had two sons, Cain, the firstborn, and Abel. They did have daughters as well, but the inheritance goes down the male line, so that's all that's recorded. We know that, because by v.17 Cain had a wife. Where did she come from? She could only have been Adam and Eve's daughter or possibly Abel's daughter (but that's unlikely). There was nobody else around.

It's not until the Law came in Moses' day, 2,500 years later, that we're now forbidden to marry our immediate relatives. Even Abraham married his half-sister, which would have been disallowed by Moses' law. In those early days, it was perfectly lawful to marry close relatives. That's another thing that maybe puts people off taking the early chapters of Genesis seriously.

***....And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground.***

Both Abel and Cain worked. They earned a living. They didn't just sit at home scrounging off their parents. They went out and worked. It's God's plan for us all to be busy, to do something useful with our lives, as much as we're able. And not waste it.

Neither Cain nor Abel's occupations were sinful. Both were quite legitimate things to do for a living. Cain followed his father's occupation, tilling the ground. And Abel kept sheep.

But what actually was the purpose of keeping sheep? Before the flood, which was 1500 years later, all men were vegans:

Genesis 1:29

*And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat.*

It was only after the flood that God allowed men to eat animal flesh:

Genesis 9:3

*Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you; even as the green herb have I given you all things.*

Abel couldn't have been keeping sheep for food. Not even milk. There's no mention of milk as food before the flood. And there was no need for wool either. Not so long ago, Adam and Eve had been running about naked. The outside temperature must have been warm enough to allow that. They didn't need woollen clothes for warmth. They were only covered after the fall, to hide their shame. Only after the flood did we begin to have extremes of temperature:

Genesis 8:22

*While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.*

So, meat, milk and wool, before the flood, were pretty useless commodities. So, what was the point of keeping sheep? That's what Cain must have been thinking to himself.

Cain must have thought how practical and useful he was being, producing food, and continuing his father's family business. Abel, on the other hand, was rearing sheep, which, to Cain, were good for nothing. Why was Abel rearing sheep? Was he stupid? There's only one thing that sheep would have been useful for in that early society. Sacrifice.

Cain and Abel would both have learned from their parents the need for the shedding of blood to take away sin. It's hinted at when, after Adam and Eve had eaten the forbidden fruit, God covered them with skins. That presupposes the killing of animals:

Genesis 3:21

*Unto Adam also and to his wife did the LORD God make coats of skins, and clothed them.*

God could've made grass skirts to cover them. He could've accepted the aprons of fig leaves that they'd made themselves. But He didn't. He slew animals, to show them the need for sacrifice. And that's an important principle we need to understand:

Hebrews 9:22

*Without the shedding of blood there is no remission [of sin.]*

This is a very important principle.

***[3] And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD. [4] And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof....***

Cain knew that God required an offering. His parents had taught him that. But, rather than bringing a blood sacrifice, he offered some of the fruit of the ground he'd produced. He was proud of his crops. He wanted to boast to God (and to men) how he'd been far more useful than Abel. You can tell by this that he didn't take God seriously. He didn't even bother taking the first-fruits, or the best of his crops. He just grabbed any old handful of the fruit of the ground and offered it. But Abel brought the first and the best of his sheep for his offering to God. And we should put God first in our lives too:

Matthew 6:33

*But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.*

***....And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering: [5] But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect....***

To Cain's surprise, it was Abel's offering which God accepted, and not his own.

***....And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell.***

So Cain got angry. But he'd got no excuse. He'd been taught from his parents the need for a blood sacrifice to take away sin. What he should've done is sold the best of his crops to Abel in return for a sheep to offer to the Lord. That's what Abel was in the business of providing. But in his heart, Cain thought religion was a waste of time. He only

acknowledged God's existence to please his parents. But then, remarkably, God came and actually spoke to him:

***[6] And the LORD said unto Cain, Why art thou wrath? and why is thy countenance fallen? [7] If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.***

The Lord didn't punish Cain at this point. He simply gave Cain a warning about sin. If he would flee from sin and do well, he would still be accepted. But if he gave in to sin, then it would end up having dominion over him. Just by God giving him a warning is an act of grace. There was still hope for him.

That's a warning to us today. We're all sinners by nature, spiritually dead. Sin is always lying at our door. It's so easy for us to give in to sin. It's pleasant to our senses. It's easy just to live our lives for our own sinful pleasures. We can't see God, so why bother with Him? Yet, even though we're in such a desperate state, God still offers hope. But it involves repentance and following Him.

Before Adam and Eve fell, they'd had a close relationship with God. But now, that intimacy had been lost. God had forgiven their sin, he'd provided a sacrifice, but their relationship would never be the same as before. Now, they no longer had such direct access to Him. Now, they could only come before God through the sacrifices. Cain had never known a relationship with God at all. The only time God did speak to him was here, to tell him off. So all he saw of his parent's religion, was an outward ritual. And he thought it a complete waste of time.

Cain was the next generation down from Adam. Today, we're now three or four generations removed from a generation that at least went to church, and had heard about the things of God. Today, when people think of "church," the only thing they think about is the outward ritual, and it means nothing to them. How many of the younger generation today know about anything about true religion? About God? About the Bible? About Jesus Christ? There's a tremendous need today to wake people up to spiritual things, to introduce the Bible to them, to tell them of Jesus Christ and how He can change them.

***[8] And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him.***

Cain didn't heed the Lord's warning. He gave in to his sinful nature. Sin had the final dominion over him, and he killed his brother.

***[9] And the LORD said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper?***

Did Cain really think that killing his brother would solve all his problems, and that God wouldn't know what he'd done? Yet so many people in the world today behave in exactly the same way. They openly commit sin and carry on doing it, and think that by behaving that way, they've defeated God in some way. But one day, there's going to be judgment:

Matthew 12:36

*....every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.*

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.*

***[10] And he said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground.***

God knew exactly what Cain had done. We can't hide anything from God. And this time Cain does get punished. After the flood, God brought in the death penalty for murder:

Genesis 9:6

*Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man.*

But God, still in His mercy, doesn't punish Cain by death here, but by something else:

***[11] And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand; [12] When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.***

Cain was given a curse that stopped him from making his living. There was already a curse on the ground from Adam's sin, and now it was made even worse for Cain. Wherever and whenever Cain tried to plant anything in future, God made sure the ground wouldn't produce. He'd lost his livelihood and was destined to be a fugitive and a vagabond, a wanderer, for the rest of his life.

***[13] And Cain said unto the LORD, My punishment is greater than I can bear.***

The punishment was so merciful in that he hadn't been killed, yet Cain continued to complain at God. He'd been so attached to his work in this world, that when it was taken away from him, he couldn't cope any more. It's a God-given thing to earn a living, and we should do our work well. But if ever it becomes so important to us that we can't live without it, we've given it too high a priority.

We ought to have far more concern for our spiritual welfare than our earthly one. We're only here for a short time. Getting ready for eternity, making ourselves right with God, is far more important than a few years of prosperity here. But Cain doesn't recognise that, and carries on complaining:

***[14] Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me.***

He complains that he'll be killed. Well, he should have thought of that before he killed Abel. He did something to someone else, and then complains when he realises that same thing could happen to himself.

Matthew 7:12

*Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.*

***[15] And the LORD said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the LORD set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him.***

God put a mark on Cain to deter anyone from killing him. We don't quite know what this mark was exactly, but wherever he went, people would know that if they killed him, sevenfold vengeance would be taken out upon them.

***[16] And Cain went out from the presence of the LORD, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden.***

And what did Cain do? Did he cry for mercy? Did he ask for forgiveness? God would still have been merciful to him even then, if he'd done so. But no. He walked away. He ***“went out from the presence of the Lord.”*** Where was the presence of the Lord? It was where the sacrifices were, where the worship of God was practised by Adam and Eve. Cain made a conscious decision to leave his family, said goodbye to their religion, and went, with his wife, as far away as he could from any mention of God, to the land of Nod.

Cain was the firstborn son of Adam and Eve. He would have received the birthright, and all its privileges. But he turned his back on everything and walked away, to live his own life, his own way, as far as possible from God. That was his own choice, but the saddest thing of all is that by moving so far away, not one of his future descendants would ever get to know about God. His children would be born many miles away from any mention of the Lord. None of Cain's descendants ever believed, and eventually they all perished in the flood, and Cain's line died out completely.

In verses 17-24 we've got a brief description of what happened to Cain and his family in Nod:

***[17] And Cain knew his wife; and she conceived, and bare Enoch: and he builded a city, and called the name of the city, after the name of his son, Enoch.***

Not being able to work on the land, Cain built a city instead. Without God, without religion, what do men do? Get together. Form communities. Support each other. Encourage each other everything's all right, there's no God, and they're all in control of their own destiny. Men are doing this today. Cofi Anan said, “When we all get together, we are the ultimate power.” What arrogance!

And the city was named after Enoch, who was Cain's firstborn son. Men try to build a name for themselves. They name cities, buildings, businesses after themselves. Trying to make themselves remembered long after they're gone. That's not the Christian way. We shouldn't exalt self. The Christian way is the way of self-abasement. The only One who should be exalted in our lives is God.

***[18] And unto Enoch was born Irad: and Irad begat Mehujael: and Mehujael begat Methusael: and Methusael begat Lamech.***

Five generations pass. And see what happens when men walk away from God:

***[19] And Lamech took unto him two wives: the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah.***

People end up making their own rules, their own morality. God had said:

Genesis 2:24

*Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.*

But the men of the city of Enoch, after five generations of living there, decided to change the rules. They redefined marriage. The further generations get away from any godly influence in their lives, this sort of thing will happen.

***[20] And Adah bare Jabal: he was the father of such as dwell in tents, and of such as have cattle.***

According to v.12 the curse was only on Cain and not his descendants, otherwise no one could have survived. But that didn't stop them trying to diversify in their occupations.

Jabal's family, the sixth generation from Cain, became cattle ranchers. What's the point keeping cattle? In Cain's godless society, they wouldn't even have been used for sacrifice. Maybe leather would have been useful, but now they've shaken off God's prohibitions, I can't help thinking that they had started eating meat.

***[21] And his brother's name was Jubal: he was the father of all such as handle the harp and organ.***

Here we have fine art and culture

***[22] And Zillah, she also bare Tubalcain, an instructor of every artificer in brass and iron: and the sister of Tubalcain was Naamah.***

Here we have technology. Fine arts and technology. This is the beginning of a highly sophisticated society.



These were all reasonably legitimate occupations. It doesn't say they were opening betting shops. They probably were, but there was still something in their consciences that made them think it good to have a veneer of morality in their society. They learned practical skills and taught them to their children. They filled their lives with worldly knowledge. They kept themselves busy, to stop themselves thinking about eternal things, to forget God as best they could. But where are they now? What did it all achieve? All forgotten. All swept away in the flood.

***[23] And Lamech said unto his wives, Adah and Zillah, Hear my voice; ye wives of Lamech, hearken unto my speech: for I have slain a man to my wounding, and a young man to my hurt. [24] If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy and sevenfold.***

Not content with having two wives, Lamech also became a murderer. He killed someone, and boasted about it to his wives, mocking God's judgment on Cain. That's interesting. That society had all tried its best, for five generations, to get away from God, to block God out of their memories completely. But God still had a witness among them, in the mark that He'd put on Cain. It's impossible to get away from God altogether.

In contrast to Cain, in the last two verses we see what happened to the rest of his family:

***[25] And Adam knew his wife again; and she bare a son, and called his name Seth: For God, said she, hath appointed me another seed instead of Abel, whom Cain slew.***

Seth had been born to Eve to replace Cain as the firstborn. It's through this line that eventually Christ would be born many generations later.

***[26] And to Seth, to him also there was born a son; and he called his name Enos: then began men to call upon the name of the LORD.***

Seth's firstborn was Enos, and we've got a very interesting phrase here: "***Then began men to call upon the name of the Lord.***" That implies nobody had done that before. But they had the sacrifices. When Cain had left them, it was said he "***went out from the presence of the Lord.***" What does it mean that only in the days of Enos, "***then began men to call upon the name of the LORD***"? We're told in chapter 5, that Adam had Seth when he was 130 years old, and Seth had Enos when he was 105 years old. So for at least 235 years, we're told here that, although they had "***the presence of the Lord***" in the animal sacrifices and the outward worship of God, nobody had truly "***called on the name of the Lord***" in their hearts. Only in Enos's day did they start doing so.

God had shown to Adam and Eve something about true religion. He'd showed them the need for a blood sacrifice to take away sin. But they also knew that the animal sacrifices were only ever a picture:

Hebrews 10:4

*it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins.*

The sacrifices were only pictures to teach that true religion is spiritual. It's invisible, we can't see it. The sacrifices were where **"the presence of the Lord"** was outwardly. But apart from Adam, Eve and Abel, for at least 235 years, nobody else had **"called on the name of the Lord"** for themselves.

Just going to church isn't enough. Church is where we can say **"the presence of the Lord"** is today. It's good to go to church, that's where God is worshipped, and that's where we learn about the Lord and His ways, week by week.

But each one of us needs to know God personally for ourselves. We need individually to call on His name. To repent of our sins. To acknowledge our sinful nature before Him, and ask Him, cry to Him, to change us from what we are, and make us new creatures. We need to put our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, whose blood sacrifice is the one that truly does atone for sin. Only then can we live lives pleasing to God, and in the end, be saved from our sins.

Romans 10:13

*For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.*

For 235 years, nobody had done that. After Abel's death, Adam had Eve and Eve had Adam, and they were the only true believers in the world, desperately trying to teach their children about true religion through the sacrifices, and failing. Only in the days of Enos, did some people finally understand, and begin to realise their need, and call on the Lord for themselves. We haven't got that long. We're not going to live that long. We know not what a day may bring forth. Let's all make sure that we **"call on the name of the Lord"** now, and not give Him rest until He's established His kingdom in our hearts.

Isaiah 55:6,7

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

## Deuteronomy 20. Dealing with our Enemies

Christians should be very keen to encourage others to read the Bible. And that's right. The Bible is God's revelation to men. It's the only window we have on the things of God. Nowhere else tells us what we're to believe concerning God and what God requires of us.

But many are put off reading it by some of its contents. For example, in Exodus, the detail of the high priest's clothes and the tabernacle. In Leviticus, the complex system of animal sacrifices. And God telling the Israelites to wipe their enemies out completely, like here:

***[16] But of the cities of these people, which the Lord thy God doth give thee for an inheritance, thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth: [17] But thou shalt utterly destroy them....***

Today, we call that "genocide" or "ethnic cleansing," and people, quite understandably, are completely put off the Bible when they read such things in it. We've got to have an answer for all this. Why did God give people such intricate details? Why did He tell the Israelites to ethnically cleanse the land they went into? Do these things still apply today?

We firstly need to understand that although, yes, God told the Israelites to do these things, none of these things are true religion. From the first day Adam was created, true religion was always spiritual and of the heart, not of the letter or in outward actions:

1 Samuel 15:22

*And Samuel said, Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.*

Hosea 6:6

*For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.*

2 Corinthians 3:6

*The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.*

So why did God give all these instructions to the Israelites if none of it is true religion? The answer is that they were physical pictures of spiritual realities. And that's how we're to apply the Old Testament today. I'm not allegorising away the Bible like modern scholars. These were real events. God gave these instructions about real physical things to the Israelites. It's true history. But we who read them now, are not to take them as instructions for us in physical things. We must interpret them as pictures pointing to spiritual realities.

For example, the Protestant Reformation was good. A great Europe-wide movement to get people back to the Bible and away from idolatrous, superstitious practices. That was nothing but a good thing. But some saw such passages about God telling the Israelites to utterly destroy everything, and they decided they should do the same. So they trashed Roman Catholic Churches, burned monasteries and so on. No! They've missed the point. These physical practices are not for us today. They were only for the Israelites at the time.

Why did God use physical pictures at all? Why didn't He just tell us true religion is spiritual, and not bother with physical pictures? Because we'd never have understood it. We only understand what we see, hear and touch. It's impossible to grasp spiritual truths without physical pictures to help us. So with this in mind, let's look at this passage.

**[1] When thou goest out to battle against thine enemies....**

Who are the enemies of the Christian? Does this mean we should go into battle physically against other religions and forcibly convert them at the point of a sword? That's what they tried to do in the Crusades. They really thought that was the way to convert the world. What a terrible witness that was to the truth. Even today, people hate Christianity because of those events. But it's in the Bible, isn't it? No, the Christian's enemies are spiritual:

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.*

There is a real battle the Christian must get involved with. When someone begins the Christian life, he becomes a soldier, he's involved in a lifelong war, only relieved for him by death. But it's not a physical battle. We shouldn't be bothered with this world any more.

2 Timothy 2:4

*No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier.*

Fighting physically is never the Christian way. Don't get me wrong. Nations need armies to defend themselves against invaders. But that's an issue for nations. It's not wrong for a Christian to be a soldier to defend his country. We need the armed forces just as much as the police to keep order. But it's not how a Christian defends his faith.

The Christian's true battle is spiritual. And our spiritual battles can be both external and internal. Externally, false teachers can bring false doctrines into the church. We don't physically fight them, but we must defend the truths of Scripture.

Jude 1:3,4

*It was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.*

That's the external battle. Our internal battle is within ourselves:

Galatians 5:16-18

*This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would. But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law.*

The way we should live is to bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ:

2 Corinthians 10:3-5

*For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ....*

And our opposition, both externally and internally, is going to seem to be overwhelming:

***....and seest horses, and chariots, and a people more than thou, be not afraid of them: for the Lord thy God is with thee, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.***

But we have the Lord with us. We should remember how the Lord was with His people in times past, like when He parted the Red Sea and brought the Israelites out of Egypt.

Elisha's servant had a problem of fear when the king of Israel's armies surrounded them:

2 Kings 6:15-17

*And when the servant of the man of God was risen early, and gone forth, behold, an host compassed the city both with horses and chariots. And his servant said unto him, Alas, my master! how shall we do? And he answered, Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them. And Elisha prayed, and said, Lord, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha.*

Keep in mind the Lord is with us. How can we do that? We must encourage one another:

Hebrews 10:24,25

*And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.*

Encouragement was the particular job of the priests, and is the job of pastors today, although we shouldn't put all the burden on the pastor, we all have this responsibility:

***[2] And it shall be, when ye are come nigh unto the battle, that the priest shall approach and speak unto the people, [3] And shall say unto them, Hear, O Israel, ye approach this day unto battle against your enemies: let not your hearts faint, fear not, and do not tremble, neither be ye terrified because of them; [4] For the Lord your God is he that goeth with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.***

King Hezekiah encouraged His people:

2 Chronicles 32:7,8

*Be strong and courageous, be not afraid nor dismayed for the king of Assyria, nor for all the multitude that is with him: for there be more with us than with him: With him is an arm*

*of flesh; but with us is the Lord our God to help us, and to fight our battles. And the people rested themselves upon the words of Hezekiah king of Judah.*

Our enemies appear so great, but we tend to look at them without trusting in the Lord. Why do we do that? Our greatest hindrances are the cares of this world:

***[5] And the officers shall speak unto the people, saying, What man is there that hath built a new house, and hath not dedicated it? let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man dedicate it. [6] And what man is he that hath planted a vineyard, and hath not yet eaten of it? let him also go and return unto his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man eat of it. [7] And what man is there that hath betrothed a wife, and hath not taken her? let him go and return unto his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man take her.***

There's nothing wrong with buying a house, planting a vineyard or getting married. They're not unlawful, like robbing a bank. But filling our lives with these things, making them so important they choke the word and put the things of the Lord in second place, that's the problem. In the parable of the sower, we're too much like the thorny ground:

Mark 4:18,19

*And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word, And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful.*

Our worldliness not only makes us unfruitful, it renders us unprepared for Christ's return:

Luke 21:34,35

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

And on top of all this, these worldly cares make us fear man too much:

***[8] And the officers shall speak further unto the people, and they shall say, What man is there that is fearful and fainthearted? let him go and return unto his house, lest his brethren's heart faint as well as his heart.***

Proverbs 29:25

*The fear of man bringeth a snare: but whoso putteth his trust in the Lord shall be safe.*

We're not to fear man, but only fear the Lord, which is, after all, the beginning of wisdom:

Luke 12:4,5

*And I say unto you my friends, Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear: Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, Fear him.*

So, we're in a spiritual battle. How do we fight?

***[9] And it shall be, when the officers have made an end of speaking unto the people, that they shall make captains of the armies to lead the people. [10] When thou comest nigh unto a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace unto it.***

We're a peaceable people. We don't argue, we don't raise our voices, we don't debate aggressively to make our point, we speak peaceably. And we'll get one of two responses:

***[11] And it shall be, if it make thee answer of peace, and open unto thee, then it shall be, that all the people that is found therein shall be tributaries unto thee, and they shall serve thee. [12] And if it will make no peace with thee, but will make war against thee, then thou shalt besiege it:***

We may win our brother over to the truth. That's the ideal scenario, in which case all is at peace. But if they start being aggressive towards us, we're told to "besiege" the city. What's that all about?

As for external enemies, we don't fight them. We don't become aggressive back. We don't set ourselves up as great debaters trying to win the argument. That's just using their worldly techniques. We end up becoming just like them. What we should do is simply disagree with them and carry on living our lives in the light of what we know to be true. Many think it's a terrible witness when Christians don't agree with one another, but it's not. **True** believers will always have a fundamental unity of heart. This unity between true believers is the witness, not any kind of forced unity between all who call themselves Christian, because some won't be:

Psalm 133

*Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments; As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore.*

Christ prayed for His people to be one, so they will be. This is not something for us to strive for, it just is, amongst all those who truly know the Lord that is:

John 17:20,21

*Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.*

Now, how does this apply to internal enemies?

