

# REALLY GOOD NEWS FOR TODAY

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# CHAPTER ONE: REALLY GOOD NEWS FOR TODAY

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‘Houston, we have a problem,’ is a piece of United States space program jargon that’s become an instantly recognisable expression well beyond the US. Many of us have been held as if spellbound viewing a live televised transmission of some daring space mission. I can recall during my final year in junior school the teacher bringing a television set into the classroom so we could watch the historic drama of the first moon-landing being played out. At times like that, if those astronauts in their fragile space vessel way out in space should communicate with the space centre in Houston saying ‘Houston, we have a problem,’ then our hearts miss a beat – their lives could be hanging in the balance.

Yes, some problems can be serious. And communications at times like that can be critical. The Bible is God’s communication to us, in which he tells us that we have a problem (Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:1). Before I come to that, allow me, if you will, another reminiscence. I remember in January 2004 while I was in the Philippines, reading in the Philippine Inquirer newspaper about a moratorium on drug dealers. As a result of an appeal by the Pope their death sentence was postponed. The newspaper described those who were on death row and who were waiting for their fate to be determined as being ‘the living dead of the Philippines.’ Some newspaper headlines are very ef-

fective. That must have been one, because I've never forgotten it.

But here's the point: I've some really Good News for you today, from the Bible, and it comes to you from the God who knows your name and loves you – but before you can appreciate this good news, you first need to realize that you're under a worse death sentence than those drug-dealers. As sinners in God's sight, everyone born - not only in the Philippines but anywhere in the world today - is born with an eternal death sentence hanging over their head – in other words, we're all the living dead of this planet! 'Dead in sins' is how the Bible in Ephesians chapter 2 begins to describe those who don't know God. Now, I'm not here to tell you about how it can be postponed, but to tell you about how God has actually made a way back to life for you – and that's a way back to experiencing life in its fullest sense for ever.

And that's because, in that same Bible chapter of Ephesians chapter 2, but this time in verses 8 & 9, there's an announcement about God's grace, which is the undeserved favour he shows us. But even as the Bible here tells us about God's amazing grace towards sinners (which is all of us), it also mentions that our own good works can't save us. This is because, as we've seen, we're actually dead in God's sight because of our sins. That's why we can't even begin to hope that God will be pleased by our good works and let us into heaven.

Please allow me to illustrate how many people think, so that we can realize for ourselves how utterly hopeless this kind of thinking is. Let's imagine a dispute between neighbours which

comes before a local magistrate. One man is accused of stealing his neighbour's motorbike. This is what he says to the magistrate: 'I am here today to demand justice. I don't want mercy or compassion, I simply want justice. In connection with the theft of the motorbike which I'm being accused of, I admit that I did it. But there have been many other days when I did not steal his motorbike. I have even done some good things for him on a few occasions. So, on that basis, I demand justice. I demand to be declared innocent and free to go!'

Now, let me ask you, what do you think the magistrate will say? Will he be convinced by this argument? No, of course not! And neither will God be if we plead that our good works should cancel out our sins. But I'm here to tell you positively that there's a way back to life with God - and Calvary's cross where Jesus, God's Son, died for you, is the place where you begin. You see, it was there where Jesus died that God solved our problem for us (1 Corinthians 15:3,4). What's more, Jesus came back from the dead to be our risen, living Saviour.

Please allow me to tell you another story of how - in another sense - a person came back to life. In 1997, the house Luz lived in was badly damaged by fire. This, it was suspected, was due to a faulty power cable. Her daughter Delimar's bedroom was so totally destroyed by the intense heat that no trace of Delimar's dead body was ever found. Later, 6 years later in fact, Luz was attending a party where a 6-year-old girl was present. Instantly and impossibly, but with a mother's intuition, she knew she was looking at her very own daughter. She pretended there was gum stuck to her hair and cut out a few strands for DNA testing which confirmed this was indeed her daughter! What

had happened was that someone known to the family, a person called Carolyn Correa, had visited just after baby Delimar's birth claiming she was pregnant. Police believe she snatched the child and then set fire to the baby's bedroom to cover up her kidnap. Still more amazingly, Jesus in reality came back from the dead physically, so we can come back from the dead spiritually. He is God's provision for our problem, the problem we're unable to fix on our own.

So, you may say, what exactly am I supposed to do? Well, this is how we must now respond – I want to use a story Jesus himself told in Luke 15:17-21. You see, we're asking: How does Jesus' death on the cross come to save us? We need to hear again the moral of the story of the prodigal son which Jesus told in Luke 15 – it's all about the boy who took his father's money and ran away from home. Later, he was sorry and came back. The father, when welcoming him home again, said about his son that it was as if he was alive again. Now, let me tell you this - God is like that father; but in order for things to be right again between us and God, we must come back to God the very same way that prodigal returned to his father – in other words, by not boasting about the good works we like to remember, but by admitting our bad deeds, the ones we'd prefer to forget.