This may sound strange, but we **don't** fight against our internal enemies either. We sin and have worldly desires all the time in our hearts. The Christian knows full well this battle within him, and he hates it. We want more than anything else to get rid of all our internal enemies and become holy people. We want to please the Lord more than anything else. Paul tells us of this battle within:

Romans 7:19-25

*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.*

Paul talks about the Christian life here. Unbelievers don't have a battle going on inside them. As Christians we long to get rid of sin and be holy. But we can't do it ourselves. So we shouldn't fight, because we'll never win. If we keep saying to ourselves, "I must get rid of that sin. I must try to be more kind, gentle, loving" etc., that's trying to do things ourselves. It's not going to work.

Instead of thinking how we can be better all the time, we "*besiege*" the city, as it were. We need to develop our relationship with Christ. Prayer is continuous communication with Him. Keep that relationship right, and He'll conquer our sin and produce fruit without us even realising it.

Matthew 25:37-40

*Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.*

We've then got two types of instruction how to deal with our enemies, first in vv.13-15 to those cities which are "*very far off*," and secondly in vv.16-18 to those cities in the land "*which the Lord thy God doth give thee for an inheritance.*" How do we understand this?

I hope I'm not spiritualising this too much, but there are two types of church. There are the big edifices, whether Anglican, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, the sort of church nations tend to adopt as their "national" church. And then there are the thousands upon thousands of tinpot little churches with no, or not much connection with any other church.

On the rare occasion when the world wants to know what Christians think on various issues, where would they go? To the big edifices every time. They are the visible witness of Christianity to the world. Tinpot little churches that anyone can set up are no witness at all. They'd be totally ignored. Why should anyone want my tinpot little church's opinion?

Don't get me wrong. I'm talking about external witnesses here. The true witness we have to the world is the internal life of the real Christian as an individual. One who has been changed in his heart by God and is now doing the good works that God has ordained for him to do, whatever church he outwardly attends:

Ephesians 2:10

*For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.*

Matthew 5:16



*Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.*

But when we look at these great edifices – these major external, visible witnesses – we see that they have all strayed far from the Bible. They either exalt tradition far above it or embrace totally liberal views. This is why the true Christian should sigh and cry over the state of the visible church, because the external witness to the truth is destroyed:

Ezekiel 9:4

*And the Lord said unto him, Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof.*

So, many true Bible-believing Christians understandably walk away from such organisations to set up their own churches which have more Biblical teaching.

Although the fact of a myriad of tinpot churches is a terrible witness, most true believers will be found in them, because the large edifices are so far from Biblical truth.

Now, with this in mind, first let's look at these separatists, those "very far off" from being a witness to the world:

***[13] And when the Lord thy God hath delivered it into thine hands, thou shalt smite every male thereof with the edge of the sword: [14] But the women, and the little ones, and the cattle, and all that is in the city, even all the spoil thereof, shalt thou take unto thyself; and thou shalt eat the spoil of thine enemies, which the Lord thy God hath given thee. [15] Thus shalt thou do unto all the cities which are very far off from thee, which are not of the cities of these nations.***

In this case we're to besiege the city, kill all the men, but keep the women, children and animals alive. How do we understand this?

I once spent some time in a Brethren church, or assembly as they prefer to call them. The numbers dwindled and it eventually closed down. But those who were left would rather travel 16 miles each way to the next nearest Brethren assembly rather than go to other more local Bible-believing churches in the area, which weren't quite the same as them.

I also spent some time in another church in which some members travelled 80 miles each way just to get to a church they believed had everything right, probably passing hundreds of other churches on the way, whereas in reality nobody has got a monopoly on the truth.

Most of the members of such churches are good, real, genuine born-again Christian people, and it is a delight to be amongst them. They are in such churches for the Bible teaching they get, which they just cannot find in the mainstream churches. Go to their churches. Join them. Learn from their sermons. I've met good Christians in both these churches. But because they are encouraged to such extreme separatism – "come to our church, nowhere else will do" – they will probably never meet each other, even though they live in the same town. This is very sad.

So, when we're told here to "*smite every male thereof with the edge of the sword,*" we are to destroy every attitude that separates true Christian fellowship. The "women, children and cattle" who are to be kept alive, or encouraged, are the people themselves, because they are all my brothers and sisters in Christ. We love them.

Now, compare this type of separatist church with the next, those who are in the cities "*which the Lord thy God doth give thee for an inheritance*":

***[16] But of the cities of these people, which the Lord thy God doth give thee for an inheritance, thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth: [17] But thou shalt utterly destroy them; namely, the Hittites, and the Amorites, the Canaanites, and the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; as the Lord thy God hath commanded thee: [18] That they teach you not to do after all their abominations, which they have done unto their gods; so should ye sin against the Lord your God.***

The Israelites were told not to make peace with the people of the land God told them to inherit. They were to utterly destroy them, saving alive "*nothing that breatheth,*" not even the women and children. How can we apply this to us spiritually today?

The great edifices – the mainstream churches – are the great witness to Christianity in the world. This is the land the Lord our God has given us. But they have been totally overrun by tradition, idolatry and/or liberalism. Destroy it all. Save nothing alive that breatheth! Get the Bible back into these places to be the true, real witness to the world around us.

2 Corinthians 6:14-16

*Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*

"*I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*" That's Christianity. Those who disbelieve the Bible know nothing of this living relationship with Christ. So, externally, we shouldn't have anything to do with them, and, internally, we shouldn't entertain for a moment their anti-Christian ideas in our minds.

Then we've got these strange couple of verses about trees:

***[19] When thou shalt besiege a city a long time, in making war against it to take it, thou shalt not destroy the trees thereof by forcing an axe against them: for thou mayest eat of them, and thou shalt not cut them down (for the tree of the field is man's life) to employ them in the siege: [20] Only the trees which thou knowest that they be not trees for meat, thou shalt destroy and cut them down; and thou shalt build bulwarks against the city that maketh war with thee, until it be subdued.***

This talks about besieging a city for a long time. And the Christian is in a spiritual battle for a long time. It's not going to end until we go to be with Christ which is far better.

There are two types of trees mentioned here. Those that produce fruit, and those that don't. We're told not to cut down the trees producing fruit. The Lord indeed wants us to produce fruit. In fact, fruit production is evidence of Christ being in us, the hope of glory:

John 15:5

*I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.*

So, externally, don't offend fellow believers, especially new Christians, by trying to chop them down. Don't offend them, especially if they're not quite like us. Encourage them:

Romans 14:21

*It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak.*

Mark 9:42

*And whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea.*

Internally, if we're Christ's we're producing fruit. This is our life. Concentrate on letting Christ produce fruit in us, and letting Him cut down everything that isn't producing fruit:

John 15:2

*Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.*

But what about these useless trees, being used as bulwarks against the city? How can spiritually useless things ever become useful? Well, they can. All of us, before we became a Christian, wasted our lives. But nothing a Christian experiences is ever useless.

For example, let's suppose that before we became a Christian we were an alcoholic. But the Lord redeemed us. He took us away from that useless way of life, and put a new heart within us, a heart of flesh not a heart of stone. We have been altogether changed from the inside now, to follow Christ. And we no longer have a problem with drink. Praise the Lord.

But although that old way of life is now finished for us, we could meet others who are still in bondage to it. And because of our experience in the past, we can relate to them. We can use our past experience to maybe help them and bring them to Christ. We use the trees of our past life that never produced fruit, to become bulwarks, something useful.

I hope you don't think I've allegorised the Old Testament away. I don't want to be lumped with those who allegorise everything and don't believe anything any more. Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 10:6-11

*Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand. Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. Now all these*

*things happened unto them for examples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.*

## 2 Kings 20. Hezekiah's Extra Fifteen Years

Hezekiah was the son of king Ahaz. Ahaz was the worst king Judah had ever had up to this point. He was the first king to introduce idols into the Temple. But Hezekiah didn't follow his father. On becoming king, he cleansed the Temple, after years of neglect. Also:

2 Kings 18:4

*He removed the high places, and brake the images, and cut down the groves, and brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it: and he called it Nehushtan.*

That brazen serpent must have been worshipped as an idol for centuries. None of the previous kings, good or bad, had removed it. Hezekiah was the first one bold enough to get rid of it. And after everything was restored, he held a large Passover feast:

2 Chronicles 30:26

*So there was great joy in Jerusalem: for since the time of Solomon the son of David king of Israel there was not the like in Jerusalem.*

Most of all, Hezekiah's reign is remembered for one thing: a remarkable deliverance the Lord wrought after the Assyrian army had besieged Jerusalem. As we see in chapter 19, Hezekiah sought Isaiah's help, they both prayed to the Lord, and remarkably:

2 Kings 19:35

*And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the Lord went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians an hundred fourscore and five thousand: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses.*

That was the turning point for the Assyrian army. The Assyrians never took Jerusalem. The king retreated back to his capital, and they were never the same force again:

2 Kings 19:36,37

*So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed, and went and returned, and dwelt at Nineveh. And it came to pass, as he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god, that Adrammelech and Sharezer his sons smote him with the sword: and they escaped into the land of Armenia. And Esar-haddon his son reigned in his stead.*

Apart from David, Hezekiah was the best king Judah ever had, with the possible exception of Josiah who came later. But just like David, he's still a sinner. We're going to look at some events in his life where even King Hezekiah made mistakes.

***[1] In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death. And the prophet Isaiah the son of Amoz came to him, and said unto him, Thus saith the Lord, Set thine house in order; for thou shalt die, and not live.***

Hezekiah was struck down with an illness. And it wasn't an ordinary illness, but a sickness "**unto death.**" Sickness isn't a curse from Satan for some sin. Hezekiah had done everything right. He'd obeyed the Lord. Sickness comes in the Lord's providence. It's how we deal with such providences that matters. It was Isaiah the prophet, not a doctor, who came with the message from the Lord: "**thou shalt die, and not live.**"

It must be quite a shock to be told we haven't got long to live. Some people are told that in this life. But even if not, we're all going to die one day. Seventy or if by strength eighty years isn't long, even if we're in good health. Or maybe our time will be up tomorrow.

Proverbs 27:1

*Boast not thyself of to morrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth.*

So the instruction the Lord gives to Hezekiah is for all of us: **“set thine house in order.”** It's so easy to neglect preparation for our own death. But it is going to happen sometime.

For Hezekiah, that meant sorting out who gets what after he's gone. That was important, because up to now he hadn't got any children. But there's something far, far more important to sort out before we die than just distributing a few trinkets. We all need to sort out our relationship with God. And Hezekiah had done that already. We know that:

2 Kings 18:5,6

*He trusted in the Lord God of Israel; so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor any that were before him. For he clave to the Lord, and departed not from following him, but kept his commandments, which the Lord commanded Moses.*

There are some of the marks of being a true believer, of trusting in the Lord, not himself. And we need to make peace with God too, because without Him, there's no hope,

Hebrews 10:27

*....But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries.*

The only way to make peace with God is through the Lord Jesus Christ. Repent of sin and put our trust in Him, believe in Him. Only He can take away sin by His death on the cross:

Romans 5:1

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

Hezekiah had sorted his relationship with God out in his youth. He was 25 years old when he became king. He'd already made his peace with God by then. As soon as his father died, he got rid of the idols he'd put in the Temple. He followed the Lord, not his father.

2 Chronicles 29:3

*He in the first year of his reign, in the first month, opened the doors of the house of the Lord, and repaired them.*

He died at the age of 52. After this sickness, he was given an extra 15 years, so this sickness came at the age of 37. He was still young. Maybe that's why he hadn't got his house in order. He'd never thought about it. He thought most of his life was still to come.

Ecclesiastes 12:1

*Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them.*

To hear he was going to die at such an early age was a shock. But he did the right thing:

**[2] Then he turned his face to the wall, and prayed unto the Lord, saying,**

When it comes to death, nobody can help us. In the end, it's just between us and the Lord. So he turns away from people and faces the wall to pour out his heart to the Lord.

Psalm 62:8

*Trust in him at all times; ye people, pour out your heart before him: God is a refuge for us.*

**[3] I beseech thee, O Lord, remember now how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in thy sight. And Hezekiah wept sore.**

That was Hezekiah's prayer. What's wrong with it? Up to a point, it's good. It's true that he'd obeyed the Lord. He'd walked before Him **"in truth and with a perfect heart."** He'd genuinely done good in the Lord's sight. He wasn't boasting or lying. So up to a point, His prayer is good. It was a real outpouring of his heart to the Lord. That's what prayer is. It wasn't a recitation. He wept. His prayer was real. So what's wrong with it?

First of all, he didn't **want** to die at such an early age. He wasn't ready to leave this world yet. He'd never thought about death before. It's natural for us to think death is the end, and he wanted to have done so much more. But death isn't the end, it's the beginning.

And then secondly, more to the point, this prayer is all about him. There's an awful lot missing in this prayer. And what's missing is what we usually miss out in our prayers too.

1. There's no adoration of God. God is so much bigger than us. We must adore Him, and acknowledge His attributes, His power, His sovereignty and control over all things:

Romans 11:33-36

*O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.*

2. Then there's no thankfulness. We've got so much to be thankful for. God gives us life, breath, health, strength, food, clothing. Our lives should be one of continual thankfulness:

Psalm 75:1

*Unto thee, O God, do we give thanks, unto thee do we give thanks: for that thy name is near thy wondrous works declare.*

3. Then there's no confession of sin. Even though we love the Lord, and try to please Him, we still fall far, far short of what we ought to be:

Isaiah 64:6

*But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousneses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.*

Yes, Hezekiah had done well, he'd been faithful to the Lord in everything he'd been given to do. Far better than most of us. We're too comfortable and lazy. But even when we've been faithful to the Lord and done our best for Him, we're still 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.*

And there should never be any boasting about what we've done for the Lord, because whatever we've done for Him is all from Him anyway:

Philippians 2:13

*For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.*

If everything we do for the Lord comes from Him, what do we have that comes from us? Sin. Confession of sin is so important in prayer, to give us a true view of ourselves.

But, even though his prayer was so centred on himself, the Lord was still gracious to him:

***[4] And it came to pass, afore Isaiah was gone out into the middle court, that the word of the Lord came to him, saying, [5] Turn again, and tell Hezekiah the captain of my people, Thus saith the Lord, the God of David thy father, I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold, I will heal thee: on the third day thou shalt go up unto the house of the Lord.***

Before Isaiah had left the building, God answered Hezekiah's prayer. He hadn't prayed for healing. He just told the Lord what he'd done. But God knows exactly what we want before we ask it. He knew Hezekiah wanted to live longer, even though he never said it. And God knows what we want, even though we can't articulate it properly:

Romans 8:26

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

God hears our prayers and sees our tears before we even call on Him:

Psalms 56:8,9

*Thou tellest my wanderings: put thou my tears into thy bottle: are they not in thy book? When I cry unto thee, then shall mine enemies turn back: this I know; for God is for me.*

And the Lord told him that after three days, he'd be going up to the house of the Lord again, just like before, fully fit. And there's more to the Lord's answer too:



***[6] And I will add unto thy days fifteen years; and I will deliver thee and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city for mine own sake, and for my servant David's sake.***

Here's a prophecy that he'd be given fifteen more years. None of us know the time of our death. But Hezekiah was given the number of years precisely. Why did God do that?

To test him, to show him what was really in his heart. God does that. He tested Abraham by telling him to sacrifice his son Isaac. He tested Solomon by giving him riches. And God here gives Hezekiah time. A precise amount of time. To see what he would do with it. And He sometimes tests us too. Maybe we think we've pleased the Lord, just like Hezekiah. But then the Lord brings upon us something uncomfortable, unhappy, difficult, a frowning providence. It's to see how we cope with it. To show us our own hearts. The Lord deals with all His people like this. Hezekiah knew the Lord, but he, and all of us, sometimes need to be tested, to show us ourselves. And I'm afraid Hezekiah failed the test miserably.

I'm sure he was very grateful to the Lord for adding fifteen years. But what did he do in that time? We don't read of any great achievement. What did he do? Well, we'll see.

***[7] And Isaiah said, Take a lump of figs. And they took and laid it on the boil, and he recovered.***

The healing was miraculous. Hezekiah was healed from a prognosis of death to full recovery in three days. That's a miracle. But it involved medication. It wasn't instant. God normally uses means. So we should listen to our doctor, not quacks like Benny Hinn.

***[8] And Hezekiah said unto Isaiah, What shall be the sign that the Lord will heal me, and that I shall go up into the house of the Lord the third day?***

Why did Hezekiah ask for a sign? Didn't he have faith in Isaiah's prophecy? Where's his faith in the Lord? The Lord was gracious in giving him a sign, but He didn't have to.

The Lord did the same to Moses. He didn't want to lead the people, and started making excuses. The Lord gave him two signs. His rod became a serpent, and his hand became leprous. And when after these Moses could give no more excuses, he told the Lord the real reason in his heart, at which the Lord was angry, and insisted he obey:

Exodus 4:10-12

*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 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.*

Gideon wanted a sign, because he was unsure of his calling too. The Lord gave him one by consuming his offering by fire. That should've been enough. But he wanted a sign of his own choosing. 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 call. 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. He too couldn't get away from the Lord's call. Are we trying to escape the Lord's call too?

***[9] And Isaiah said, This sign shalt thou have of the Lord , that the Lord will do the thing that he hath spoken: shall the shadow go forward ten degrees, or go back ten degrees?***

And the Lord is so gracious to Hezekiah too that He gives him a sign. Does he want the shadow on the sundial to go forwards or backwards ten degrees?

***[10] And Hezekiah answered, It is a light thing for the shadow to go down ten degrees: nay, but let the shadow return backward ten degrees.***

Hezekiah asks himself, which is the more difficult? How stupid! Both are equally easy to God. But, to his little mind, for the dial to go backwards was harder, so he asked for that. We're just told that the shadow went back. Does this mean the sun did as well? Either way, it's a miracle. In Scripture, there's one example of the Lord moving the sun out of its usual course, when Gibeon was attacked and Joshua helped the Gibeonites to victory:

Joshua 10:12-14

*Then spake Joshua to the Lord in the day when the Lord delivered up the Amorites before the children of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel, Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon. And the sun stood still, and the moon stayed, until the people had avenged themselves upon their enemies. Is not this written in the book of Jasher? So the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and hasted not to go down about a whole day. And there was no day like that before it or after it, that the Lord hearkened unto the voice of a man: for the Lord fought for Israel.*

The shadow was going to move, Hezekiah only decided which way the shadow would go.

***[11] And Isaiah the prophet cried unto the Lord: and he brought the shadow ten degrees backward, by which it had gone down in the dial of Ahaz.***

And again, Isaiah isn't asking for the sun to move, he's just telling the Lord that Hezekiah wanted the shadow to go backwards. The "**dial of Ahaz**" is interesting. I don't know if Ahaz was a sun worshipper, but he must have constructed a notable sundial somewhere.

So, Hezekiah recovers. Then he gets a visit from some envoys from Babylon:

***[12] At that time Berodach-baladan, the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent letters and a present unto Hezekiah: for he had heard that Hezekiah had been sick.***

Babylon, at this time was a small country far to the east, similar in size to Judah. It had already been conquered by Assyria. Nobody could possibly have known that just over a hundred years later, Babylon would become an even bigger superpower than Assyria. It would defeat Assyria, capture Judah, exile its inhabitants, and even conquer Egypt too.

***[13] And Hezekiah hearkened unto them, and shewed them all the house of his precious things, the silver, and the gold, and the spices, and the precious ointment, and all the house of his armour, and all that was found in his treasures: there was nothing in his house, nor in all his dominion, that Hezekiah shewed them not.***

Hezekiah had no idea of the threat Babylon would become, so he happily accepted their present and letters and showed them around. But it was a pretty dumb thing to do. If I told you I've got two million pounds of gold bars in my garage, and I even showed you them (I haven't), just knowing they're there would be a temptation for you to take them.

But Hezekiah was proud. In his heart, he wanted to show off what he had. He didn't want to hide his wealth, but flaunt it. This was a good opportunity. We're told in 2 Chronicles:

2 Chronicles 32:31

*Howbeit in the business of the ambassadors of the princes of Babylon, who sent unto him to enquire of the wonder that was done in the land, God left him, to try him, that he might know all that was in his heart.*

God knew what was in Hezekiah's heart already, but He gave him the extra fifteen years, and this visit from the Babylonians, amongst other things, so he'd know himself. We all need to know what we're really like. Only then can we truly repent and obey the Lord.

***[14] Then came Isaiah the prophet unto king Hezekiah, and said unto him, What said these men? and from whence came they unto thee? And Hezekiah said, They are come from a far country, even from Babylon.***

Isaiah is used as God's instrument to rebuke him. He asks what the men said, and where did they come from? Hezekiah only answered the last question, probably because these envoys didn't actually say anything, he showed them his wealth without being prompted.

***[15] And he said, What have they seen in thine house? And Hezekiah answered, All the things that are in mine house have they seen: there is nothing among my treasures that I have not shewed them.***

So Isaiah asks him another question. ***"What have they seen in thy house?"*** To which Hezekiah answered truthfully, he'd shown them all his treasures. He didn't seem to think that was a foolish thing to do, he thought it was good to shew off his possessions.

***[16] And Isaiah said unto Hezekiah, Hear the word of the Lord . [17] Behold, the days come, that all that is in thine house, and that which thy fathers have laid up in store unto this day, shall be carried into Babylon: nothing shall be left, saith the Lord .***

Isaiah prophesied, surprise, surprise, that all the treasures he'd shown them would one day be taken away by the same people, the Babylonians. It wouldn't happen until a hundred or so years later, it would be the descendants of those whom Hezekiah had actually shown all his treasures to that would take them away, but it was going to happen.

***[18] And of thy sons that shall issue from thee, which thou shalt beget, shall they take away; and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.***

And not only that, but Isaiah prophesies that Hezekiah's descendants would be taken away to Babylon too, and made eunuchs, so they would have no more descendants. The monarchy would end. What a disaster for Judah! And what was Hezekiah's response?

***[19] Then said Hezekiah unto Isaiah, Good is the word of the Lord which thou hast spoken. And he said, Is it not good, if peace and truth be in my days?***

What a selfish attitude! That's good, it's not going to happen to me. It doesn't matter if the nation gets wiped off the map later, that's not my problem. Hezekiah's attitude here is so much different from his youth, when he was so keen on loving the Lord and doing His will.

And this wasn't the only incident the Lord used to try him. In 2 Chronicles, we're also told:

2 Chronicles 32:25

*But Hezekiah rendered not again according to the benefit done unto him [that is his recovery from sickness]; for his heart was lifted up: therefore there was wrath upon him, and upon Judah and Jerusalem.*

The whole nation of Judah was affected by Hezekiah's selfishness. Leaders have responsibilities. This happens in every walk of life. The acts of heads of households affect the rest of the family. Our sins affect other people, not just ourselves. But we're also told:

2 Chronicles 32:26

*Notwithstanding Hezekiah humbled himself for the pride of his heart, both he and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the wrath of the Lord came not upon them in the days of Hezekiah.*

Although his heart was lifted up, which affected the nation for a time, we're told he ***"humbled himself for the pride of his heart."*** And that's what we should do. And notice it was ***"both he and the inhabitants of Jerusalem."*** So he must have publicly acknowledged his sin before the people, otherwise they wouldn't have humbled themselves as well. Public sin requires public repentance. If our sin has affected anyone else, they need to know of our repentance, so they can be corrected too, in case we've led them astray.

***[20] And the rest of the acts of Hezekiah, and all his might, and how he made a pool, and a conduit, and brought water into the city, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah?***

Hezekiah making a conduit and bringing water into the city wasn't during this last fifteen years. If you read 1 Chronicles 32, it was before the siege by the Assyrians. Jerusalem's only water supply was the Gihon spring, which was outside the city walls. Hezekiah realised the Assyrian armies were marching towards him, so he blocked off the spring and dug a tunnel, so the water could be accessed from the pool of Siloam, inside the city

walls. If you go to Jerusalem today you can walk through it. It's knee deep in water and about 1 km long. So this exploit was before the siege, not in this last useless fifteen years.

**[21] And Hezekiah slept with his fathers: and Manasseh his son reigned in his stead.**

And there's another thing Hezekiah did in this fifteen added years. He got married. Nothing wrong with marriage. But he had a son, Manasseh, who succeeded him as king at the age of 12. Manasseh turned out to be even more evil than Ahaz:

2 Kings 21:1-3

*Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign, and reigned fifty and five years in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was Hephzibah. And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, after the abominations of the heathen, whom the Lord cast out before the children of Israel. For he built up again the high places which Hezekiah his father had destroyed; and he reared up altars for Baal, and made a grove, as did Ahab king of Israel; and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served them.*

Manasseh was the most evil king Judah ever had, and it was his long 55-year reign and influence which spelt the end of the kingdom altogether, as Jeremiah prophesied:

Jeremiah 15:4

*And I will cause them to be removed into all kingdoms of the earth, because of Manasseh the son of Hezekiah king of Judah, for that which he did in Jerusalem.*

The evil the Lord brought on Judah was the exile into Babylon. This time there would be no miraculous escape, as happened after the Assyrian siege in Hezekiah's day.

If we read the 2 Chronicles version of Manasseh's life, we find that, towards the end of his life, he turned to the Lord, which shows us that even the greatest of sinners can be saved, if he truly repents and turns to the Lord. In the last five years of his life he tried desperately to reverse all the damage he'd done in the previous fifty years, but he couldn't. The people were so hardened by all he'd done they would never repent.

Manasseh's grandson Josiah was a good king, and just like Hezekiah, he cleansed the Temple, restored the worship and held a huge Passover feast. But the people didn't follow. Manasseh's fifty years of wicked rule so seared the hearts of the people of Judah, they could no longer repent, and the Lord had no alternative but to sent them into exile.

So what can we learn from Hezekiah, especially his last fifteen useless years?

1. We must prepare for our death, no matter what age we are. Get right with God, that's the most important thing for us to do, and happily, despite his sins, Hezekiah had done it.
2. If ever God tells us, "**thou shalt die, and not live,**" we ought to be ready, and acquiesce to God's plan. He's got plenty of work for His people to do here, but one day we must lay it all down, and if God says that now is the time, He always knows best.
3. Hezekiah did so much good work for the Lord in his youth, but the last fifteen years were useless. "**His heart was lifted up.**" Here's a warning to us oldies. Make sure this

doesn't happen to us. Make sure we love the Lord and do His work to the end. Hezekiah was only 52 when he died, but we should never think avoiding sin gets easier, because it doesn't. We might have different sins. It might be possessions that become a snare, or our comfortable life. Sin will be with us to the end. But we know that in the next world:

Revelation 22:3-5

*There shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him: And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads. And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever.*

That's what we've got to look forward to.

## 2 Kings 22. Good King Josiah

King Josiah was the last good king of Judah. He lived at a very difficult time, not unlike the times we're in today. After he died, three of his sons and a grandson ruled in turn, but didn't last very long and all of them were evil. After their reign, the unthinkable happened. Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, the Temple destroyed, and the monarchy ended.

But wasn't Jerusalem the place God had chosen to put His name for ever?

Deuteronomy 12:10,11

*But when ye go over Jordan, and dwell in the land which the Lord your God giveth you to inherit, and when he giveth you rest from all your enemies round about, so that ye dwell in safety; Then there shall be a place which the Lord your God shall choose to cause his name to dwell there....*

Psalms 132:13,14

*For the Lord hath chosen Zion; he hath desired it for his habitation. This is my rest for ever: here will I dwell; for I have desired it.*

What was God doing? Why did He allow Jerusalem to be destroyed like this?

**[1] Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign, and he reigned thirty and one years in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was Jedidah, the daughter of Adaiah of Boscath.**

Josiah became king at the age of 8. He reigned 31 years. He died at 39, in a battle he foolishly got involved in. His father was the previous king, the wicked king Amon:

2 Kings 21:19-24

*Amon was twenty and two years old when he began to reign, and he reigned two years in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was Meshullemeth, the daughter of Haruz of Jotbah. And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, as his father Manasseh did. And he walked in all the way that his father walked in, and served the idols that his father served, and worshipped them: And he forsook the Lord God of his fathers, and walked not in the way of the Lord. And the servants of Amon conspired against him, and slew the king in his own house. And the people of the land slew all them that had conspired against king Amon; and the people of the land made Josiah his son king in his stead.*

Thankfully the Lord took king Amon away quickly. After only two years, his servants killed him, and the 8 year old Josiah was set on the throne instead. This all goes to show:

Daniel 2:21

*....he [God] removeth kings, and setteth up kings....*

Psalms 75:6,7

*For promotion cometh neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south. But God is the judge: he putteth down one, and setteth up another.*

The Lord is in control. Whether evil kings or good kings are in power, the Lord sets the limits of their reigns. And He ordains everything for one overarching purpose:

Acts 17:26,27

*And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; [why?] That they should seek the Lord...*

And we're told that most of our leaders will be evil. Most of them will hate the Lord:

Psalms 2:2,3

*The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against his anointed, saying, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us.*

But that doesn't mean they're not set up by God. Cyrus king of Persia was an unbeliever:

Isaiah 44:28

*That saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid.*

God calls Cyrus "my shepherd" not because he was one of the Lord's people, but because through him, the Lord would arrange the decree for the Jews to return.

And we're to obey our rulers, and never rebel. Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft:

Romans 13:1,2

*Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.*

Paul probably wrote that in the time of Nero. We're to obey our rulers in all things except when they try to force us to sin. Like when Nebuchadnezzar tried to force Daniel and his friends to worship idols. In that case we disobey and take the unjust consequences.

And we're called to pray for our leaders. But not in everything. We're not to pray about their policies. The Lord will do what the Lord will do in them. We only pray for two things: their salvation, and that we Christians can live our Christian lives unhindered by them:

1 Timothy 2:1,2

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

We leave the rising and falling of empires to the Lord as he ordains everything for one purpose: "that [men] should seek the Lord." And in fact, that's just what king Josiah did:

***[2] And he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, and walked in all the way of David his father, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left.***

In the parallel passage in 2 Chronicles, we're given a few more details about this:



2 Chronicles 34:3

*For in the eighth year of his reign, while he was yet young, he began to seek after the God of David his father....*

So he would have been 16. At the age when most teenagers go their own way and reject God, he instead rejected the wickedness of his father, and began to seek after the Lord. That's commented on: "*while he was yet young.*" So, never give up on stroppy teenagers.

Josiah as a very small child would have known his grandfather, Manasseh. Manasseh reigned for 55 years. He was Judah's longest reigning king and by far its most wicked. He built altars for Baal, he brought idols into the Temple, he made his son pass through the fire: he used enchantments, and dealt with familiar spirits and wizards. You name it, he did it. We might be thankful that the Lord took king Amon away after only two years, but how would we feel if we lived under such a wicked king for such a long time? However dark the times, we've just got to trust the Lord knows what He's doing. And He must have answered so many prayers because Manasseh became one of the Lord's people:

2 Chronicles 33:10-13

*And the Lord spake to Manasseh, and to his people: but they would not hearken. Wherefore the Lord brought upon them the captains of the host of the king of Assyria, which took Manasseh among the thorns, and bound him with fetters, and carried him to Babylon. And when he was in affliction, he besought the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, And prayed unto him: and he was intreated of him, and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord he was God.*

Manasseh is one of the greatest examples in the Bible of the fact that even the worst of sinners can find grace in the eyes of the Lord. Another one is the apostle Paul:

1 Timothy 1:15

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

Both Manasseh and the apostle Paul saw the depth of their own sin. They saw it for what it really was before God. And that's what we need to do. The more we see the depth of our own sin, the more we'll see our need of Jesus Christ to save us from our sins.

For 50 years Manasseh led Judah astray. After he knew the Lord, he spent the last 5 years of his life desperately trying to undo everything he'd done, but he couldn't. The people under his long reign had become so hardened, they were no longer able to repent.

But, these last five years were the formative years of his grandson, Josiah, who would've been between 1 and 6. 10 years after his grandfather's death, maybe he remembered him when he "*began to seek after the God of David his father.*" We may think our witness to others is ineffective. But who knows what effect we can have, even long after our death.

Four years after he'd begun to seek the Lord, Josiah was ready to do something:

2 Chronicles 34:3

*...and in the twelfth year [age 20] he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem from the high places, and the groves, and the carved images, and the molten images.*

Josiah began to purge Judah of all the places of false worship. After all, that was the king's duty. But I can't help wonder what the hardened people really thought about this. Cleansing the land probably made Josiah very unpopular.

**[3] And it came to pass in the eighteenth year of king Josiah [of his reign (2 Chronicles 34:8), So he's now 26], that the king sent Shaphan the son of Azaliah, the son of Meshullam, the scribe, to the house of the Lord, saying, [4] Go up to Hilkiah the high priest, that he may sum the silver which is brought into the house of the Lord, which the keepers of the door have gathered of the people:**

One of the things Josiah did was organise a collection for repair work on the Temple.

**[5] And let them deliver it into the hand of the doers of the work, that have the oversight of the house of the Lord : and let them give it to the doers of the work which is in the house of the Lord, to repair the breaches of the house, [6] Unto carpenters, and builders, and masons, and to buy timber and hewn stone to repair the house.**

We're told the Temple had breaches in it. How had the Temple got into such a state of disrepair? We read of Manasseh's father Hezekiah repairing the doors, but before that, the previous time we read about major repairs on the Temple was way back in the days of good king Joash, over 200 years before. Was this simply 200 years of wear and tear?

2 Chronicles 34:11

*Even to the artificers and builders gave they it, to buy hewn stone, and timber for couplings, and to floor the houses **which the kings of Judah had destroyed.***

An enemy hadn't destroyed it. Previous kings had neglected it for 200 years. The thing about essential repairs is that you spend all that money, but don't see much in return, the work's all hidden. So the money would've been spent on far more exciting things.

And repairs will always be needed, because this world is subject to decay. Bread goes mouldy. Leaves fall off trees. We're all getting older. These things should all point us to the fact we're living in a fallen world. And that in turn should point us to the Lord:

Psalms 39:11

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

**[7] Howbeit there was no reckoning made with them of the money that was delivered into their hand, because they dealt faithfully.**

The workmen could be given all the money and they didn't need to give an account, because they'd built up a reputation for being honest and having integrity.

There are many unbelievers, who are totally trustworthy. And when we come across them, we're tempted to doubt what the Bible says about the human heart:

Jeremiah 17:9

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

And then we can also come across professed Christians who aren't trustworthy. I used to be involved selling Christian books. Christian booksellers just don't pay their bills. It's so much easier to deal with secular bookshops, they're far more professional and trustworthy. It shouldn't be like that. We should be the ones with the reputation for integrity and honesty. Now, maybe these workmen were believers, we don't know.

And then, just as work on the Temple is progressing, the High Priest finds something:

***[8] And Hilkiyah the high priest said unto Shaphan the scribe, I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord. And Hilkiyah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it.***

As he's clearing out, he finds the book of the Law. We read about Hezekiah, Manasseh's father, setting up the Temple worship "according to the law of Moses," so it seems to have been there then. So it must have got lost during Manasseh's reign.

Hilkiyah immediately realises it's importance and gives it to Shaphan the scribe "***and he read it.***" It's no good having a Bible, unless we read it. Just sitting on the shelf is no good. The Jews thought they were God's chosen people because God had given them the Scriptures. That was a great privilege, but they didn't read it and do what it says:

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.*

***[9] And Shaphan the scribe came to the king, and brought the king word again, and said, Thy servants have gathered the money that was found in the house, and have delivered it into the hand of them that do the work, that have the oversight of the house of the Lord.***

Shaphan did his duty to report back to the king. Normally, when you're in the presence of the king, you say what there is to say then leave. Otherwise you could get into trouble. But Shaphan was so concerned about the contents of this book, he had to tell the king:

***[10] And Shaphan the scribe shewed the king, saying, Hilkiyah the priest hath delivered me a book. And Shaphan read it before the king.***

He read the book aloud to the king. And look at the king's reaction:

***[11] And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the law, that he rent his clothes.***

What made Shaphan so concerned he had to tell the king? And what had made the king rend his clothes? Because they realised that both they and the whole nation had failed to keep the words in the book. This book convicts us of sin. It's no ordinary book. It's alive:

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.*

So the king immediately got together his best counsellors:

***[12] And the king commanded Hilkiah the priest, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Achbor the son of Michaiah, and Shaphan the scribe, and Asahiah a servant of the king's, saying, [13] Go ye, enquire of the Lord for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found: for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book, to do according unto all that which is written concerning us.***

Temple worship continued as normal, and nobody had noticed the book had got lost. It's a terrible thing when the outward form of worship, the church traditions, still carry on, but the Scriptures have gone missing. That's the state of so many places of worship today.

***“great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book.”*** We don't talk about the wrath of the Lord today. It's conveniently forgotten. Why? Because the Scriptures have been forgotten. God is not just a God of love and mercy. He is that, and we should be thankful. But He's also a God of holiness and justice. Not hearkening to the words of this book incurs God's wrath.

And Josiah commands his men to ***“Go ye, enquire of the Lord”*** about this. How were they to do that? In those days, to know the Lord's will, one had to visit a prophet:

***[14] So Hilkiah the priest, and Ahikam, and Achbor, and Shaphan, and Asahiah, went unto Huldah the prophetess, the wife of Shallum the son of Tikvah, the son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe; (now she dwelt in Jerusalem in the college;) and they communed with her.***

They went straight to Huldah the prophetess. Why did they go to her? Jeremiah and Zephaniah were around, although Jeremiah had only just started his ministry, maybe he wasn't well known. Maybe Huldah was easily accessible, and had a good reputation.

***[15] And she said unto them, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Tell the man that sent you to me,***

Prophets always began by saying **“Thus saith the Lord.”** In their time, they were the mouthpiece of God. But we don’t need prophets any more now Christ has come:

Hebrews 1:1,2

*God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son....*

We’ve now got the complete canon of Scripture, and the Holy Spirit in us to interpret it:

***[16] Thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, and upon the inhabitants thereof, even all the words of the book which the king of Judah hath read: [17] Because they have forsaken me, and have burned incense unto other gods, that they might provoke me to anger with all the works of their hands; therefore my wrath shall be kindled against this place, and shall not be quenched.***

**“my wrath shall be kindled against this place, and shall not be quenched.”** There was no way of avoiding the judgment on the land. The Lord revealed this later to Jeremiah too:

Jeremiah 15:4

*And I will cause them to be removed into all kingdoms of the earth, because of Manasseh the son of Hezekiah king of Judah, for that which he did in Jerusalem.*

It was Manasseh’s fault. He’s always going to be known as the king who hardened the people of Judah so much, they became incapable as a nation of repentance. And yet, Manasseh himself repented. How he must have regretted everything he’d done in the 50 years before he knew the Lord. And what about us? Just think of the consequences of all the terrible things we’ve done to others in our past. How ashamed we should be.

That’s why the call to repent and believe in Christ for salvation is urgent. The sooner we repent, the better. What a terrible life we lead if we’re living for self. And we don’t even notice the damage we do to others while we’re like that. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. He saved Manasseh. He saved the apostle Paul. And He can save us and change us forever, if we only repent of our sin and put our trust in Him for our salvation.

The good news is that everything is under the Lord’s control. All that mess we’ve made in the past, He can turn around to His glory. So let’s not get too depressed about our past. Rather, realise it’s been forgiven in Jesus Christ. And be eternally thankful:

Philippians 3:13,14

*....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.*

It was too late for the nation of Judah to avoid the judgment. But despite that, Josiah still carried on cleansing the nation of idols, and we read he held a great Passover festival:

2 Kings 23:22

*Surely there was not holden such a passover from the days of the judges that judged Israel, nor in all the days of the kings of Israel, nor of the kings of Judah....*

Outward religion in the nation had never been better. Josiah organised the biggest, best Passover celebration ever held. But, although the people outwardly went along with it, their hearts weren't in it. Otherwise the judgment would've been averted. So, do we long to be in a more lively church elsewhere? Maybe we hanker for revivals of the past. Wouldn't it be great if we lived in the time of the Puritans, or whatever. No. The fact is that the Lord has put us here, now. Be thankful for what we've got. In any case, whatever might seem so good outwardly, we don't know the reality. We can't see people's hearts.

But Huldah had a prophecy for Josiah, which was altogether different from the nation:

***[18] But to the king of Judah which sent you to enquire of the Lord, thus shall ye say to him, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, As touching the words which thou hast heard; [19] Because thine heart was tender, and thou hast humbled thyself before the Lord, when thou heardest what I spake against this place, and against the inhabitants thereof, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and hast rent thy clothes, and wept before me; I also have heard thee, saith the Lord. [20] Behold therefore, I will gather thee unto thy fathers, and thou shalt be gathered into thy grave in peace; and thine eyes shall not see all the evil which I will bring upon this place. And they brought the king word again.***

Huldah's prophecy for the nation was one of doom. But her personal prophecy for Josiah gives all of us hope. God deals with us as individuals. He dealt with Manasseh. He deals here with Josiah. We can't say we're Christian because we're born in a Christian country, or because we go to a Christian church. A nation can't save us. Not even a church can save us. Nations and churches come and go as the Lord sees fit. But no matter how bad our own personal situation, we can be saved by God out of it, but only as individuals.

Ezekiel 14:13,14

*Son of man, when the land sinneth against me by trespassing grievously, then will I stretch out mine hand upon it, and will break the staff of the bread thereof, and will send famine upon it, and will cut off man and beast from it: Though these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they should deliver but their own souls by their righteousness, saith the Lord God.*

So, what do we need to do to escape the coming judgment? Take Josiah as our example:

- his heart was tender.
- he humbled himself before the Lord.
- he rent his clothes. A sign of mourning for his sins.
- he wept before the Lord.

In the next chapter, we're told:

2 Kings 23:25,26

*And like unto him was there no king before him, that turned to the Lord with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; neither after him arose there any like him. Notwithstanding the Lord turned not from the fierceness of his great wrath, wherewith his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations that Manasseh had provoked him withal.*

Jerusalem was going to be destroyed. But Josiah's hope wasn't in physical Jerusalem. He had a sure hope in a heavenly Jerusalem to look forward to:

Revelation 21:2-4

*And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.*

And we too can receive that sure hope Josiah had. Seek the Lord while He may be found:

Jeremiah 29:13

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

## **Job 33:27-28. He Looketh Upon Men**

*Read Psalm 139 and Job 33*

I just want to look at two verses today. And they are Job 33:27-28:

***[27] He looketh upon men, and if any say, I have sinned, and perverted that which was right, and it profited me not; [28] He will deliver his soul from going into the pit, and his life shall see the light.***

So let's go through each phrase in turn to see what we can learn.

***He....***

Who is the "**He**"? In context, it must be speaking about God. I know some translations disagree and think it's one man speaking to others. But in the previous verse it says:

Job 33:26

*....for he will render unto man his righteousness.*

So, who else can that be but God? And the following verses are even more clear:

Job 33:29,30

*Lo, all these things worketh God oftentimes with man, to bring back his soul from the pit, to be enlightened with the light of the living.*

So this is speaking about the work of God. And it's important to understand that the Bible assumes God's existence. The very first verse of the Bible is:

Genesis 1:1

*In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.*

The Bible doesn't waste time trying to "prove" the existence of God. Neither should we. In any case, it's impossible. And, I hasten to add, it's also impossible to disprove it. It depends what we mean by "proof". What do people want as "proof"? Can we detect God with our senses? No. Can we detect Him with scientific instruments? No. So, the atheist swiftly concludes He's not there, He can't exist. But that's a logical fallacy, in other words, the conclusion doesn't follow. It may seem to follow. People will try to persuade us it follows. But it doesn't follow. God is there, and we can "know" Him. But only those to whom God shews Himself can know that. The unbeliever is in total spiritual darkness:

John 3:19

*And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.*

In the past, men have put forward philosophical arguments to try to "prove" God exists, but they too all contain logical fallacies. Logic isn't taught in schools any more. It used to be. It should be. Knowing some simple logic is all we need to see how conclusions can so easily be wrong. Don't bother trying to prove God exists. We can't, and it's not necessary.