The prodigal did this after the Bible says he 'came to himself' – in other words after he came to his senses. You can read in Luke's Gospel how his father 'had compassion' – which confirms the boy was in big trouble from every point of view. Then, finally, the son admitted: 'I'm not worthy.' May I ask: Have you spoken to God like that? That's the true way to come back to God as if from the dead – turning your life round to find the

way to life. The father said of his boy that it was as if he'd been dead and was now alive again.

We've by now made it clear, I hope, that we're not good enough for heaven, but in case anyone here thinks the opposite - that they're too bad for heaven, let me tell you about a young girl on a plane who was obviously travelling to visit her dad. Let me describe her to you: she's in a pretty dress with pink ribbons in her hair and black, shiny shoes. All the time she's singing loudly 'I'm going to see daddy ...' Every chance she gets while on the plane she has a Pepsi and a cake. She keeps bouncing up and down with excitement, until well ... you can guess what happened. She exploded. I mean she was violently sick. Now the little girl with pink ribbons in her hair and nice dress and black shiny shoes was in a terrible mess. When people got out of the plane as soon as it landed, escaping in a hurry from the mess and smell, they were interested to see a man in a light-coloured suit of immaculate clothes heading for the plane - surely, this was her dad coming to meet his daughter.

How was he going to react, when he saw the disgusting mess she was in now? The little girl saw him and rushed towards him. In a split second, he saw the terrible mess she was in ... but he didn't hesitate - he stretched out his arms and hugged her close. And that's how God in his grace welcomes us, as in fact the farmer did his rebel boy. There's no life that's too messed up. God wants to welcome you back - as someone who was effectively dead to him, but who's alive again. Yes, today, right where you are, you can find your way back to life with God through Jesus' death and all by God's grace. According to John 5:24 just

by hearing and believing you can pass in a moment from death to life.

This is Good News for all, for everyone, but you must come on your own, when you come to God through Jesus.

## CHAPTER TWO: GOD'S THOUGHTS ARE NOT OUR THOUGHTS

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In one way or another, we're all pretty good at 'keeping up appearances.' There may be a strain in relationships within the family, but when visitors call we're able to perform in such a way as to avoid it being detected. Behaving like this – or at least attempting to do so – goes all the way back, almost to the dawn of time. The Bible tells us that when our very first parents sinned by disobeying God's original command not to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree, they discovered they were naked. Their instinctive response at that time, it seems, was to make themselves a covering for their nakedness by using fig leaves. We don't read that they were in despair or deeply sorrowful for what they'd done. Perhaps, its enormity hadn't hit them yet. We're left wondering if they really thought a quick fix was possible.

“Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings” (Genesis 3:7). This was the original cover-up operation. Such a flimsy attempted repair of such a catastrophic failure. Their thinking was at the level of trying only to deal with the external appearances. An attempt to look good was the offered solution. But God's searching questions, and their expulsion from the garden paradise, soon made it devastatingly obvious that this human solution was

hopelessly inadequate. It made no difference as far as God was concerned.

Would the next generation fare any better? They would surely have been told by Adam and Eve of all that happened leading up to when God made the first coats of animal skin for them. This would have involved sacrifice, with some animal's blood staining the still new planet. I think we can fairly assume God made this into a teaching opportunity. He surely taught our first parents the great principle that would come to run through the whole Bible. And what is that? Some refer to it as the red or scarlet thread. Hebrews 9:22 contains the words: all things are cleansed with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

This referred to the multitude of the various prescribed Old Testament blood sacrifices. And ultimately it was the blood of Christ that all these Old Testament offerings were pointing forward to. With each of those sacrifices there was a passing over of sins; but when Christ died on the cross that was when the sins of each believer on him were finally put away. Many Old Testament rituals involved blood or even things stained or sprinkled with blood, so as to become coloured red, and all these things in a rich variety of ways form part of what we're styling as 'the red thread' that runs throughout the whole Bible. Ultimately, of course, it leads us to the cross where Christ died. And we affirm that in his death alone forgiveness can be obtained from God.

Cain and Abel, the children of Adam and Eve, couldn't fail to have had this lesson impressed upon them, I suggest. I think

that's as good as confirmed by Hebrews 11 in the place where Abel gets an honourable mention for his faith. It was his faith, you see, that led him to draw near to God in worship with a lamb that he'd taken from his own flocks. The Bible tells us (in Romans 10) that faith invariably acts upon a word from the Lord. And in this case, I'm presuming that word came to Abel via his parents. He responded by complying with God's instruction, and sacrificed a lamb. But Cain was not compliant. He'd other ideas. It appears his thinking was like the thinking of a great many people who'd come after him, right down to the present time.