Atheists never attempt to disprove the existence of God. They think they don't need to. They've already made their mind up that the existence of God is ridiculous, like little green men on the moon. So they say the onus must be on us to prove it. But that's a false conclusion too. It's not ridiculous at all. Belief in God is completely rational and sensible.

Never let an atheist try to force us into thinking we have to prove God's existence. It isn't possible, and we don't need to. Just concentrate on living our lives in the light of His presence. That's our witness. Leave it to their conscience to convict them of the truth:

Romans 1:20

*For the invisible things of him [God] 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....*

Creation shews us God's "eternal power and Godhead," so everybody is without excuse. And we all have a conscience to convict us of that. We don't need to argue anything.

So what is God doing? "**He....**":

***....looketh upon men,....***

The almighty all-powerful Creator God is looking upon all of us. And He's not merely looking, just to see what we're doing down here. It's not as though He's just wound the world up like a watch, set it going, looking occasionally to see how we're getting on, but otherwise leaving us alone. Far from it. "**He looketh upon men.**" We're under His scrutiny.

God is all-knowing. He knows exactly everything that's going on. We can't hide anything from Him. Hagar gave God a name (Genesis 16:13): *Thou God seest me.*

And He doesn't just see outward actions, but He sees into the very depths of our hearts. We can think nothing that He doesn't know already what we're thinking. That frightens us, because we don't want anybody else to go there. Anyone who can see down there into the depths of our being, we can't hide anything from, we can't lie to or cheat on:

Psalms 7:9

*The righteous God trieth the hearts and reins.*

Hebrews 4:13

*Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.*

People laugh at the very idea of this. I was in a group of unbelievers once, and one of them, mocking, said, "The sweet baby Jesus sees everything you do." And everybody burst out laughing. When we're in such company, again, don't argue. Just walk away. Let the dead bury their dead. That's the best witness. Don't say anything. Leave them to it.

Revelation 22:11

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

Not only does God see all we say and do and think, but we can never get away from Him:

Psalm 139:7-10

*Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.*

People try to avoid the thought there's an almighty God watching over them. Especially one who sees their every move, and knows every last thing they're thinking in their hearts. A God they can never get away from. They don't want that. They want the freedom to lie, and to deceive others, so they can get what they want. But **"God looketh upon men."**

And He's not looking for His own entertainment. If He's looking, it must be for a purpose. Why would He bother otherwise? What is He looking for? **"God looketh upon men...."**:

**....and if any say,....**

He's looking for us to say something. He is waiting for any one of us to communicate with Him. It is possible for us to communicate with the one true living Creator God at any time if we really want to. But most people don't want to. And what is He looking for us to say?

Does it say here: "God looketh upon men, and if any say, 'I've lived a good life' "? No.

Does it say: "And if any say, 'I've done more good than bad' "? No.

It says **"and if any say,"** these golden words:

**....I have sinned....**

That ought to surprise us. Surely God is looking for righteous people, those who do what pleases Him. He can't possibly be looking for sinners. Surely the devil is the one looking for sinners, so they can carry on sinning with him. Surely God is looking for those who keep the Ten Commandments. Well, actually, that's right, He is. Christ Himself said so:

Luke 10:25-28

*And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? He said unto him, ['believe in Me and you'll be saved by grace'. No He didn't. He said:] What is written in the law? how readest thou? And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself. And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live.*

That's straightforward. *"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself."* That's a summary of the Ten Commandments. O.K. Do it. Live a perfect life. We've got a promise here, *"This do, and thou shalt live."* Remember, God sees the heart. So, outward actions aren't enough. We've got to do it genuinely, in thought and word and deed, all the time.

Who can do that? None of us, even for a second. And what about the sins we've already committed? We're undone, we can't attain to this. That's what Christ wanted this lawyer to understand. If we could keep the law, we'd live, but we can't, so we're all guilty.

Romans 3:19

*Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.*

That's the role of the Law. It shows us God's perfect standard, but also how far short we fall of it. So, God simply wants us to acknowledge we've fallen short. **"I have sinned."**

The Christian faith is far more than that, but acknowledging **"I have sinned,"** is always the first step. When Jesus Christ started His public ministry, He didn't start teaching in a vacuum. Before He began His work, He sent a forerunner ahead of Him, John the Baptist. John preached a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. He instituted a ceremony using water, baptism, to symbolise the fact that whoever underwent it recognised **"I have sinned,"** and wanted to repent, or change. It was a baptism unto repentance. John would then point them to Jesus Christ as the One to trust in to be saved from their sins. He must increase, I must decrease. Hear Him.

Acknowledging **"I have sinned"** is the starting point of the Christian life. But it's hardly ever taught anywhere in the Christian church today. Go to any church, watch any online service, or any so-called "Christian" TV channel, even the most conservative ones, and sin is never mentioned. They'll talk about lots of other things, but persuading people to say **"I have sinned"** is not one of them.

And I think it's partly to do with a modern teaching that's crept into the church, which goes like this: Christ died for our sins on the cross, once and for all. Sounds good. That's true. So, they say, He's dealt with sin. So now we don't need to think about sin any more. In fact it's a sin to think about sin any more. Just realise the freedom that Christ has given us all. Just come to Jesus. No need to bother about sin. No need to repent. No need to change in any way. Just come. Now sin has been taken away, realise what a wonderful human being you really are underneath. No. The gospel is not "come to Jesus." It's **"Repent and come to Jesus."** Each one of us as individuals has got to first acknowledge personally **"I have sinned."** **Then** we can come to Him to cleanse us from our sin.

And it's not just about mouthing the words **"I have sinned"** either. Pharaoh, Balaam, Achan, Saul, Shimei and Judas all said these words. But none of them had any intention of changing in any way. They just said it to get out of a temporary mess they found themselves in. Pharaoh said to Moses, **"I have sinned,"** but only because a plague was ravaging his land. He promised to let the people go, but as soon as the plague was over he didn't. He knew very well as he was saying those words, he wasn't going to.

So it's not simply about mouthing words. Neither is it simply about sins against others, although if we have sinned against someone it's better to acknowledge it than ignore it. Nor simply about admitting, "I'm not perfect," although that's better than thinking I am.

It's about sinning against God. Now, there are some people who do recognise they've sinned against a higher being. My wife was once in a taxi going to Manchester airport. The driver said to her "I'm going to Mecca next week." Not getting much of a response,

he then asked, “Do you know why I’m going to Mecca next week?” To which my wife replied was it something to do with making the pilgrimage once in your life. He said, “No, it’s not that. I go every year. Why do you think I go every year?” He was going to tell her anyway. “To cleanse myself of my sins.” Now, I don’t know what they do. Shave their heads and throw stones at the devil, I don’t know. But at least there was a man who went to great pains to try to cleanse himself from his sins. We don’t often meet people like that these days. Most people aren’t in the slightest bit interested in getting rid of their sins. He was going the wrong way about doing it, but at least he realised **“I have sinned.”**

Sadly, most people who do at least acknowledge their sins before God, think that if they perform some ritual that they’ve been taught, they can atone for their sins themselves. So they go to Mecca, like this man. Or maybe they confess their sins to a priest in a confessional box, who tells them to say a couple of Hail Marys and that’s it, job done. Or maybe they walk round and round a temple with their prayer wheel. Whatever they do, they’re all rituals invented by men. God didn’t tell anyone to do any of that. None of it is ever enough to atone for sins. And they have to keep on doing it. There’s never any end.

To realise that no ritual can cleanse us from our sins, we really need to see the depth of our sin. God has got something more He wants us to acknowledge: **“I have sinned....”**

**....and perverted that which was right,....**

We have perverted that which was right. There is a right and wrong in this world. There is an absolute morality, given to us by God, for all time. God has told us how we should live.

Micah 6:8

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

And He gave the nation of Israel a particular privilege by giving them a summary of how He wants us to live in the form of Ten Commandments. We must acknowledge we’ve not only broken them, but perverted them, twisted them and call good, evil and evil, good.

Malachi 2:17

*Ye have wearied the LORD with your words. Yet ye say, Wherein have we wearied him? When ye say, Every one that doeth evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delighteth in them; or, Where is the God of judgment?*

Isaiah 5:20

*Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!*

Let’s quickly go through some of the Commandments to see how we’ve perverted them:

*Thou shalt not kill.* We might say “I’ve never killed anybody.” But we’ve probably wanted to. And, in our society we think it nothing to abort babies. We call it a woman’s right to choose. But does a serial killer have a right to choose to terminate life? Of course not.

*Thou shalt not commit adultery.* We should be faithful to our partners. But given the opportunity, and a belief they’ll never find out, everybody does it. It’s the new normal.

*Thou shalt not steal.* But we're quite happy to steal from work, the government, or NHS, or any big organisation if we think there's money to be had out of them.

*Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.* We all know we shouldn't lie, but we do all the time. We put on a shew to make us appear better than we really are.

*Thou shalt not covet.* We think it's all right to desire our neighbour's property, because we're not actually stealing it. We think nobody can see our inner desires. But God can.

*Honour thy father and thy mother.* If the truth be known, most people are not in the idyllic happy families we dream of. Most are in dysfunctional families. In any case, in our society, we don't live in multi-generational households. The children leave home as soon as they can to be free from any parental control. And if our parents become too much bother, we just dump them in a care home.

That's six of the Commandments. The other four deal with God Himself. If we're not even going to believe He exists, we're certainly not going to keep any of these:

*Thou shalt have no other gods before me.* Most today believe all religions lead to God. But one look at the so-called "holy" books of each religion, and we find they all teach their faith to be exclusive. So they might all be wrong, but they certainly can't all be right.

*Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.* Go to Jerusalem. 2% of the population is Christian, the rest are Muslims and Jews. I found it quite remarkable that Muslims and Jews don't seem to have a problem keeping idols out of their mosques and synagogues. Yet every "Christian" church is full of statues and icons. Why do we have such a problem?

*Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain.* Taking God's name in vain is considered to be the mildest form of swearing.

*Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.* God has set apart one day in seven for us to specifically worship Him. Yet even Christians disagree as to which day this is. Some say Saturday, some Sunday and some both. We can't even agree amongst ourselves.

So, every one of us has "**perverted that which is right**" and we must acknowledge it. But why do we behave like this? There must be a reason, otherwise we wouldn't do it.

Well, God wants us to say something else. "**I have sinned, and perverted that which is right,....**"

**....and it profited me not;....**

We do it for our own profit. We live our lives for our own benefit. Me, me, me. We must acknowledge that the way of life we've led right up to this point has been utterly selfish. Completely for ourselves. We need to realise how self-centred we all are. And we should want to change. Want to be finished with living this way. That's what God is looking for. A realisation that, "I thought the way I led my life would profit me, but it never did."

And we're not talking just financial profit here. It's the pursuit of anything for self. Happiness, pleasure, worldly comforts. There may be nothing wrong with some of these things in themselves, but the pursuit of them, to the exclusion of everything else, is the problem. It's the love of money, the love of these things, that's the root of all evil.

In Ecclesiastes chapter 2, we read of King Solomon. He had everything anyone could ever want. He had almost limitless finances, limitless resources, power and the opportunity to do anything he wanted. And, more to the point, God gave him wisdom. He was the second wisest man that ever lived, apart from Christ Himself. With this wisdom, he could understand what having all these things could do. So he tried everything out:

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

*I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure: and, behold, this also is vanity. I said of laughter, It is mad: and of mirth, What doeth it? I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine, yet acquainting mine heart with wisdom; and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life. I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards: I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kind of fruits: I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees: I got me servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me: I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts. So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me. And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour: and this was my portion of all my labour. 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.*

Solomon, the second wisest man that ever lived, found out the hard way that the pursuit of pleasure and stuff in this world, for self, was vanity, vexation of spirit, pointless, and **without profit**. Jesus Christ, the wisest man that ever lived, went further than this:

Mark 8:36

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

Not only is the pursuit of self, without profit in this world, it also has eternal consequences. To do with the soul after death. And this is what we come on to now.

Once we admit before God these three things: "***I have sinned, and perverted that which is right, and it profited me not,***" God can then begin to work in us. And He does two things:

***....He will deliver his soul from going into the pit,....***

This is about the soul, so it's about what happens after death, after the soul has left the body. We're told "***He will deliver his soul from going down to the pit.***" In other words, if we carry on ignoring God, living our own lives for our own gratification, we're going to end up in this pit. This pit is the default position if we never acknowledge to God "***I have***

***sinned, and perverted that which is right, and it profited me not.***” That’s why this is so important.

What’s the pit? Christ Himself tells us most of what little we know about it. Firstly, it’s everlasting. It’s permanent, unlike this world which is only temporary. We’re not here for very long, but we’ll be there for ever. It’s described variously, by Jesus Christ Himself, as fire, torment, outer darkness, a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth, where the worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched. Put it this way, we don’t want to go there.

The medieval church has given us a distorted view of this. They depicted it as a place of flames with the devil in charge, poking people back in with his pitchfork if they ever tried to escape. The devil isn’t in charge of hell, God is. The devil is it’s most notorious inmate.

Matthew 25:41

*Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels....*

Many think that in hell they’ll see all their mates again and carry on sinning for ever. No they won’t. Do we really think God has created a place where people can sin forever? That’s just what they want. He’s created this world, where He allows people to sin for a time, but it’s only temporary. And He only allows sin in a limited way. There’s a lot of evil in this world. But God only allows to happen what He purposes to turn to His own glory in the end. Nobody will be able to sin in hell. They’ll all be bowing the knee to Jesus Christ:

Philippians 2:9-11

*Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, **and things under the earth**; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Those who have been delivered from the pit also, in the next world, won’t be able to sin any more, and also will be bowing the knee to Christ. The difference is that those in hell will be hating every minute of it. That’s their torment. They’ll know it’s right that they’re there. They won’t be shaking their fist in God’s face saying, “I hate you God. It’s your fault I’m here.” No. They’ll know exactly whose fault it is. They only have themselves to blame.

But those who’ve been delivered from the pit will love being in a place without sin, worshipping Jesus Christ for ever. They live in this world longing to be free from sin, and to see Him. And, one day, their longings will be realised.

Only God can deliver us from the pit. To avoid it, we must call upon Him while we’re still in this world, It’ll be too late once we’re in the pit. The Lord won’t be available then:

2 Thessalonians 1:9

*Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction **from the presence of the Lord**, and from the glory of his power;*

That doesn’t mean God won’t be there. God is in control of hell, God is everywhere. But He won’t be accessible any more. He’ll be silent. We won’t be able to call on Him, to pray to Him any more. Just as Christ was silent before Herod, and later Pontius Pilate. We must call on God now, while we’re still in this world, before it’s too late and He’s silent:

Isaiah 55:6,7

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

And we must come in this way: ***“I have sinned, and perverted that which is right, and it profited me not.”***

And we don't just receive deliverance from the pit. We also see the light:

***....and his life shall see the light....***

We'll see the light. And notice, ***our life*** shall see the light. We can see it in this world now, even before death, and it will continue to be with us in the next life to all eternity.

Psalms 36:9

*For with thee is the fountain of life: in thy light shall we see light.*

There's a world of difference between these two groups of people. One hates sin and loves Christ. The other loves sin and hates Christ. Total opposites. It's the difference between darkness and light. We're born in darkness. How can any of us come to this light? It's altogether opposite from what we see here and now. None of us can attain it by ourselves. We need God to reveal it to us. There's only one source of spiritual light:

John 8:12

*Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.*

If we come to God in this manner: ***“I have sinned, and perverted that which is right, and it profited me not,”*** and call on Him, He will reveal the light, Jesus Christ to us. And then we'll see. And we will be transformed. Like the man born blind healed by Christ:

John 9:25

*....one thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see.*

Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father. Christ said:

John 14:6

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

Jesus Christ died on the cross to atone for the sins of all who call upon Him. He knows who they are. And if we call, God will open our eyes to see Him as He really is. He'll transform our lives. Our eyes will be opened and we'll become altogether new:

2 Corinthians 5:17

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



This new birth is the most fundamental principle of the Christian faith. We must be transformed by God in this way. Because we can't do it ourselves. And we must come to the light, or else we'll end up in the pit. We must be born again by the Spirit of God.

These who come to Christ are the only ones who will escape going down to the pit. And they'll do that, not because they're better than anybody else, not by anything they've done, but by the sheer grace of God changing them. This is the position we all need to come to. And we must call on God to bring us there. But the only way is to come to God in this manner. Come to an end of ourselves and trust in God alone. May all of us do so:

***He [God] looketh upon men, and if any say, I have sinned, and perverted that which was right, and it profited me not; He will deliver his soul from going into the pit, and his life shall see the light.***

## **Psalm 73. The Prosperity of the Wicked**

### ***A psalm of Asaph.***

This psalm is one of twelve psalms that were written by Asaph. He was one of the chief singers appointed by King David for the worship in the Temple in Jerusalem. David's son Solomon actually built the Temple, but David made all the arrangements for it before he died, even down to the details of who the chief singers should be.

Asaph was a true believer. He knew the Lord for himself. And we find that out in v.1:

### ***[1] Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart.***

He knew God was good, and God would bless Israel. And he knew that the true Israel, the true people of God, weren't necessarily all those who were physically descended from Abraham. The Old Testament shows us that most of them rebelled against God. They weren't God's chosen people. But rather the true people of God are all "***such as are of a clean heart,***" those spiritually descended from Abraham as the "father of the faithful."

Galatians 3:7

*Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham.*

In other words, the ones who will inherit all the eternal promises of God are not the Jews as a race, but rather all those, both Jew and Gentile, who are of a clean heart. Christ said:

Matthew 5:8

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

These are true believers. These are the only ones on their way to heaven, who'll escape the judgment to come. The first thing we all have to admit is that none of us have a clean heart. By nature, we're all born in a sinful condition. We need to have our hearts completely renewed if we're to live clean and pure lives. So, first of all, we must cry to God for Him to give us a new heart. Only then, can we have a heart that seeks after purity.

But Asaph had a problem.

### ***[2] But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped.***

He was a true believer, but there was one big question he just couldn't understand. He knew that God was good to His people. He knew that God would keep His people, and look after them. He knew that God was kind and generous to His people. These things weren't the problem. He knew all that from his own experience of God. His problem came when he saw the wicked seemingly having such a better time of things than he was.

***[3] For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. [4] For there are no bands in their death: but their strength is firm. [5] They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men.***

He envied the wicked. They were so much more prosperous than he was. They didn't seem to have any difficulties in their lives and they were healthy and strong. Now, how much of that was actually true, we don't know. Wicked people tend to put on an outward show. Maybe many of them were really miserable in their hearts. They'd never show it if they were. But at least to Asaph, life seemed to be so much easier for them. God seemed to bless them more than those who loved righteousness and at least wanted to do what was right. He thought it was so unfair of God to allow such wicked people to prosper.

Do we envy anybody? Maybe our unbelieving neighbour seems to be getting along so much better than we are. They seem to have so much prosperity and pleasure, and here we are struggling away. We've got the Lord to help us, but we still find life difficult. They just drift through a life of relative ease.

But this easy life begins to bring out their real self. And Asaph can see this:

***[6] Therefore pride compasseth them about as a chain; violence covereth them as a garment. [7] Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish.***

As a result of their being comfortable in this world, their wicked hearts become more and more manifest. They become proud and arrogant. They have pride in their achievements. "Look what I've achieved." "Aren't I wonderful." They're full of pride. And they become so self-centred, that they'd get violent if anybody opposed them. They end up living openly sinful lives, and whatever their evil imaginations come up with, they feel free to indulge in.

***[8] They are corrupt, and speak wickedly concerning oppression: they speak loftily. [9] They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walketh through the earth.***

And they can use their mouths to get anything they want out of life. Do we know anybody with the uncanny ability to be able to control others to always get what they want? There are a lot of people in the world like that, who have this "power of persuasion." It's a real power, and it's a very dangerous thing.

They can manipulate others to do anything they say. Think of the dictators of the world. How did Adolf Hitler come to power? The people voted for him. They wanted him. People blindly follow such personalities, wherever they lead them. That's why it's so dangerous.

***[10] Therefore his people return hither: and waters of a full cup are wrung out to them.***

***"His people return hither."*** This is quite difficult to understand, but I think "*His people*" refers to God's people, or at least those who profess to be God's people. Even we in the church can be so persuaded by silver-tongued speakers that we'll follow them rather than God. And this can so easily lead to us returning back to our old way of life, our old ideas.

Those who've truly received a new heart from God, while they can backslide grievously, and be affected by such people, they can never fall away completely. So, when it says "**waters of a full cup are wrung out to them,**" this must refer to those who just profess God outwardly, but don't really know Him, because they return completely to their old life.

2 Peter 2:22

*But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire.*

And unbelievers can see this happening. They see people who once professed Christianity going back and following their old way of life again, and it gives them boldness to go even further and challenge God Himself.

**[11] And they say, 'How doth God know?' And 'Is there knowledge in the Most High?'**

We're warned in the Scriptures to particularly look out for this phenomenon as we come nearer to the end of time:

2 Thessalonians 2:3,4

*Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day [i.e. the Day of Judgment] shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.*

**[12] Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches.**

So prosperity and riches in this world will lead to all sorts of wickedness: pride, violence, corruption, oppression, evil speaking, an uncanny power of persuasion to control others, and in the end it leads people to set themselves up in the place of God Himself.