Seemingly rejecting what he'd heard, Cain figured it ought to be enough, more than enough perhaps, to bring the fruit of his own labours to present to God – literally he brought crops he'd grown and these formed his offering. In a similar way, ever since, people have likewise felt they need to do something to try to make themselves acceptable to God - taking some pride possibly in the idea that they were making some contribution at least. But are they right to think like this? There's only one verdict that counts, and we read about it in Genesis chapter 4, that the LORD had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard. So Cain became very angry.

Tragically, Cain was so angry that he murdered his brother Abel. In that way, the very first man born into this world became a murderer. Right from the very first generation, human nature, although only so recently flawed, was fully capable of serious sin. Despite this, God waited for over one and a half thousand years before giving imminent warning of global

judgement on the human race. This takes us to the time of Noah. Once again, it would prove to be a case of God's thoughts not being our thoughts, in that the way of salvation God presented to the world then was ruled unacceptable, in fact it was laughed out of court. The Apostle Peter summarizes it like this in the New Testament: "... and [God] did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly ..."

Those listening back then to this preacher of righteousness – to Noah, that is – wrote him off as crazy. Any explanation for his actions in building a large boat, must have been laughed out of hand, in the same way as the preaching of the cross of Christ today is viewed as foolishness by many. But as now, so also then; it was God's wisdom through the apparent foolishness of the thing preached, to bring about salvation for the many – or the few – who responded on God's terms (1 Corinthians 1:18). Rejecting God's way brought God's judgement upon them. They scoffed at Noah, ridiculed his building of the ark, were shut outside, and so perished in the deluge.

Within another couple of chapters of the record of the Bible's first book, we've an example of another typical human behaviour. I'm referring to the incident that occurred at the Tower of Babel when God intervened to disrupt human communications by introducing diversity into human language for the first time. Why did God do this? It was because the common interest of people at that time was to try to reach God – to try to get to heaven their own way. They were listening to each other, but not to God. That's similar to the goals of organized institu-

tional religion at any time in human history. Once again, God showed the bankruptcy of this approach.

Then, when we come to the Bible's second book, and into the third millennia of human history, God clarifies for all humanity the standard from which it had fallen. We know of this standard famously as the Ten Commandments. But the perversity of human nature would find it irresistible not to misuse even these God-given commands. God's purpose in giving them is clearly stated in the Bible (see Romans 7 & 8; Galatians 2 & 3). God intended the Law to be like a thermometer or a mirror. A thermometer can confirm that a patient is unwell; and a mirror can confirm that our outward appearance needs attention. But the thermometer cannot make us well; nor can the mirror beautify us. God's Law, together with the inward conviction that we've violated its standard, similarly only proves that we stand in need of help – help which only God, and not we ourselves, can provide.

Not too many pages further on, as Israel are journeying to the Promised Land, we come across another trap the Bible documents humanity is capable of falling into. It's the trap of venerating relics and icons:

“The people spoke against God and Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food.” The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. So the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, because

we have spoken against the LORD and you; intercede with the LORD, that He may remove the serpents from us.” And Moses interceded for the people. Then the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery *serpent*, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live.” And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived” (Numbers 21:5-9).

Sadly, this serpent didn't remain in the place where it was set up, but was taken with them, and continued until the days of good king Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:4). It's then the Bible writer discloses how the people had hung onto that copper serpent as a religious relic, attributing special powers to it. Time and again, the commentary of the pages of the Bible, drawn from specific incidents down through history, witnesses to us of the futility of our own thoughts about how we might extricate ourselves from the predicament of our fall from grace and our disqualification for heaven as a result.

The story is told of a lifeguard among a crowd on a riverbank. In the treacherous river currents, a man is drowning. Seeing the obvious difficulty the swimmer is in, the crowd urge the lifeguard to dive in and offer assistance. But still he stands motionless, other than keeping his eye trained on the drowning man. The baffled crowd urge him again to do something, but still he remains motionless, without flexing a muscle. Now it appears it may be too late, the man in the water is barely able to keep his head above water, and his movements have now become much

weaker. Suddenly, the lifeguard dives in and brings the man to the shore. The crowd, although appreciative, demand to know why he left it so late. He replies that as long as the man was desperately trying to save himself, he couldn't help him, in fact it would've been dangerous for both of them if he'd attempted the rescue at any earlier time.

The Bible says: "For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6). "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). As with the lifeguard, God waited to the right time - when we were helpless. And it's also only when we too realize that we're helpless, that we can be saved from this greatest danger. Our own attempts, based on misguided thinking, now need to stop. This is the right time to tell God we can't help ourselves - he must do it all for us. I urge you to take hold of the Bible's red thread, turn from your sins and trust in Christ's death alone for your eternal forgiveness.