Asaph, a man who loved God, had a serious problem when he saw all these things happening around him. How could God allow this to happen? Wickedness wasn't being punished. People seemed to be getting away with it. In fact they were becoming more prosperous, and more brazen in their wickedness. And God didn't seem to stop any of it.

Asaph was really beginning to think that following the Lord wasn't worth it:

**[13] Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocency. [14] For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning.**

Asaph thought, what's the point of keeping ourselves from evil, of fleeing from sin, of trying to keep ourselves holy, of trying to please the Lord? Because sin seems to bring so much prosperity and advantage in this world. But at least he also had the sense to realise that if he'd said this to anyone, his witness for the truth would have been destroyed.

**[15] If I say, I will speak thus; behold, I should offend against the generation of thy children.**

Do we have doubts in our mind about God? About what He's doing in the world? "Why does God allow this or that?" Or even about whether we're truly one of His children? It's at this point we should be careful what we say. If we truly love the Lord, and if we diligently stay close to Him, He'll keep us from completely destroying our witness for Him by saying unwise things about Him to others. If we have a problem with the things of God, there should be some people we can speak to about it, close friends, but generally we ought to keep quiet about it until God sheds more light on the situation for us.

But Asaph isn't the only one in the Bible who had a hard time thinking on these issues.

Jeremiah 12:1,2

*Righteous art thou, O LORD, when I plead with thee: yet let me talk with thee of thy judgments: Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? wherefore are all they happy that deal very treacherously? Thou hast planted them, yea, they have taken root: they grow, yea, they bring forth fruit: thou art near in their mouth, and far from their reins.*

Jeremiah had the same problem. Notice, v.2, he acknowledged that the Lord had allowed the wicked to get into that position, and he realised that although they professed the true religion outwardly, they were far from God in their hearts. But he still found it so unfair these people prospered. The Lord replied to him, but it wasn't the answer he expected:

Jeremiah 12:5,6

*If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses? and if in the land of peace, wherein thou trustedst, they wearied thee, then how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan? 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.*

The Lord told Jeremiah that if he couldn't understand what was happening now, then how was he going to understand in a far more difficult situation? And God revealed to him that he was in just such a situation, namely, his own family had betrayed him. All that the Lord brings upon us is under His overall control. It would have to be Jeremiah's faith that kept him faithful to the Lord, not what he saw in external circumstances.

Habakkuk was another prophet who also had the same problem:

Habakkuk 1:2-4

*O LORD, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save! Why dost thou shew me iniquity, and cause me to behold grievance? for spoiling and violence are before me: and there are that raise up strife and contention. Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth.*

Habakkuk saw so much injustice and violence everywhere. He cried to the Lord asking Him why He doesn't do anything about it? To which the Lord replied:

Habakkuk 1:5,6

*Behold ye among the heathen, and regard, and wonder marvellously: for I will work a work in your days, which ye will not believe, though it be told you. For, lo, I raise up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, which shall march through the breadth of the land, to possess the dwelling-places that are not theirs.*

Just like Jeremiah, God gave Habakkuk a reply he could never have expected. God was going to bring a far worse nation, the Chaldeans, to be the instruments of His justice on Judah. They would do what was unthinkable to the Jews, and take away their land and destroy the Temple. How could God do that? Allow an even more evil nation to prosper? Well, if it's any consolation, Babylon itself was also going to be judged seventy years later.

Habakkuk finally came to terms with God's response, and, like Jeremiah, concluded:

Habakkuk 2:4

*The just shall live by his faith.*

This is quite an important verse in the Bible. It's quoted three times in different parts of the New Testament, Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11 and Hebrews 10:38. This was the call of the Protestant Reformation. In the Reformation, the main issue was the question of how God can declare sinners righteous, and accept them into His presence. Does God look at our works? No. We're not saved by works. We can't work our way to heaven ourselves, we're not good enough. We're not even saved by faith with a little bit of works. We can't by nature do any works pleasing to God at all. If we're going to be accepted by Him, we must be saved by the grace of God through faith alone. It has to be this way.

The just have to live by their faith. If they looked to their works, all they'd see is sin. We have to live by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that He's paid the price for our sin, and that He now declares us righteous in God's sight, so we'll escape the punishment we deserve.

But we also have to live by our faith in practical everyday circumstances as well. We have to live by faith that the Lord is in control of all things, despite what we see around us.

2 Corinthians 5:7

*We walk by faith, not by sight.*

We only have to go out of our front doors, or turn on our television sets, to see wickedness everywhere. Many people just can't believe in a God of love when they see the world so full of sin and evil. "How can God allow this or that to happen?" they'd say.

And true believers too, like Asaph, Jeremiah and Habakkuk, also found this difficult to understand. What's the point of striving for righteousness, of keeping oneself from sin, if everybody else around, who isn't bothered by these things, is having a far better time of it than we are? Well, I suggest we do what Asaph did, and enter the sanctuary of God.

***[16] When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me; [17] until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end. [18] Surely thou didst set them in slippery places; thou castest them down into destruction. [19] How are they brought into desolation, as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors! [20] As a dream when one awaketh; so O Lord, when thou awakest, thou shalt despise their image.***

If we ever have a problem with the prosperity of the wicked, injustice in society or the extent of wickedness we see all around us, then we really need to change our perspective. We need to keep our eyes fixed on eternal things, not on things on this earth:

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.*

On this earth justice is clearly not done. People get away with all sorts of evil things here. So if we're to believe in a holy, righteous, living Creator God, we've got to conclude that perfect justice will be dealt by Him in the next world, after death.

Genesis 18:25

*Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?*

So we've got to get away with just looking at what we can see around us. We must set our sight on invisible, eternal things, not just things on this earth. Only then can we get rid of any envy we have because of the prosperity of the wicked. If we could only see their upcoming punishment, we'd never want to be in their shoes on Judgment Day.

Asaph came to realise this, and he saw how foolish he had been at envying the wicked:

***[21] Thus my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins. [22] So foolish was I, and ignorant; I was as a beast before thee.***

And he came to realise that it's always the right thing to do to put our trust in the Lord, despite outward circumstances seeming to tell us otherwise. Only in Him, following Him, trusting in Him, can we begin to see reality. Reality is seeing things in the light of eternity.

Habakkuk finally concluded:

Habakkuk 3:17,18

*Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation.*

In fact, we're told in the Bible that things'll get worse and worse before the end of time, so we should be ready for that, not be surprised by it. Christ said about the end of time:

Matthew 24:21

*For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be.*

Matthew 10:22

*And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake: but he that endureth to the end shall be saved.*

Asaph continued:

***[23] Nevertheless, I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand.***

***[24] Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterwards receive me to glory.***

There's nowhere else for any of us to go for protection and help but to the one true living God. He is continually with His people, holding and guiding them until they reach glory.

Peter saw this when Christ's followers began to leave Him.

John 6:68,69

*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.*

Asaph saw this too. He lived a thousand years before Christ, but true believers in Old Testament times put their trust in a Saviour to come. We today have exactly the same hope Asaph had, except we now know who that Saviour is, Jesus Christ.

Asaph concluded:

***[25] Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. [26] My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.***

Can we say this about the Lord? Is He all we desire, not just for a hope in the next world, but here, now, on this earth too? Is He our strength, even when we go through the valley of the shadow of death? When our bodies start to decay, and death comes near, who have we got to help us through it? Only the Lord can help us in life and death. Nobody else can do that. All other religions tell us there's something we can supposedly do to get the blessing in the next world. No, there's nothing we can do, except put our trust in the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

***[27] For, lo, they that are far from thee shall perish: thou hast destroyed all them that go a whoring from thee. [28] But it is good for me to draw near to God: I have put my trust in the LORD God....***

So, are we quite happy with ourselves, our status, our comfortable life? Not really bothered about sin or injustice (as long as it doesn't affect us)? As long as we can prosper in this world, it doesn't matter about anybody else – is that our philosophy of life? Do we think Christians are a bit simple? Do we think that they can't cope with the realities of this world, so they invent an invisible God to help them when they're in trouble? Is that what we think? If this describes us, then watch out. There's going to be a judgment.

Hebrews 9:27

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

The one thing we all need to do right now is to repent.



Acts 17:30,31

*[God] 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.*

And what did this whole lesson encourage Asaph, the believer, to do?

***....that I may declare all thy works.***

We have got a marvellous message to give to the world. It is possible for us to be saved from our own sinful nature. There is a Saviour, Jesus Christ of Nazareth, and we must put our trust in Him. If people laugh at us because of this message, so be it. But we know that here is the most wonderful message of all. Let's never let the world out there get us down ever again. Let's not follow the world and its wicked ways, despite the pressure we get on us every day to do so. But rather let's flee from sin and live our lives in the light of eternity.

Colossians 3:1-6

*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. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory. Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry: for which things' sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience.*

## Psalm 90. Numbering Our Days

### ***A Prayer of Moses the man of God.***

This is ***“A prayer of Moses, the man of God.”*** The psalm titles are inspired Scripture. In a Hebrew Bible the title is v. 1. The verse numbers aren't inspired, but the titles are.

This psalm is attributed to Moses, it's the only psalm by him. It's not in the first five books of the Bible, which we usually ascribe to Moses. I don't know when the book of Psalms was compiled. Most of the psalms were written by King David and his contemporaries. If it was compiled then, that was about 500 years after Moses. So this Psalm of Moses, which is inspired Scripture, must have been around on its own for a long time.

And this psalm is called ***“a prayer.”*** There's a *“Song of Moses”* in Deuteronomy 32. That tells the story of how the Lord had helped Israel, and how they rebelled against Him. And in Revelation, we find out that we'll only be singing two songs in heaven:

Revelation 15:3

*And they sing the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb.*

I don't know what that song of Moses refers to. Is it the one in Deuteronomy 32, or this Psalm, or something else completely? We're not going to know until we get to heaven.

And we see that this is ***“A prayer of Moses the man of God.”*** And that's useful. When we find it difficult to pray, or simply want to know how to pray more effectively, it's no bad thing to go to Scripture and find the prayers of men of God to help us.

Christ gave us a template how to pray in the Lord's Prayer. We don't recite it blindly in a superstitious way, but we use it as a template for our own prayers in our own words. And we can do the same with many other prayers of men of God throughout Scripture. Abraham, Moses, David, Hezekiah, Daniel. There are many prayers in Scripture for our learning and benefit. So let's look at this ***“Prayer of Moses the man of God.”***

### ***[1] Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.***

A ***“dwelling place”*** is far more than a bed for the night. It's a home. A place of comfort and security, where we can relax, away from the burdens of the world. But Moses' dwelling place isn't a home on this earth. It's the Lord Himself. The one true God, Lord of heaven and earth is Moses' dwelling place. But what does that mean?

Moses understood that any home we have on this earth is only ever temporary. He was brought up in Pharaoh's palace for 40 years, then he was a shepherd in the back side of the desert for another 40 years, followed by 40 years wandering in the wilderness. And then he died, without ever entering the land the Lord had promised the Israelites.

But he did enter the true promised land. The true land promised by God was never meant to be a piece of real estate at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. For a short time that was given as a temporary home for the Jews. But Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, all these people of faith, weren't looking for anywhere on this earth to be a home:

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.*

And the Lord has made Himself a dwelling place, not just for Moses, but **“in all generations,”** for all His children in all ages, and that includes us. So, the true believer, the man of faith, doesn't have a home here, and we shouldn't try looking for one.

Hebrews 13:14

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

But if the Lord is our dwelling place, we ought to know more about Him. Who is this God, that past men of faith had as their dwelling place, their real home? And we need to look at two things: His greatness and His holiness. Firstly, His greatness, how big He is.

***[2] Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.***

God is **“from everlasting to everlasting.”** He is eternal. He was not only there before the earth was formed, but He created it in the first place. We're dealing with an eternal, all-powerful Creator God. Many people don't want to believe such a God even exists. It makes them feel uncomfortable, because it would mean they're responsible to that God and can't get away from Him. So they'd rather invent their own smaller gods.

Or maybe they wouldn't invent gods at all, but fancy theories about the origin of the universe. If everything started at random by a big bang, without God being involved, then there'd be no responsibility, they can live how they please. Very convenient. But to believe in the concept of a big bang happening at random takes far more faith than simply believing in an all-powerful Creator God who created all things in the first place.

And I don't think we realise how big God actually is. If we've ever flown in an aeroplane over London, it is possible to see the whole city out of the window. God is in control of everybody and everything that's going on down there. He knows every sparrow, and every hair on everybody's head is numbered. And He's ordaining all things to His greatest glory. And that's just a small city. He's in control of all things, at all times, everywhere. Too often we think of God as just a little bit bigger than ourselves:

Psalms 50:21

*....thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself.*

But, we may say, if this all-powerful Creator God exists, why is there death in the world? If He's created us, why do we die? That's a bit of a waste, to say the least, isn't it?

**[3] *Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest, Return, ye children of men.***

All of us die. If God is a God of love, why doesn't He give us good things in this world, all the time, for ever? That's a common question. And to answer it, we really need to start looking at things from an eternal perspective. All we can see at the moment is our own, comfortable, cosy little lives. That's all we bother about. We can't see beyond our own death. We need to see things from God's perspective. Death is not the end.

**[4] *For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night.***

To God, and compared to eternity, our lives are so very short.

2 Peter 3:8

*But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.*

And that's actually quite a comfort to the Christian. To us, nothing seems to change very much from day to day. Whatever difficult situation we're in, we seem to be in it for far too long. It's as though the Lord isn't answering our prayers. Everything seems to be going by so slowly. We want answers now. But the Lord is at work, and speedily:

2 Peter 3:9

*The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.*

The Lord's not slack. He's gathering His elect. He's shortening the days, for their sake:

Matthew 24:21,22

*For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened.*

**[5] *Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep: in the morning they are like grass which groweth up. [6] In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, and withereth.***

We need to see the brevity of our life, in the light of eternity. Our lives are so short. We're like grass. It grows quickly, but it's either cut down or withers just as quickly.

1 Peter 1:24,25

*For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: but the word of the Lord endureth for ever.*

So then we've got another question to ask: Why has God ordained our life in this world to be so brief? We've looked at God's greatness, compared to our smallness. Now we need to look at the second thing, His holiness, compared to our sinfulness. Let's suppose we

did have everything we want in this world, for ever. What kind of people would we become? Selfish, conceited, proud, and without doubt we'd forget God altogether.

***[7] For we are consumed by thine anger, and by thy wrath are we troubled.***

We're told in 1 John 4:8,16 that "God is love." So many people think that means that God will never be angry with us, He just loves everybody the way they are, and He just wants everyone to acknowledge Him. But that's not true. Here we find out death and decay are in the world because God's angry with us. We're sinners in the hands of an angry God:

Romans 6:23

*For the wages of sin is death.*

We ought to be troubled by this. There's a very popular teaching going around in the church today which teaches something like this: God loves everybody. All we need to do is realise God's love for us. The love's been there all along, we just don't realise it. We just need to recognise our "freedom in Christ" as they say. Now, what's the problem with that?

Repentance is completely missing. And then we wonder why we're still in the mess we're in. With this illness, this family situation, this body of decay and death. It's because the wages of sin is death. It's not a question of realising God's love for us. It's a question of realising God wants us to repent. And these situations God puts us in, are Him telling us that. We can't simply carry on regardless, we need to do something about it.

***[8] Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance.***

We need to recognise we fall short of God's standards, and that we must repent, to change our ways. If we repent and put our trust in the Saviour God has provided, Jesus Christ, we'll be saved. Everything will be fine. We'll be saved to a new life, saved from the consequences of our sins. And we'll know we've been saved. That's what's necessary. Moses recognised that. He put his trust in the Saviour that, to him, was still to come:

Deuteronomy 18:15

*The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken....*

We must put our trust in the same Saviour, but, unlike Moses, we know He's Jesus Christ.

Many people would accept that they fall short of what they ought to be. "Nobody's perfect," they'd say. But here God delves deeper into our lives than we could ever do. He looks at our secret sins in the light of His countenance, His face. Oh dear!

Now, I just want to mention the doctrine of hell-fire, a place of everlasting torment for the wicked after death. We can't avoid it because Christ spoke about it:

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

*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*

You've heard in the past of hell-fire preachers, who whip their audiences up with such a graphic description of hell-fire to make them so scared of it, that they then easily seem to turn to Christ. Is that how we should be preaching? Is that where we're going wrong? Well, it would be the truth. There is a place of eternal torment for the wicked after death, and coming to the Saviour is the only way to escape the wrath to come. And wherever truth is preached, God can work. Christ said:

John 8:32

*....the truth shall make you free.*

But I don't think it's necessary, or wise, to shout at people they're going to hell. Even most Christians, have a problem with the doctrine of hell fire. They find it difficult to believe a loving God can send anybody there. And I can understand that. None of us can see the depth of our own sin straight away. It's only as we grow in the faith, the closer we get to God, to "**the light of His countenance**," the more sin we see in ourselves, and the more we'll come to accept that a place of eternal torment is just where I deserve to be.

Isaiah 64:6

*But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.*

God sees everything we do, and think. We can't get away from the "**light of His countenance**." As Christ said to the man at the pool of Bethesda, we need to:

John 5:14

*....sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee.*

**[9] For all our days are passed away in thy wrath: we spend our years as a tale that is told.**

We live our pathetic little lives, and it's just like a story that's told. Once we've read a story, it might have been exciting at the time, but after the story's over, who remembers it? Who's interested in it any more? It's boring. I've read that. Let's read something new, something more exciting. What empty lives we lead if we're just looking for the next thrill. If we're living purely for ourselves, we actually haven't achieved anything at all.

**[10] The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.**

In the early days of our world, people lived a lot longer than they do now. Adam lived until he was 930, Noah lived until he was 950. But after the flood, our lifespan shortened considerably. Abraham died at 175, and Moses himself died at 120. But even in Moses day, we're told here, the average lifespan was as low as it is now, 70 or 80 years.

Contrary to popular opinion, we're not living longer at all. We should realise the brevity of life, and that even the strength of this life is only "**labour and sorrow.**" Those two words sum up life in this world. Why would anyone want to stay here for ever? We're "**soon cut off, and we fly away.**" There's nothing here about not existing after death.

Many people today think there's nothing after death, so if their lives turn out to be a mess, that's all right, in the last resort they can just kill themselves and they think that'll be the end. No! When we die, we "**fly away**" to the next place, wherever that is.

And there are so many Christians too who've got a wrong view of this. Many believe that if we die knowing Christ we'll get eternal life, but if we die without Christ, we just cease to exist. But that's a terrible thought! Where's the incentive for anyone to give up their sin? Not coming to Christ isn't too great a deal, if there's nothing after death anyway.

1 Corinthians 15:32

*Let us eat and drink for to morrow we die.*

And just think of all the crimes that people commit in this world. If they don't get caught here – and many of them don't – they've got away with it if there's nothing after death. No! Even if we find it difficult to believe in a place of everlasting torment, we must at least agree that there is going to be a judgment after death. Otherwise God can't be just.

Hebrews 9:27

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

**[11] Who knoweth the power of thine anger? even according to thy fear, so is thy wrath.**

None of us can really understand the power and depth of God's anger against sin. He is so holy. So we should fear the Lord. "**Even according to thy fear, so is thy wrath.**" The depth of God's anger against sin is as great as the fear we should have for Him.

Psalms 111:10, Proverbs 9:10

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*

**[12] So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.**

And now, finally, we come to the petitions in this prayer. When we pray, too often our prayers are just asking for things and that's it. We've got our needs, and we need to tell the Lord about them, even though He knows everything we need anyway. There's nothing wrong with that. God encourages us to come to Him with our needs:

1 Peter 5:7

*Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.*

Philippians 4:6

*Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.*

But when we pray, we need to get into a right frame of mind first. Christ said:

John 16:23

*Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you.*

From this verse, many people think we can ask for whatever we want and we'll get it. So we can ask for a million pounds and God will just give it to us. Of course that's not true. We need to pray "*in Christ's name.*" That doesn't mean superstitiously adding "in Jesus name, Amen" to the end of our prayer. If we just pray, saying, "God, please give me this, and that, in Jesus name, Amen," I can assure you, it's not going to work. James said:

James 4:3

*Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.*

It means the prayer has to be in the will of God. It has to be what Christ wills for us:

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.*

But how do we know Christ's will? We need to get into the right frame of mind in prayer, before we ask our petitions. That's exactly what Moses has done here. Once we're in the right frame of mind, we can then begin to offer our petitions. And we'll find we no longer want to pray for stupid things to spend on our lusts. We'll be more in the right frame of mind to pray for useful things, things the Lord wants us to pray for.

And the first petition here is "**to number our days.**" We only have to look back on our lives to see how much time we've actually wasted. Certainly all the time we spent before we became a Christian was wasted. And even after becoming a Christian, we have to acknowledge that we've not spent all our time as we ought to have done. So we need to pray that every day we may spend our time usefully in the Lord's service.

And we should "**apply our hearts unto wisdom.**"

Proverbs 8:1,11

*Doth not wisdom cry? and understanding put forth her voice? .... For wisdom is better than rubies; and all the things that may be desired are not to be compared to it."*

King Solomon asked for wisdom, and the Lord not only made him the wisest man that ever lived, apart from Christ, but also gave him long life and riches, he never asked for.

**[13] Return, O LORD, how long? and let it repent thee concerning thy servants.**

The next request is for the Lord to return. This implies that the people of God, His servants, have gone away from the Lord, and Moses is calling on the Lord to return and repent of the just punishment He put on them for their sins. Now, God doesn't repent:

Numbers 23:19

*God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent*



But God sometimes changes what He was going to do depending on the action of his subjects. But I don't think this is necessarily referring to a particular incident in the life of the Israelites. It's more of a request for the presence and closeness of the Lord to be felt again. Whatever has happened, Moses is having difficulty discerning the Lord's presence. Maybe He's sinned and the Lord's withdrawn His presence for a time. And he's crying for that closeness, that knowledge of the presence of the Lord, once more.

This happens to all of us at various times in the Christian life. And when it does happen, we first of all need to examine ourselves, to see if we've done something to warrant this. But we also need to ask the Lord to get our mind refocused on Him as Moses does here.

***[14] O satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.***

And then Moses cries for the Lord's mercy – and that's all any of us can ever do. Whoever we are, we need the Lord's mercy. We can't do anything without it.

Christians have already experienced His mercy, and we should be praying for a continued knowledge of His mercy in our lives, reflecting constantly on what He's done for us. Unbelievers haven't experienced His mercy at all yet. They're still under His wrath. They need to repent, and the way to do that is to cry to the Lord for His mercy. And God will be gracious to them. All of us, believer and unbeliever, need God's mercy.

***“that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.”*** Do we want a happy life? We can't have one unless we're in a right standing with God. We need to continually make sure we're in a right relationship with God. That'll guarantee a joyful, fulfilled and happy life.

***[15] Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil.***

We look to our past, and we recognise the Lord has afflicted us, and we've seen much evil. We see nothing but trouble, and it has to be said, mainly of our own making. We're not to dwell on our past. We need to look forward:

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.*

***[16] Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their children.***

If we do look back on our lives at all, we need to forget our foolish behaviour, and see how the Lord has dealt with us. See His work in our lives, and how He's displayed His glory in us. And that's the legacy we have for our children.

***[17] And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.***

Only if we're working for the Lord can our works be established. Living for ourselves is a complete waste of time.

1 Corinthians 15:58

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

These are the things that Moses prays for. Maybe he intended to pray for other things as well. But after realising God's greatness compared to our smallness, and God's holiness compared to our sinfulness, his mind became conformed to God's will, not his own will. If we understand this prayer of Moses properly, we'll no longer have any desire to pray for stupid things any more, but our desire will also be conformed to the Lord's.

## Psalm 136. Harvest Thanksgiving

Harvest thanksgiving is one of the most important festivals of the church year, because it teaches us thankfulness. We primarily give thanks to God for this year's harvest. And that's important, because sometimes harvests fail. Why does God allow that? There are many reasons. Maybe because of the sins of the people. Maybe it's God trying to wake us up to return to Him:

Amos 4:6

*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.*

Or maybe it's God teaching us to be dependent on one another. In 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, the church at Jerusalem was in great need. The church in Macedonia heard about it and responded generously. The point being:

2 Corinthians 8:14

*...that now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their want, that their abundance also may be a supply for your want: that there may be equality.*

So we should never take a good harvest for granted. We've had a good harvest every year for so long now, that people today don't even think there's a God to be thankful to. They think everything just makes itself. The world was made suddenly from a big bang. We all evolved from a blob that one day crawled out of some slime. Dirt just becomes food. We've conditioned ourselves to think that things just happen. We never consider that all we see around us is proof there must be a God who created it all and provides for us. We wilfully choose to believe anything rather than be accountable to Him.

Romans 1:20,21

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

Men will be condemned, amongst other things, for their unthankfulness. So we should be thankful. I want to examine this in more detail by looking at Psalm 136. There's so much more to be thankful for than just the harvest.

**136:1 O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever.**

This psalm is the easiest passage in the Bible to know what the main subject is, because it tells us in every verse: **"For His mercy endureth for ever."** That's the greatest thing we have to be thankful for, God's mercy. But, before we can understand how God is merciful to us, we need to understand more of who God is. And the first thing to note is that He is good. Aren't we so glad about that?

Throughout history, societies have invented their own gods: The Greek gods, the Roman gods, the Hindu gods. They're all beings more powerful than us, but at the same time they're all too much like us. They fight, they get jealous, they have emotions. And many

people think that God is like that as well:

Psalm 50:18-21

*When thou sawest a thief, then thou consentedst with him, and hast been partaker with adulterers. Thou givest thy mouth to evil, and thy tongue frameth deceit. Thou sittest and speakest against thy brother; thou slanderest thine own mother's son. These things hast thou done, and I kept silence; thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself.*

But the true God is good. Isn't that a great relief to know? He's not capricious, doing what He fancies at the time, sometimes this, sometimes that, so you never know what He's going to do next. He's good. He's consistently good. He's always good, and never evil. Which means He's perfectly just. What a wonderful thought that is. So we give thanks firstly because the Lord is good.

***[2] O give thanks unto the God of gods: for his mercy endureth for ever. [3] O give thanks to the Lord of lords: for his mercy endureth for ever.***

And we're to give thanks to the God of gods and Lord of lords. That doesn't mean He's the greatest of many. He's the only true God and Lord of all. Other gods don't really exist, they're figments of men's imagination. Whoever we can call "lord" in this world is nothing compared to the one true living God.

We really don't understand how big God is. By definition, a multiplicity of gods can't be gods at all. If God is all-powerful, all-knowing and in control of all things, there must only be One. If there's just one thing controlled by some other being, He can't be God.

But we don't want a God like that, we'd rather invent our own false gods instead, gods more like us. The Old Testament is the history of the Israelites, whom God made an example of what we're all like. If God had chosen the British, we'd have done exactly the same. Time and again, they rebelled against the true God and went after idols.

We may say we don't bow down to an idol. No, we don't do that in the West, but nearly every house in India, China and south east Asia has a little shrine somewhere, with a little wood or tin god, and incense burning and rotting fruit placed beside it. To them it's real. They worship their little gods.

We don't do that here, but we make idols in other ways. We make idols of celebrities. And we make an idol out of science. We think science can tell us everything. Science is good if used properly. We can use science to tell us how a plane crashed. That's a good use of science. But people use it in a wrong way. They think it can tell them the origin of the universe. But it can't.

These things aren't gods, they're idols. The second Commandment tells us not to idolise anything. There's only one God, He's good, and He's in control of everything. Isn't that wonderful? That's something to be thankful for.

***[4] To him who alone doeth great wonders: for his mercy endureth for ever.***

God alone doeth great wonders. In the Bible there are “*signs and wonders*,” real miracles, things beyond and above the natural order of things. Many churches today see miracles around every corner, but actually, there aren’t all that many miracles of this kind in the Bible at all. The Exodus from Egypt. Elijah and Elisha. And our Lord Jesus Christ and the apostles performed real miracles. But miracles are noticeable because most of the time they don’t happen. When Christ came, people were surprised at His miracles:

John 9:32

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

But we see here that God “**alone** doeth great wonders.” So when we become a Christian, we shouldn’t think we’ve now got magic powers to heal people and do miracles like Jesus did, because we haven’t. Only God can ordinarily do these things. So, if, for example, we want to see someone healed, we don’t just say: “Be healed in the name of Jesus!” and suddenly it happens. We **pray** to God for healing.

James 5:16

*The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.*

But there are two great “wonders,” different from these “miracles,” that **are** part of our everyday experience. The wonders of creation and providence. God created all things out of nothing. And in His providence, He upholds and controls everything that comes to pass, to His greatest glory.

Matthew 10:29,30

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

**[5] To him that by wisdom made the heavens: for his mercy endureth for ever.**

He made the heavens by His **wisdom**. This world isn’t just randomly assembled, wound up and let to run down, like a watch. Every little thing has been created and is controlled by God’s wisdom. God is all-wise. He knows exactly what He’s doing. It might not seem like it at the time, but He does.

In Genesis 1, God created the heavens and the earth in six days. Heaven was created on the second day. Now we don’t know much about these things, but we know there are at least three heavens, because the apostle Paul said once that he was caught up to the third heaven, whatever that is.

On the third day, God gathered the waters together, so the land appeared:

**[6] To him that stretched out the earth above the waters: for his mercy endureth for ever.**

And on the fourth day He made the sun moon and stars:

***[7] To him that made great lights: for his mercy endureth for ever: [8] The sun to rule by day: for his mercy endureth for ever: [9] The moon and stars to rule by night: for his mercy endureth for ever.***

We're told in Genesis 1 that the sun, moon and stars were "*for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years.*" Not only are they to give light, but they give us seasons, chronology, and we can even navigate by them. All this is God's mercy to help us, because He cares about us. So we must be thankful.

Why is it important that we believe God created the world in the way He did? Why, for example, did God create light on the first day, but didn't create the sun and moon until the fourth day? It's a physical pattern of a spiritual reality. God does this all the time. We can't see spiritual things, so God gives us physical patterns that we can see, to explain what we can't see.

To understand the spiritual reality that Creation points to, we need to understand what it is to become a Christian. If we read a bit further on in Genesis, by the time we get to chapter three, it's all gone wrong. Adam ate of a fruit that God told him not to eat of, and, to quote the Shorter Catechism:

*"All mankind by their fall lost communion with God, are under his wrath and curse, and so made liable to all miseries in this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell for ever."*

That's the situation we're in today. We're all born with a sinful, selfish nature. But God didn't leave us like that. In His mercy He provided a Saviour. He sent Jesus Christ into this world, to live a sinless life, and die a death He didn't deserve, whose death would be in place of His people. We deserve to die for our sins, but if we put our trust in Him, we can be freed from the punishment we deserve. That's Christianity, and it's mirrored here in the creation account:

Genesis 1:2,3

*And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.*

We're born "*without form and void.*" Darkness is upon the face of our hearts. We're born living for ourselves, living empty, formless, void lives. But when the Spirit of God moves, God says, "*Let there be light, and there is light.*"

When we become a Christian, that's the first thing God does within us. He says "let there be spiritual light" in our hearts, and there is. It's like a light being switched on inside us. Suddenly the Bible, which was a dead book to us before, comes alive. We now see what we couldn't before. We become altogether different from what we were. That's the most wonderful thing that could ever happen. God coming into a soul, and saying, "*Let there be light.*"

Once we have light, God can then start to order our lives. Bringing order out of chaos, just as in days 2 to 6 of creation. The rest of our lives, God changes us to make something useful. And then, just as in the 7th day when God "rested," so when we die, we receive the heavenly rest, the heavenly Sabbath, and we go to be with Christ in eternal sinless glory for evermore. Creation is a pattern of the spiritual reality. That's why it's important

we understand the pattern.

So, not only should we be thankful that God is good, He created the universe, and that He's in control of everything. But we should also be thankful for His plan to redeem a people for Himself. A plan successfully carried out by our Lord Jesus Christ. How thankful we should be for what He's done for us.

And then we've got, on the face of it, a rather strange verse:

**[10] To him that smote Egypt in their firstborn: for his mercy endureth for ever:**

How is it possible for God to kill all the firstborn in Egypt and then to say, "**For His mercy endureth for ever**"? What's merciful about killing people? Well, we need to understand the story of the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. Again, it's another physical pattern of a spiritual reality.

The Israelites were in slavery in Egypt for 430 years. God raised up Moses to set them free. By a series of plagues, God ruined Egypt, the final plague being the destruction of the firstborn. From the firstborn of Pharaoh to the firstborn of cattle, they all died. But God gave the Israelites advanced warning, and told them if they killed a lamb and smeared the blood on the doorposts, He'd pass over them. So the firstborn of the Israelites were saved, the Egyptians weren't.

That's the pattern. All who put themselves under the blood of the Lamb of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, will be saved from the punishment they deserve for their sins. But those who don't, will be destroyed for their own sins. Israel is an example of the believer being freed from the slavery of sin in his heart.

**[11] And brought out Israel from among them: for his mercy endureth for ever: [12] With a strong hand, and with a stretched out arm: for his mercy endureth for ever.**

The killing of the Egyptian firstborn is mercy, not to the Egyptians, but to the Israelites, in bondage for 430 years but now set free, by God, with a strong hand and a stretched out arm. So, on one hand, there's a sense in which God is merciful to all. We've no excuse. We've all got plenty to be thankful for:

Psalm 145:9

*The LORD is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works.*

But His mercy to the unrepentant isn't going to be forever. If we carry on in unthankfulness, not even acknowledging God for anything, one day there'll be a judgment. We've got to realise that, and repent while there's still time. We must turn from our sin to Jesus Christ, to escape the wrath to come.

And this also shows us that in this world Christians will have enemies:

John 16:33

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

We have three enemies: the world, the flesh and the devil. That's not a phrase in the Bible, but it's a very good description of our enemies. We've got the world that doesn't understand us, and so persecutes us. We've got the devil:

1 Peter 5:8

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

But our greatest enemy of all is ourselves, the flesh. We're our own worst enemy. The apostle Paul expressed this spiritual battle within him. He said:

Romans 7:22-25

*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.*

After the Israelites had escaped from Egypt, they wandered for forty years in the wilderness. This, again, is a physical picture of a spiritual reality. As soon as they left, the Egyptians followed them. With the Egyptians behind them and the Red Sea in front of them, they had no way of escape. What could they do? What can we do, when we face a situation in life where there seems to be no way out? They cried to the Lord. And the Lord delivered them:

***[13] To him which divided the Red sea into parts: for his mercy endureth for ever:***

***[14] And made Israel to pass through the midst of it: for his mercy endureth for ever:***

***[15] But overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red sea: for his mercy endureth for ever.***

God parted the Red Sea. With a wall of water on their left and right, The Israelites escaped to the opposite bank, but the Egyptians were drowned. The Egyptians received the just punishment they deserved. But the Israelites received mercy. God is good. He is perfectly just. He saves His people from their enemies, and judges everybody else with His perfect justice.

There's another phrase in the Bible that says, "God is love," which He is. But that doesn't mean He's got a fuzzy feeling about us all, and is going to forgive everybody everything unconditionally all the time, because He loves us all so much. That's a wrong idea about God altogether, because it doesn't take into account that God is good, He's just. The love of a good God is shown in saving them from evil, wherever it's found, in the world, the flesh or the devil. That's the true love of a good God. And He's saving His people from evil every day.

God cares about His people all the time. He keeps us and He protects us. After we've come to Him, the rest of our lives are spent under His care:

***[16] To him which led his people through the wilderness: for his mercy endureth for ever.***



God led His people through the wilderness. They became pilgrims, passing through wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. And we're pilgrims travelling through this world, until, at the end of our days, we reach the true Promised Land of heaven. That's always been the lot of true believers:

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.*

This world is not our home. We're just passing through. We should set our affection on things above, not on things on the earth:

Matthew 6:19-21

*Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*

And then we read about two kings, Sihon and Og:

***[17] To him which smote great kings: for his mercy endureth for ever: [18] And slew famous kings: for his mercy endureth for ever: [19] Sihon king of the Amorites: for his mercy endureth for ever: [20] And Og the king of Bashan: for his mercy endureth for ever: [21] And gave their land for an heritage: for his mercy endureth for ever: [22] Even an heritage unto Israel his servant: for his mercy endureth for ever.***

Towards the end of the forty years in the wilderness, the Israelites passed peaceably by the nations of Edom, Moab and Ammon, and they tried to use the same diplomatic means to pass by the land of the Amorites as well:

Deuteronomy 2:30-33

*But Sihon king of Heshbon would not let us pass by him: for the LORD thy God hardened his spirit, and made his heart obstinate, that he might deliver him into thy hand, as appeareth this day. And the LORD said unto me, Behold, I have begun to give Sihon and his land before thee: begin to possess, that thou mayest inherit his land. Then Sihon came out against us, he and all his people, to fight at Jahaz. And the LORD our God delivered him before us; and we smote him, and his sons, and all his people.*

Sihon and Og, rather than being peaceable, both came out to fight. The Lord defeated them both, and the Israelites acquired their land. It wasn't yet the Promised Land, it was still east of the Jordan river, but it was land. And the Lord has given us some land in this world. It's not the real Promised Land in the next world, but it's a foretaste. He's given us the church. A place where true believers can be refreshed, find help, encouragement and support from fellow pilgrims, on our way to the real Promised Land in the next world.

Now, I know the church can be a depressing place at times, especially when people who fancy themselves too much have taken over. True believers can get very frustrated with things. I know quite a few people who know the Lord, but they've given up going to church altogether, and that's very sad. No matter how bad the situation, nothing should ever stop us meeting together:

Hebrews 10:24,25

*And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.*

But there's also the opposite extreme. Of the tribes of Israel: Reuben, Gad and half of the tribe of Manasseh liked the land they'd acquired from Sihon and Og so much, they decided to settle there and not go into the promised land on the other side of Jordan at all. They helped the others go in, but they wouldn't go in themselves. And there are so many people who love their church in this world so much, they don't want to leave it. They'd be lost without it. They're not making themselves ready for the next world. The church is not the Promised Land. We shouldn't put our trust in it, but keep our eyes on Christ.

***[23] Who remembered us in our low estate: for his mercy endureth for ever:***

From their bondage in Egypt, through all their wilderness journeying, and even after entering the promised land, Israel was in a low estate. In fact,

Deuteronomy 7:7,8

*The Lord did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: But because the Lord loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the Lord brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.*

And it's the same with us. We might be quite comfortable here. We might have status in this world, and many possessions, but every one of us is in a low estate. Do we feel that? Mary, the mother of our Lord, had a tremendous privilege. She was to carry the Son of God in human flesh. But she didn't puff herself up with pride about it. She saw herself for what she really was:

Luke 1:46-48

*And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.*

We should always keep this attitude of Mary. We're nothing. We're simple people. But that's exactly who the Lord looks for to do His work:

1 Corinthians 1:26-29

*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.*

We can't do anything. Everything we do and are is of the Lord's mercy. As we grow in the faith, we come to realise this. We need the Lord for everything.

***[24] And hath redeemed us from our enemies: for his mercy endureth for ever.***

We can't defeat the world, the flesh and the devil. They're far too powerful for us. We need the Lord to do everything for us. And in His mercy, He helps His people. Everything we have and are is of the Lord's mercy. Consequently, the only thing that should fill our hearts is thankfulness, nothing else. And finally:

***[25] Who giveth food to all flesh: for his mercy endureth for ever.***

That's what we're thinking of tonight, as we give thanks for the harvest. He feeds all flesh. All His creatures are dependent on Him. None of us deserves anything in this world. The harvest is mercy. We should be thankful.

But the believer has something far greater to be thankful for. The forgiveness of sins. We could just sit here and continue year after year the way we are, living our own sinful, self-centred lives, not being thankful for anything. But one day we'll find God's mercy will no longer be there. But all those who come to The Lord Jesus Christ can have their sins freely forgiven. It's a wonderful thing to know we won't be condemned with the world. That's true mercy. Only when we know our sins forgiven, can we know what thankfulness really is.

***[26] O give thanks unto the God of heaven: for his mercy endureth for ever.***

## **Ecclesiastes 2. The Meaning of Life**

I want to talk today about the meaning of life. I've heard sermons which start something like this: "Everybody's looking for the meaning of life. Well, I can tell you the answer, it's Jesus Christ." Now, I agree that's the correct answer, but I'm not too sure about the first bit. I don't know anybody who's looking for the meaning of life. They want to know the football results, or what's on telly tonight, who's having an affair with who in their favourite soap. Nobody's searching for the meaning of life. Nobody thinks about it.

But King Solomon looked for it, and found it. The book of Ecclesiastes tells us about it all.

King Solomon was in a unique position to do this search. After his father David died, God said he could ask for any one thing and it would be given him. What would you ask for?

2 Chronicles 1:7-12

*In that night did God appear unto Solomon, and said unto him, Ask what I shall give thee. And Solomon said unto God, Thou hast shewed great mercy unto David my father, and hast made me to reign in his stead. Now, O Lord God, let thy promise unto David my father be established: for thou hast made me king over a people like the dust of the earth in multitude. Give me now wisdom and knowledge, that I may go out and come in before this people: for who can judge this thy people, that is so great? And God said to Solomon, Because this was in thine heart, and thou hast not asked riches, wealth, or honour, nor the life of thine enemies, neither yet hast asked long life; but hast asked wisdom and knowledge for thyself, that thou mayest judge my people, over whom I have made thee king: Wisdom and knowledge is granted unto thee; and I will give thee riches, and wealth, and honour, such as none of the kings have had that have been before thee, neither shall there any after thee have the like.*

Solomon didn't ask for riches, wealth or honour or anything else that we would probably have asked for. He asked for wisdom. And so God made him the wisest man of his day. And as a bonus, God gave him all these other things as well. So if anyone could find out the meaning of life, he had all the resources to do so. So he's worth listening to.

We're told that we can ask God for wisdom as well:

James 1:5

*If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.*

But what is wisdom? Where can we find it? Well, we're told something about it:

Proverbs 8:11

*For wisdom is better than rubies; and all the things that may be desired are not to be compared to it.*

If wisdom is so precious, it can't be very easy to find. So the first thing we can say is that the world in general hasn't got it, otherwise it wouldn't be said to be better than rubies. So, let's see what the wisest man in the world found in his search for the meaning of life.

What do most people naturally assume the meaning of life is all about? A two letter word. Me. My own happiness. My own pleasure. They just naturally think that's what we should all be doing, enjoying ourselves. So, Solomon, in his search, started there:

***[1] I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure: and, behold, this also is vanity.***

He tried mirth and pleasure. And found out it was all vanity. He didn't get very far, did he? But that's what so many people do. They laugh and joke their way through life, living for the next unit of pleasure they can find. Travelling the world looking for new experiences. They don't want to do anything else. They don't think there's anything else to do.

***[2] I said of laughter, It is mad: and of mirth, What doeth it?***

Solomon found out it's madness to seek after these things. The NIV says here, "*what does pleasure accomplish?*" That's a good way of putting it. It doesn't do anything useful. There's no point to it at all. Yet, to millions, that's all life's about.

So when someone with a bit of wisdom comes along and says, "I'm bored with laughing, joking and pleasure-seeking all the time," they really think we're stupid. They're in the vast majority, so they think they must be right. But one thing's for sure, they can't be wise, because wisdom is more precious than rubies. Wisdom can't be what the majority thinks.

But there are quite a few people who can see through all this pleasure-seeking. They've come to realise it can't satisfy. So, what do people do when they can't stand any more daytime television? And they get fed up with one holiday resort looking pretty much like another? And they're bored with what this world has to offer? They try to escape from it all. They get drunk. So that's what Solomon did.

***[3] I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine, yet acquainting mine heart with wisdom; and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life.***

People turn to drink and drugs to try to alleviate the dissatisfaction they have with everything else. They're right that pleasure can't satisfy, but they think drink and drugs can provide a means of escape from this empty life. So Solomon tried it. But he kept his wisdom, to try to understand it all. Don't try this at home. Don't say, "I can get drunk and use drugs, but still keep my wisdom, to see what it's like." Because we'll get stuck in a never-ending spiral. Just take Solomon's word for it. All it does is blot out reality.

So Solomon found out that pleasure-seeking doesn't satisfy, and neither does getting drunk. So, what does he try next? He set about following his heart, doing whatever his heart desired. Solomon had the wealth to do whatever he wanted:

***[4] I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards: [5] I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kind of fruits: [6] I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees: [7] I got me servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me: [8] I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the***

***provinces: I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts. [9] So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me. [10] And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour: and this was my portion of all my labour.***

This is the sort of thing people would do if they won the lottery. They'd spend their new found wealth on "***whatsoever their eyes desired.***" So Solomon built up His huge empire.

But haven't we read stories about people who win the lottery, and it doesn't satisfy them at all, in fact, they end up being really miserable.

***[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.***

So, by now, he's tried everything this world could offer. Pleasure-seeking, getting drunk, doing whatsoever his heart desired. None of it satisfies. What would we do after trying all that? We're running out of things to do here. A lot of people would think of killing themselves at this point. But there is one more option left. Philosophy. Spirituality. Seeking intangible things in our minds that we can't sense with our senses.

***[12] And I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness, and folly: for what can the man do that cometh after the king? even that which hath been already done.***

So, he exercises his mind to search out wisdom, and seek out the difference between wisdom, madness and folly. He's seeking learning for its own sake. He'd already been given wisdom by the Lord to do all this. He could do this a lot better than any of us could. He uses his own mental capacity to try to seek some kind of enlightenment, to see if he could search for the meaning of life by his own logical thought processes.

He does come to one good conclusion:

***[13] Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness.***

He finds out wisdom is better than folly, or foolishness. So it's better to be wise than to be foolish. So, he's worked that one out. But it doesn't solve his problem.

***[14] The wise man's eyes are in his head; but the fool walketh in darkness: and I myself perceived also that one event happeneth to them all.***

He's found out it's much better to be wise than stupid. But it's obvious that both the wise man and the fool die. So what's the point pursuing either?

***[15] Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also is vanity.***

We can spend our lives being wise, but what's the point when the wise man and the fool both die anyway? Why have I spent all that effort trying to be wise? It's all pointless.

***[16] For there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? as the fool.***

Nobody remembers us after we die. Go to a graveyard. Dead people may have been very wise in their lifetime, but where's their wisdom now? The wisdom they accumulated has all gone. All forgotten. And that's us. We can think we're so important now, but once we're gone, everything we're doing here, everything we've learnt, has been a waste of time.

So, Solomon concludes, it's all pointless. He's tried it all. Pleasure-seeking, getting drunk, doing everything his heart desired, seeking out wisdom for himself. All pointless, because we're going to die anyway. There's no point in anything, and there's nothing left to try.

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

So we must conclude that life is hateful. There's no other option. If there's no point in anything, everything becomes hateful. Solomon was right. We fill our little lives with our busy activities, and many people are too busy even to come to church for an hour a week. What are they doing? They must think that their little lives are so important. But the wisest man in the world is here telling us that it's all vanity and vexation of spirit.

***[18] Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me. [19] And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have shewed myself wise under the sun. This is also vanity.***

Most people leave all they have to their children, but after we're gone they might decide to have altogether different ideas from us, and we can't stop them. So our ideas will all be forgotten. So however wise we've been, all we've worked for has been a waste of time.

***[20] Therefore I went about to cause my heart to despair of all the labour which I took under the sun.***

***“Despair.”*** That's the only conclusion we can possibly come to, if we look at our miserable lives here. We're only here temporarily. And when we're gone, we'll be forgotten.

James said:

James 4:14

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

***[21] For there is a man whose labour is in wisdom, and in knowledge, and in equity; yet to a man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil.***

We can spend all our lives working hard on something useful, but it all goes to someone who hadn't worked for it. Our lives here are not only short, but full of labour and sorrow.

Moses said:

Psalms 90:10

*The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.*

***[22] For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun? [23] For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity.***

This life is hard labour, full of sorrow, and sometimes our heart doesn't even rest properly at night because of our various concerns. And in the end it's all pointless anyway. This is reality. It's not a wonderful life. Nobody has a perfect family. Everybody's life is dysfunctional. If this is all there is, there really is nothing to live for. That's the truth. The sooner we all come to this conclusion, the better. We all need to face up to reality.

And there are many more things about this world that Solomon talks about later on in the book, which we don't have time to look at now. Like the injustices we see in society:

Ecclesiastes 3:16

*And moreover I saw under the sun the place of judgment, that wickedness was there; and the place of righteousness, that iniquity was there.*

Or the oppression we see:

Ecclesiastes 4:1

*So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter.*

Or loneliness:

Ecclesiastes 4:8

*There is one alone, and there is not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother: yet is there no end of all his labour; neither is his eye satisfied with riches; neither saith he, For whom do I labour, and bereave my soul of good? This is also vanity, yea, it is a sore travail.*



All of these things show the vanity of absolutely everything in this world. The BBC will never tell you about this. They want you to get excited about this, that and the other thing in this world. They try to tell you how wonderful everything is. But the wisest man who ever lived, apart from Christ, is here telling us the truth.

So, what did Solomon do? Because he didn't kill himself. He saw all this, that life in this world is vanity, vexation of spirit, and all so temporary. But he came to this conclusion:

***[24] There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour....***

So, does that mean, just don't think about it. Whatever our lot in life, just accept it. Just eat, drink and work at whatever we have to do, and don't think about whether it satisfies, or makes us happy, or enlightens us in any way? Well, I suppose living like that, makes things a lot easier. But the difference here is that Solomon, for the first time in this whole chapter, brings God into the situation:

***....This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God.***

Whatever life we have, whatever situation we are in, however difficult it is or unhappy we are or unsatisfying our lives are, there is a God in heaven, and He's given this to us.

So you say, "Well, I hate God then, because my life's a mess. How can this have come from a loving God? I don't want to believe in God." Hang on a minute.

So far, in all of Solomon's thinking, God has been left out of the equation. He's thinking life is all about me, my happiness, my satisfaction, my achievements, my searching out the truth. And it's not about me at all. Who am I? I'm only here for a short time, and soon enough I'll be completely forgotten. But God remains forever. He is eternal.

Lamentations 5:19

*Thou, O Lord, remainest for ever; thy throne from generation to generation.*

So, if we're going to find any kind of meaning to our lives, it must be something eternal, something for God, not for ourselves. To live for this world only is always a waste of time.

1 Corinthians 15:19

*If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.*

The only alternative to following and worshipping the one true living God, is a meaningless, pointless life which we may as well end now. The reason so many people haven't ended their lives yet is because they still think there's something to live for here.

In fact, more and more people are wanting to end their lives today, especially if they've got a debilitating, unrecoverable illness. They want to "die with dignity," thinking that'll give them relief. But if there's an eternal God in heaven who has ordained everything we see and do, we shouldn't think like that, because that means death isn't the end. There's an eternity beyond death. Don't take my word for any of this, take Solomon's:

**[25] For who can eat, or who else can hasten hereunto, more than I?**

Solomon was perfectly qualified to come to this conclusion, because he'd been given the wisdom to see it clearly. We don't have that. So we still fumble around in the dark. To save us all a lot of bother, we've got this book. Just take Solomon's word for it. Don't ever think this world is all there is, because if we do, not only will we realise everything's pointless, but we might decide to end our life, only to find it's not ended, but it continues after death.

Those who try to "die with dignity" haven't understood this. They still think life is all about this world, me, my happiness, my satisfaction. So when they can't go parachuting any more, or travelling the world any more, they think there's nothing more to live for. But that's not true. It's such selfish thinking. There's plenty more to live for in eternity.

There's a very popular book around, written by an atheist, which also talks about life, the universe and everything. I've forgotten the title, but someone at work left it lying around, so I had a quick look at it. It talked about the Big Bang, the universe being billions of years old and we all evolved from monkeys and so on, the usual stuff. So I went straight to the last page, and do you know what the conclusion this intelligent atheist came to? He wasn't wise, otherwise he would have come to the conclusion Solomon came to – everything's vanity without God. But, no. His conclusion was: we're all stardust. That's it. Doesn't that make you feel good? We're just all specks of dust. That's all atheists can offer. The truth is far more wonderful than that. Only because there is a God in heaven.

**[26] For God giveth to a man that is good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge, and joy: but to the sinner he giveth travail, to gather and to heap up, that he may give to him that is good before God. This also is vanity and vexation of spirit.**

The world is split into two types of people, the "**man that is good in His sight,**" and "**the sinner.**" Because there is a God in heaven, we've got morality. Atheists don't have this. They don't have a greater being to whom they're responsible. That's why they've invented a belief system for themselves. They don't want to be accountable.

But we've just discovered that there must be a God, otherwise everything is pointless. And if there must be a God, there must be morality. Whether we like it or not.

1 John 3:4

*Sin is the transgression of the law.*

And Solomon tells us that to the sinner, God "**giveth travail, to gather and to heap up.**" So is our life one of travail, one of hard bondage? Welcome to the world. Everybody's life is like that. If we think our life is a mess, welcome to the club. That's God telling us we're all sinners:

Romans 3:23

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

Romans 3:10-12

*As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.*

We don't even seek after God, we don't even think He exists, let alone try to find out what He requires of us. But if we carry on like that, we're told our lives will be travail, hard bondage. So, we shouldn't shake our fist in God's face and complain, "I hate you God, for making my life like this." It's like this because we don't acknowledge Him and seek Him.

Solomon also tells us that to "**a man that is good in his sight,**" God gives "**wisdom, and knowledge, and joy.**" So there is a way out of this mess. It doesn't have to be like this.

In chapter 3 of Ecclesiastes, Solomon goes on to say:

Ecclesiastes 3:10-14

*I have seen the travail, which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised in it. He hath made every thing beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end. I know that there is no good in them, but for a man to rejoice, and to do good in his life. And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labour, it is the gift of God. I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him.*

The fear of God, That's the key. Not that we should be afraid of Him, but that we should acknowledge His presence and no longer want to live for ourselves, but rather serve Him instead. That's "**the man that is good in His sight,**" to whom God gives "**wisdom, knowledge and joy.**" And the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord:

Psalms 111:9,10

*He sent **redemption** unto his people: he hath commanded his covenant for ever: holy and reverend is his name. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: a good understanding have all they that do his commandments: his praise endureth for ever.*

If we fear the Lord, we will want to "do His Commandments." But we'll soon find out we can't do them. We fall short of His requirements. As we said before, we've all sinned. Which is where redemption comes in. And that's the work of the Lord Jesus Christ:

1 Corinthians 1:30,31

*But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption: That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.*

Jesus Christ is our wisdom. He's the one to follow. He's also our redemption. He died on the cross to redeem all His people from their sins, so they would no longer be justly punished for them. That's redemption. If we're going to become "**the man that is good in**" God's "**sight,**" we need to apply this redemption to ourselves. How do we do that?

Acts 2:21

*Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.*

Call on Him. Speak to Him. Start a relationship with the one true living God, Lord of heaven and earth. If we're genuine about no longer wanting to live for ourselves but wanting to live for God instead, speak to Him, tell Him. Ask for forgiveness for our sins, and call upon Him. He will answer. I guarantee it. It's the only way out of the mess we're all born into. Notice what Solomon says about the sinner who carries on in his sin:

***“to the sinner he giveth travail, to gather and to heap up, that he may give to him that is good before God. This also is vanity and vexation of spirit.”***

If we do nothing and carry on in our sin, everything we work for will be taken away from us and given to ***“him that is good before God.”*** We're not going to be able to take any of it into the next world. Christ said something similar too:

Luke 19:26

*For I say unto you, That unto every one which hath shall be given; and from him that hath not, even that he hath shall be taken away from him.*

If we insist on continuing to live for ourselves, not only will our lives be sore bondage, but it will all be taken away from us in the end. It's not worth it. Solomon's final conclusion at the end of the book of Ecclesiastes is:

Ecclesiastes 12:13,14

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

Every other way won't work. It's vanity and can only lead to despair. Let's make sure we have a real meaning to life, by coming to the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave His own life for us, and is the only one who can bring us to God.

1 Peter 3:18

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

## Jeremiah 31:31-34. The New Covenant

The Bible is split into two parts. The first two-thirds of it is known as the Old Testament, and the remaining third is known as the New Testament. Now, you might say you know this already. But the fact is that young people out there in the world know absolutely nothing about the Bible at all. This would be all new to them. And it's not because they're not intelligent. They know how to use a smartphone or make a TikTok video far better than I could. It's because they're never taught about it. The Bible isn't taught in schools or in the media anywhere in the world. It's left to us, Christians, to educate people.

So today, we have to start teaching people who have no previous knowledge of the truth whatsoever. Now that can be a good thing. Those with no previous knowledge don't have any baggage, any false teaching received from any kind of church background they might have had. They don't have to "undo" anything before embracing the truth.

Anyway, I want to look today at this difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament. And the best place we've got to do that, is here, in Jeremiah's prophecy.

***[31] Behold, the days come, saith the Lord , that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: [32] Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord : [33] But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord , I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. [34] And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord : for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord : for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.***

This passage talks about two "covenants," or testaments. A testament is another name for a covenant. We have here a **new covenant** which it is said will soon be made (v.31), "**Behold, the days come, saith the Lord , that I will make a new covenant....**", and (v.32) an **old covenant** "**that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt.**" These are the New and Old Testaments.

The whole concept of a covenant, or testament, is fundamental to Christianity. God has made two covenants, or testaments, with men. One, as we see here, that is passing away, the **old covenant**, and another that is about to be made, the **new covenant**. That's what this passage in Jeremiah is telling us.

A covenant is a contract. We make contracts all the time. And there are two types of contract or covenant. A **conditional covenant**, with conditions attached, and an **unconditional covenant**, with no conditions attached. We're more familiar with conditional covenants.

A **conditional covenant** has conditions attached. It would always be in the form of an "if...then" statement. For example, "**if** you do this, **then** I will do that."

For example, Christ gave a parable about labourers going to work in a vineyard:

Matthew 20:1,2

*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.*

There was an agreement that if the labourers worked in the vineyard all day, the manager would give them a penny each. That was a contract, a covenant. If they didn't do the work, they wouldn't get the money, they would have broken the contract. If they did work all day, and the manager didn't give them the money, the manager would have broken the contract. So the contract is only fulfilled if the conditions are met on both sides.

But a covenant can also be **unconditional**. We usually call that a **promise**. For example, the covenant God made with Noah after the flood was **unconditional**. It was a **promise**. He promised never again to flood the earth with water:

Genesis 9:9,11

*And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you; .... neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth.*

There's no conditions for Noah to keep. God didn't say, "If you keep my law **then** I'll never flood the earth again," or anything like that. He just said He wouldn't do it, full stop. So He won't. That's an **unconditional covenant**, or a **promise**. No conditions attached.

We'll see that the "Old Testament" was a **conditional covenant**, with conditions to be met. And the "New Testament" is an **unconditional covenant**, with no conditions.

Let's go through the text in Jeremiah. I think it's going to be easier to look at verse 32 first, because that talks about the old covenant, or Old Testament. We need first of all to see what this was, and then what was so wrong with it that God says He's going to make a new covenant.

***[32] Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord:***

So, first of all, what was the covenant God made with their fathers?

***Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt.***

Jeremiah is talking to Jews. The Jews have had such tremendous privileges throughout history. This **old covenant** mentioned here was made essentially with them. So, understanding the history of the Jews is fundamental to our Christian faith.

To the Jews were given the Scriptures:

Romans 3:2

*Unto them were committed the oracles of God.*

And they were given so many other privileges too. Look at this list that Scripture gives us:

Romans 9:4,5

*Who are Israelites; to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; Whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen.*

So their history is important when it comes to understanding our faith. None of the history in the Old Testament is unimportant. It's all been put in Scripture for our learning.

1 Corinthians 10:11

*Now all these things happened unto them for examples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.*

Romans 15:4

*For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.*

And to find out about this **old covenant** given to their fathers, we have to go back to their exodus from Egypt.

Ask any Jew what the greatest event in their history was, and they'll probably tell you about this. For 430 years the Israelites were in slavery in Egypt. But the Lord raised up Moses, and through a series of miracles, culminating in the parting of the Red Sea, Moses led them through to safety, at the same time drowning the Egyptians.

Now, we may say, that's all very well, but where's the making of a covenant in that? I've not finished the story yet. God then led them to Mount Sinai. And God took Moses up the mountain to receive two tables of stone, on which was written what we know today as the Ten Commandments. And God called this a **covenant**:

Exodus 19:5

*Now therefore, **if** ye will obey my voice indeed, and **keep my covenant**, **then** ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine.*

Notice, this is a **conditional covenant**. It is an "if...then" statement. "**if** ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, **then** ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people." In other words, "Do this and live." A **conditional covenant**. **If** you obey me, **then** I'll be your God. And that's what most people think God is like. We have to do something to please God and He'll reward us. A man came up to Christ thinking that:

Luke 10:25-28

*And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou? And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy*

*soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself. And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live.*

This lawyer gives a Scriptural summary of the Ten Commandments: *“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.”* And Christ said, *“This do, and thou shalt live.”*

So if the Jews, in fact if anybody, keeps the Ten Commandments perfectly, in deed and word and thought, throughout their whole lives, they will live. They will receive eternal life to be with the Father in heaven for ever and ever. It's genuine. It's a genuine offer of salvation, **if** we keep our side of the bargain. So there's absolutely nothing wrong with this **conditional covenant**:

Romans 7:12

*Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good.*

But the Jews broke their part of this covenant:

***which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord.***

The contract was broken on the Jew's side, not God's. And after many, many years of unrepentant sin, like an unfaithful husband, God eventually had to act and put them away like a divorce:

Isaiah 50:1

*Thus saith the Lord, Where is the bill of your mother's divorcement, whom I have put away? or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? Behold, for your iniquities have ye sold yourselves, and for your transgressions is your mother put away.*

God was so patient with them. The whole of the Old Testament gives the sad history of the Jews and their unfaithfulness to keep their side of this old covenant. Eventually God had to act and sent them away out of their land into exile in Babylon. After seventy years He allowed a small remnant to come back to build a second Temple. But they rebelled again. Many years later, after they as a nation had rejected the Messiah He had sent, the Temple was finally destroyed by the Romans, and has never been rebuilt to this day.

So, what do we think of the Jews? Do we become anti-Semitic and hate them because they hated God, and killed our Messiah? Of course we don't. We ought to have nothing but pity for them, because the way they acted in history is exactly the way we would have acted. God set up the Jews as an example of us all. If God had chosen the Chinese, or the English, or any other race, we'd have done exactly the same thing as the Jews did. There's one thing we need to learn from their example:

Romans 3:9-12

*What then? are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin; As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.*



The Jews broke the law, the **conditional covenant** God gave them on Mount Sinai, and we do exactly the same thing all the time. *“There is none that doeth good, no, not one.”* The problem is with us. None of us can live the way the law tells us. We’re all sinners.

God knew this all along. He didn’t make a mistake in giving the law, knowing nobody would be able to keep it. Some people think that God made a mistake first time around with the Old Testament, so we now have a New Testament, which is God starting all over again with plan B. No, God never makes mistakes.

Job 23:13

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

Isaiah 46:10

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

We only think it was a mistake because we think that keeping the law was a genuine means of salvation. *“Do this and live.”* And this is our natural reaction. We think that if there is a God at all, He must require something from us before we are to be accepted by Him. Every false religion in the world thinks this way. We must do something to placate or please God or the gods of the religion.

But that’s not what the law was for. The law was never a means of salvation at all. God knew nobody could keep it. He gave the law, not as a means of salvation, but for the very important purpose of showing us that we all fall short of it, and that we’re all sinners:

Galatians 3:21,22

*Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid: for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law. But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe.*

The law was given to show us we can’t keep it, *“that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe.”*

Galatians 3:24

*Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.*

And this brings us to the **new covenant**.

***[31] Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah:***

There’s a day coming, future to this prophecy of Jeremiah, that God will make a new covenant. And it’s called *“the promise by faith of Jesus Christ,”* it’s a **promise**, in other words, an **unconditional covenant**. We won’t have to do a thing, God will do what He says with no conditions attached. We won’t have to do anything, just like the covenant He made with Noah. This one will be through Jesus Christ.

But some see these words, “**Behold, the days come**” and make a mistake. They realise this applies to Christ, but they still have this idea that in Old Testament times, people had to keep the law to be saved to eternal life, but in New Testament times we don’t need to do that any more, we simply need to take hold of this new covenant in Christ.

But the words, “**Behold, the days come**” is referring only to the time of the **making** of the covenant, “*Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will **make** a new covenant.*” The covenant was made at a certain point in time:

Galatians 4:4,5

*But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.*

The effect of this covenant made by Christ is for all time, past, present and future.

Hebrews 13:8

*Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.*

This has to be the case, because we’ve already seen that nobody, since the fall of Adam, can keep the law. It was only ever there to show us our sin.

How were Old Testament people saved to eternal life? By trusting in Christ, just like us. To them, He was a Messiah who was still to come in the future. To us, He’s already been, and we know who He is. They had exactly the same faith as us:

1 Peter 4:6

*For for this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.*

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.*

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.*

And we’re told this new covenant will be “*with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah.*” And that is repeated in v.33:

***[33] But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.***

***But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord.***

So does the new covenant completely exclude Gentiles? Is it still only for Jews? No. Just as the Ten Commandments were only physically given to the Jews as a special privilege, but were meant for everybody to show them their sin; so the new covenant was given, as promised, by a Jew, Jesus Christ, but that is meant for everybody too.

Romans 3:28-30

*Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law. 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.*

So, what does it mean that the new covenant will be made “*with the house of Israel*”? The Saviour of the world came as a Jew. It was always promised that this would be the case. He would be of the seed of David. But unlike anyone else who has ever lived, He fulfilled the law, the old covenant, in every last detail. In Him was no sin. And He died on a cross in place of His people, for their sins. And His people will be from every nation of the world, not just Jews.

This fulfilled the Jewish Scriptures, if only the Jews would have believed that. But also, there’s a world of difference between being a physical Jew descended from Abraham, and a spiritual Jew:

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.*

Galatians 6:16

*And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.*

And this is the new covenant. Remember, it’s an **unconditional covenant**. It doesn’t rely on our doing anything to fulfil it. We put our trust in Christ who fulfilled it for us. In other words, God is giving us, through Christ, an **unconditional promise**:

***I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.***

Christians should straight away recognise that this describes them. A Christian is someone who has had a fundamental change from the inside. The Bible variously describes this as being born-again, having a new heart put within us, becoming a new creature, having the Holy Spirit dwelling in us. All those are Biblical descriptions of the

change that has happened to the Christian, if he's truly one of the Lord's people. And here's another description. We have been given an **unconditional promise** for our salvation, which can never be taken away.

We've had God's law put in our inward parts, written on our hearts. None of us can keep the law with our natural hearts, so it is vital that we must all have this change. We must be changed from the inside. Then we'd delight to keep God's law, we'd love God's law, it would no longer be a burden to us.

Psalm 40:8

*I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart.*

Christians still fall into sin, but now we hate it when we do. The apostle Paul said:

Romans 7:22-25

*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.*

And notice, **“and will be their God, and they shall be my people.”** Christians are the true people of God. To be physically descended from Abraham counts for nothing. All those who've had this heart change, who've had the law written on their hearts, these inherit all the promises God's given to His people, including all the Old Testament promises. So, for example, when in the Old Testament it speaks of the “Promised Land,” we shouldn't think of a physical piece of land on the east of the Mediterranean, but a spiritual inheritance in heaven to be with Christ for ever.

***[34] And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord : for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord : for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.***

***And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord***

That's how most people use the law. They strive to keep the Ten Commandments outwardly, without having a new heart. They think the law is for teaching externally to an unregenerate heart. But if that's the case, we'll always fail. The only way for us to keep the law is to have it written in our hearts. And with new hearts, other benefits follow too:

***for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord.***

We get to know God. We get to know Him personally. We don't just hear about Him in church, we have a real, living relationship with Him, the one true God Lord of Heaven and earth. And that will help us see ourselves in an altogether different light. Job said:

Job 42:5,6

*I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.*

We can talk to Him, He can take over our lives, teach us how we should live, what we should do in every circumstance. We're no longer dependent upon ourselves any more.

And a second benefit:

***for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.***

Don't we want every sin we've ever committed, and every sin we ever will commit, forgiven by God, never to be remembered any more? This is by far the greatest advantage of coming to know the Lord. We can be relieved of every burden. Christ said:

Matthew 11:28-30

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

These are some of the benefits of the new covenant. It was always the way God dealt with people even back in Job's day. And it's still the way. The call to all men everywhere is to embrace this new covenant. Recognise we can't keep the old one. Stop trying to please God in our own efforts, and come to Jesus Christ. He alone can put the law in our inward parts, so we can begin to please Him and live usefully in this world rather than living for ourselves.

Hebrews 9:15

*And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance.*

## Jeremiah 36 and 45. Baruch

I want to look today at Baruch the son of Neriah. He was Jeremiah's scribe. He appears three times in the book of Jeremiah. The book of Jeremiah isn't written in chronological order. We have to get the chronology from which king was reigning in Judah at the time.

(1.) The first and earliest occasion is what we're going to look at today. Chapters 36 and 45 belong together. Both chapters begin in the fourth year of king Jehoiakim:

***[36:1] And it came to pass in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah, that this word came unto Jeremiah from the Lord, saying,***

***[45:1] The word that Jeremiah the prophet spake unto Baruch the son of Neriah, when he had written these words in a book at the mouth of Jeremiah, in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah, saying,***

But in chapter 36 at v.9, we jump to his fifth year, and the rest of that chapter occurs then. Chapter 45 must occur between verses 8 and 9, because it occurs in Jehoiakim's fourth year, but after Baruch had written Jeremiah's words in the book.

(2.) Baruch appears again in chapter 32. This is in the tenth year of Zedekiah, eighteen years later, just before Jerusalem was besieged and destroyed by the Babylonians:

Jeremiah 32:9-15

*And I bought the field of Hanameel my uncle's son, that was in Anathoth, and weighed him the money, even seventeen shekels of silver. And I subscribed the evidence, and sealed it, and took witnesses, and weighed him the money in the balances. So I took the evidence of the purchase, both that which was sealed according to the law and custom, and that which was open: And I gave the evidence of the purchase unto Baruch the son of Neriah, the son of Maaseiah, in the sight of Hanameel mine uncle's son, and in the presence of the witnesses that subscribed the book of the purchase, before all the Jews that sat in the court of the prison. And I charged Baruch before them, saying, Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; Take these evidences, this evidence of the purchase, both which is sealed, and this evidence which is open; and put them in an earthen vessel, that they may continue many days. For thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; Houses and fields and vineyards shall be possessed again in this land.*

Jeremiah is told by God to buy some land. For forty years he'd been prophesying the fall of Jerusalem, and it's just about to happen. What's the point buying property, when it's going to be taken away? But he obeyed God and bought it anyway. That took faith. He prophesied the exile would last seventy years. So he'd be long dead before then. And he was told by God not to have a wife or children. So he'd have no descendants either:

Jeremiah 16:1,2

*The word of the Lord came also unto me, saying, Thou shalt not take thee a wife, neither shalt thou have sons or daughters in this place.*

Baruch is drawing up a legal document. He's not just a copyist. He's a lawyer, a solicitor, arranging the paperwork, getting the witnesses together and so on. He's a very intelligent,

professional man. We'd have thought he'd have his own business, make his own decisions. But instead he humbles himself and subjects himself to the Lord's prophet.

(3.) Baruch is also mentioned in chapter 43, after the fall of Jerusalem. God told Jeremiah to tell the people not to go into Egypt, but they didn't accept the word of the Lord:

Jeremiah 43:2,3

*Then spake Azariah the son of Hoshaiiah, and Johanan the son of Kareah, and all the proud men, saying unto Jeremiah, Thou speakest falsely: the Lord our God hath not sent thee to say, Go not into Egypt to sojourn there: But Baruch the son of Neriah setteth thee on against us, for to deliver us into the hand of the Chaldeans, that they might put us to death, and carry us away captives into Babylon.*

The people thought Baruch had influenced Jeremiah. To all outward appearances, Baruch seemed to them as the leader. But Jeremiah was God's prophet. Baruch knew that, and subjected himself to Jeremiah, sitting under his guidance, not the other way around.

So, let's start to look at chapter 36:

***[36:2] Take thee a roll of a book, and write therein all the words that I have spoken unto thee against Israel, and against Judah, and against all the nations, from the day I spake unto thee, from the days of Josiah, even unto this day. [3] It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the evil which I purpose to do unto them; that they may return every man from his evil way; that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin.***

Jeremiah is told by the Lord to write in a book all the words the Lord had spoken through him so far. He first started prophesying in the thirteenth year of king Josiah. Here, we're in the fourth year of king Jehoiachim, so that's the first 22 years of his ministry.

The prophecies were originally (v.2) given "***against Israel, and against Judah, and against all the nations.***" But Jeremiah was asked to write them down and proclaim them all to Judah (v.3), to try to get them to repent. So, old prophecies still have a use long after they were originally given. Which is why we have so many of them collected in the Bible.

***[4] Then Jeremiah called Baruch the son of Neriah: and Baruch wrote from the mouth of Jeremiah all the words of the Lord, which he had spoken unto him, upon a roll of a book.***

The Holy Spirit must have brought to Jeremiah's mind all the prophecies for the last 22 years. He couldn't have written them down and kept them in a file or something, because he then wouldn't have needed to dictate them to Baruch, he'd just tell him to copy it out.

And we're told not to worry when we're in trouble:

Mark 13:11

*But when they shall lead you, and deliver you up, take no thought beforehand what ye shall speak, neither do ye premeditate: but whatsoever shall be given you in that hour, that speak ye: for it is not ye that speak, but the Holy Ghost.*

***[5] And Jeremiah commanded Baruch, saying, I am shut up; I cannot go into the house of the Lord: [6] Therefore go thou, and read in the roll, which thou hast written from my mouth, the words of the Lord in the ears of the people in the Lord's house upon the fasting day: and also thou shalt read them in the ears of all Judah that come out of their cities. [7] It may be they will present their supplication before the Lord, and will return every one from his evil way: for great is the anger and the fury that the Lord hath pronounced against this people.***

Jeremiah was going to deliver these messages in the Lord's house in the Temple on the fast day. But Jeremiah was unclean, so he asked Baruch to do it for him. The fast day was chosen because there'd be people from all over Judah there that day. He particularly asked him also (v.6) to ***“read them in the ears of all Judah that come out of their cities.”*** So any message wasn't to be confined to the Temple faithful. And we too have got a message, and it's to go far beyond the four walls of the church. We're called to:

Luke 14:23

*Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.*

And the message we have for the world is exactly the same message Jeremiah had (v.7): ***“return every one from his evil way: for great is the anger and the fury that the Lord hath pronounced against this people.”***

Matthew 4:17

*Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*

There was going to be a judgment coming on Jerusalem, which came eighteen years later when the Babylonians flattened the city. And we've got a message of a judgment too. It's coming on the whole earth. God is justly angry with every one of us because we've gone our own way. We don't acknowledge Him. We're self-centred. We all need to repent personally to God for our sins. Or we'll be destroyed.

But we've also got a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and of a Saviour who can save us from our sins. That's what we need:

John 3:16

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

Romans 5:8

*But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*

2 Corinthians 5:21

*For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.*



1 Peter 3:18

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

There is a judgment to come. But God has provided a way out in Jesus Christ. All we have to do is come to Him. But we've got to repent, to give up our sins. He'll help us to do that. But so many people don't want to give them up, they like their sins too much. And if we carry on like that, we'll end up the way Jerusalem ended up, forsaken of God.

After Jeremiah's day, in the Lord's mercy, the Jews returned to the land seventy years later. But after Christ came to them and they rejected Him, He said these solemn words:

Matthew 23:38

*Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.*

Let's all make sure that our house, our souls, are not left desolate, by embracing Christ, coming to Him in repentance and faith. Then we'll escape the judgment we deserve.

***[8] And Baruch the son of Neriah did according to all that Jeremiah the prophet commanded him, reading in the book the words of the Lord in the Lord's house.***

Baruch was obedient. This well-educated lawyer, submitted himself to God's prophet.

Now, we've got a break in the narrative. Verse 9 is about a year later. And it's here that chapter 45 occurs, which we'll look at later. After Baruch had read Jeremiah's words, we read nothing of a response from the people.

Nothing has changed. Nobody listens to Christians today. We just get laughed at, sidelined, don't we? But we have the word of the Lord. And the Lord told Isaiah:

Isaiah 55:11

*So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.*

***[9] And it came to pass in the fifth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah, in the ninth month, that they proclaimed a fast before the Lord to all the people in Jerusalem, and to all the people that came from the cities of Judah unto Jerusalem. [10] Then read Baruch in the book the words of Jeremiah in the house of the Lord, in the chamber of Gemariah the son of Shaphan the scribe, in the higher court, at the entry of the new gate of the Lord's house, in the ears of all the people.***

Baruch decides to read Jeremiah's words again on another fast day in the Temple. Maybe this is the equivalent fast day a year later. We're not told that either God or Jeremiah had told him to do this. Maybe he did, maybe he didn't. If he did, it's a bit odd that Jeremiah didn't go himself, because he would surely not have been ceremonially unclean for a second year running. Maybe Baruch was so frustrated at the lack of response the previous year, he took it upon himself to read it again. We don't really know.

This time he doesn't read it in the Lord's house as before, but "***in the chamber of Gemariah the son of Shaphan.***" From v.12, we see Gemariah was one of the princes. This seems to be a convenient location because it's at the entry of the new gate, so he can reach the ears of more people. And look what happens:

***[11] When Michaiah the son of Gemariah, the son of Shaphan, had heard out of the book all the words of the Lord, [12] Then he went down into the king's house, into the scribe's chamber: and, lo, all the princes sat there.... [including his father, Gemariah] [13] Then Michaiah declared unto them all the words that he had heard, when Baruch read the book in the ears of the people.***

The second time Baruch read Jeremiah's prophecies, someone in high places got to hear it. This is actually the third time these prophecies had been proclaimed, including the original occasions. But before, nobody had taken any notice. Let's keep going. Nobody seems to be listening to us today, as we preach the gospel. But we shouldn't give in. We never know when someone, somewhere is going to respond. This man Michaiah went to the king's house, and told the princes what Baruch had said:

***[14] Therefore all the princes sent Jehudi the son of Nethaniah, the son of Shelemiah, the son of Cushi, unto Baruch, saying, Take in thine hand the roll wherein thou hast read in the ears of the people, and come. So Baruch the son of Neriah took the roll in his hand, and came unto them. [15] And they said unto him, Sit down now, and read it in our ears. So Baruch read it in their ears.***

Now we're getting somewhere. Baruch is called to appear before the princes to read the roll to them. This was now the fourth time it had been read out.

***[16] Now it came to pass, when they had heard all the words, they were afraid both one and other, and said unto Baruch, We will surely tell the king of all these words. [17] And they asked Baruch, saying, Tell us now, How didst thou write all these words at his mouth? [18] Then Baruch answered them, He pronounced all these words unto me with his mouth, and I wrote them with ink in the book. [19] Then said the princes unto Baruch, Go, hide thee, thou and Jeremiah; and let no man know where ye be.***

The princes became afraid. God's Word was finally having an effect on people. This wasn't the first time the princes had defended Jeremiah. Three years earlier, at the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign in chapter 26, they'd saved his life:

Jeremiah 26:16

*Then said the princes and all the people unto the priests and to the prophets; This man is not worthy to die: for he hath spoken to us in the name of the Lord our God.*

The princes had no power. They had to tell the king. If the king heard these words, and feared the Lord, maybe there was still time for Judah to repent and avoid the judgment.

The princes make sure they've got accurate information. They ascertain the words were Jeremiah's and Baruch was only the scribe. They just wanted to make doubly sure that the words had come from God himself before going to the king about it. Then they advised them both to hide. They were fully aware what the king's reaction might be.

***[20] And they went in to the king into the court, but they laid up the roll in the chamber of Elishama the scribe, and told all the words in the ears of the king.***

They were quite wise the first time they went into the king, because they kept the roll in a safe place, and didn't take it in with them, just telling him the contents verbally at first. But the king asks them to fetch it, so they couldn't really refuse:

***[21] So the king sent Jehudi to fetch the roll: and he took it out of Elishama the scribe's chamber. And Jehudi read it in the ears of the king, and in the ears of all the princes which stood beside the king. [22] Now the king sat in the winterhouse in the ninth month: and there was a fire on the hearth burning before him. [23] And it came to pass, that when Jehudi had read three or four leaves, he cut it with the penknife, and cast it into the fire that was on the hearth, until all the roll was consumed in the fire that was on the hearth. [24] Yet they were not afraid, nor rent their garments, neither the king, nor any of his servants that heard all these words.***

An altogether different reaction from that of the princes. The king and his servants were laughing at the word of God. The princes had been afraid. The king and his servants were not afraid, they mocked. That's what we're going to get. Some will be affected by the gospel, and fear God and respond to it. Others will be completely unaffected by it.

***[25] Nevertheless Elnathan and Delaiah and Gemariah had made intercession to the king that he would not burn the roll: but he would not hear them.***

The princes begged him not to burn the roll. They realised that the message was from God, and saw the seriousness of the situation Judah was in. But it was all to no avail.

***[26] But the king commanded Jerahmeel the son of Hammelech, and Seraiah the son of Azriel, and Shelemiah the son of Abdeel, to take Baruch the scribe and Jeremiah the prophet: but the Lord hid them.***

Jeremiah and Baruch became marked men. So they took the advice of the princes, and the Lord hid them. But not before Jeremiah manages to get a final word to the king:

***[29] And thou shalt say to Jehoiakim king of Judah, Thus saith the Lord; Thou hast burned this roll, saying, Why hast thou written therein, saying, The king of Babylon shall certainly come and destroy this land, and shall cause to cease from thence man and beast? [30] Therefore thus saith the Lord of Jehoiakim king of Judah; He shall have none to sit upon the throne of David: and his dead body shall be cast out in the day to the heat, and in the night to the frost. [31] And I will punish him and his***

***seed and his servants for their iniquity; and I will bring upon them, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and upon the men of Judah, all the evil that I have pronounced against them; but they hearkened not.***

Jeremiah never prophesied again in the rest of Jehoiachim's reign, which lasted another seven years. Jehoiachim was eventually carried into exile by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. The very king he didn't believe would come. The whole nation of Judah followed eleven years later. After King Jehoiakim was gone, Jeremiah then came out of hiding:

Jeremiah 22:18,19

*Therefore thus saith the Lord concerning Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah; They shall not lament for him, saying, Ah my brother! or, Ah sister! they shall not lament for him, saying, Ah lord! or, Ah his glory! He shall be buried with the burial of an ass, drawn and cast forth beyond the gates of Jerusalem.*

But what about the roll? All those prophecies had been painstakingly gathered together by Jeremiah and Baruch. All that effort, and the roll had been burnt up.

***[27] Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, after that the king had burned the roll, and the words which Baruch wrote at the mouth of Jeremiah, saying, [28] Take thee again another roll, and write in it all the former words that were in the first roll, which Jehoiakim the king of Judah hath burned.***

Jeremiah was told by the Lord to compile the prophecies again on another roll. They were to trust in the Holy Spirit to give them the exact words again.

***[32] Then took Jeremiah another roll, and gave it to Baruch the scribe, the son of Neriah; who wrote therein from the mouth of Jeremiah all the words of the book which Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned in the fire: and there were added besides unto them many like words.***

And that's the book of Jeremiah we've got in our Bibles today. King Jehoiachim thought he could completely eradicate the word of God by burning it. But that's impossible.

Isaiah 40:8

*The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.*

Now let's go to chapter 45. And Jeremiah's got a word for Baruch here:

***[45:2] Thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel, unto thee, O Baruch; [3] Thou didst say, Woe is me now! for the Lord hath added grief to my sorrow; I fainted in my sighing, and I find no rest.***

He's troubled. Remember, after the first reading of the roll, nobody had reacted to God's Word at all. And Baruch was troubled by that, and needed words of comfort. Little did he know that a year later the king would get to hear those words and he and Jeremiah would

have to go into hiding for seven years. But God brings a message to Baruch via Jeremiah. And it's a message to us today, when we get disillusioned that nobody is listening to us:

***[4] Thus shalt thou say unto him, The Lord saith thus; Behold, that which I have built will I break down, and that which I have planted I will pluck up, even this whole land.***

The message was that the Lord was going to destroy Jerusalem. It would be another eighteen years away yet, but the judgment would come. It's going to happen. Hardly a word of comfort for Baruch. What's the Lord doing telling him such bad news?

Comfort involves telling the truth, hard though it may be. Truth was that the Babylonians were going to destroy Jerusalem, just as Jeremiah prophesied. But the message goes on:

***[5] And seekest thou great things for thyself? seek them not: for, behold, I will bring evil upon all flesh, saith the Lord: but thy life will I give unto thee for a prey in all places whither thou goest.***

And this is a message exactly for us today. We've got three things in this verse:

(1.) "***I will bring evil upon all flesh.***" Not only was Jerusalem going to be destroyed, but the whole world is one day going to be destroyed:

That's the message we've got for people today. It's not a very palatable message, they're not going to like it. But truth is that one day this world will end, and be destroyed by fire:

2 Peter 3:10

*But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.*

(2.) So, what should Baruch do? Still put his trust in this world? Follow the world and it's ways, even though they lead to destruction? No. "***seekest thou great things for thyself? seek them not.***"

Baruch could have become a very successful professional. Men of the world would have looked up to him. But he chose another path. He associated himself with the prophet of the Lord. He had no time at all for status in this world. Just like Moses:

Hebrews 11:24-26

*By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward.*

(3.) And thirdly, if we don't chase after great things in this world, and put trust in things here, how are we going to survive? The Lord said: "**thy life will I give unto thee for a prey in all places whither thou goest.**" The Lord will look after us, and keep us from the evil.

If we follow the Lord, we needn't worry about the judgment to come. We might have to go through many unpleasant and difficult circumstances while we're here, but the Lord will save us through them all, and we'll be saved eternally from the judgment altogether.

That's the message to Baruch, and it's a message to us too. Don't put our trust in the world, it's not worth it.

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.*

Psalms 23:4

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

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