## CHAPTER THREE: NEW LIFE IN JESUS

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The other day, a woman in a group I was talking with, said ‘I don’t watch the evening news any more – it’s too depressing. I wouldn’t sleep if I watched the horrors it shows late in the evening.’ There was a general murmur of consent. We do seem to get bombarded by a relentless stream of all the problems in world, in society, and in people’s personal lives - and it can be very graphic. This lady had just had enough, she was covering her ears (and eyes).

It reminded me of an incident I’d been reading about some time back. Two men were in discussion, one of them an evangelist and the other someone who might have described himself as an agnostic. Why was he having trouble coming to faith? He said it was down to all the evil in the world. He had philosophical problems, he said, about the extent of evil, the origin of evil, and how the very presence of evil could be considered consistent with the existence of God, at least the kind of God he thought he understood from what he knew of the Bible. The evangelist was thoughtful for a moment, and then asked him what his take was on the evil he detected in his own heart? I think that personal approach, although direct, is better than the philosophical one – although there are some very clear answers to at least some of the skeptic’s questions.

One day, Mark records Jesus Christ in dialogue with some of his followers. Jesus is speaking:

“Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?” (Thus He declared all foods clean.) And He was saying, “That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man” (Mark 7:18-23).

A moment's reflection shows that what Jesus was, in effect, saying was that the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. The evil in my life, in society ... starts out from inside of me, and all other people who are, in these terms, just like me. No wonder the world is in a mess. When a newspaper posed the question, 'What's Wrong with the World?' the Catholic thinker G.K. Chesterton reputedly wrote a brief letter in response:

'Dear Sirs:

I am.

Sincerely Yours,

G. K. Chesterton.'

As Timothy Keller commented, “That is the attitude of someone who has grasped the message of Jesus.” And the message of

Jesus as he spoke it plainly in Mark 7:21. Whether he fully realised it or not, someone else who grasped Jesus' diagnosis of the human condition was Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who said: "If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?" (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* 1918-1956).

Our own heart indeed. That was Christ's point. And the Bible prophet, Jeremiah, had given an equally frank diagnosis in the Old Testament: "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; Who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). The Bible at that point doesn't have in view the mere physical organ of our heart. It's not talking about the pump that sends blood around our body. The sense in that verse surely indicates that each human is corrupt – at least in God's sight – at the very core of his or her being. The source of everything our entire life revolves around is tainted. But the language of sickness there, seemed to invite me to compare – by way of some kind of analogy – what the wonderful world of modern medicine can now do with patients who have a fatal heart condition. I was drawn to the story of Heather Clark.

At only seven-months-old, Clark's son, Lukas Clark, died from fatal injuries under the supervision of his babysitter. The case at the time of writing still remains under police investigation, but, according to the *Daily Bulletin*, detectives believed the babysitter's abusive boyfriend physically harmed Lukas when he wouldn't stop crying. As soon as Clark was forced to bear

the burden of losing her first-born child, she immediately decided to donate his organs. “There is another family out there,” Clark thought, “and I have the chance to make them not go through what I’m about to go through.” Lukas’ organs were used to save the lives of three different children, including Jordan Drake, who spent years in the hospital for a congenital heart defect.

Esther Gonzalez, Jordan’s mother, told reporters, “It’s hard to describe ... that [Clark] would be so selfless to be able to think of another family while she’s going through her grief. We’re family now. We’re friends now. Our families are families. We’ve brought our families together.” Clark first reached out to Jordan’s family on Facebook, where she also posted her exciting news. “I would like to share something with all the amazing Lukas supporters. Today I have been in contact with a beautiful family. This beauty (Jordan) is the girl who has Lukas’ heart beating in her. One day I will meet her and squeeze her so tightly! Thank you to her mom and dad who allow me to be a part of their lives. This is the best Christmas present I could have asked for.”

Not long afterwards, Heather Clark finally met with Jordan and her family at Phoenix Children’s Hospital, where she put a stethoscope to Jordan’s chest and heard Lukas’s heart again for the first time. After losing her infant son two-and-a-half years ago, Heather Clark was able to listen to his heartbeat again in the body of 4-year-old Jordan Drake. Now I want us to return in thought to where we were before hearing about Heather Clark. We’d learnt from the Bible that our heart is desperate-

ly sick (Jeremiah 17:9). But there's good news for us – as there was for Jordan Drake.

God is offering us a new heart. God once said this through the Bible prophet, Ezekiel: “Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances” (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

Now, admittedly, Ezekiel said those words to the nation of Israel, but the same teaching comes through to us all in the New Testament. How can this miracle happen? If you receive Christ, you receive life (1 John 5:12). That's the Bible's Good News message. Whoever has the Son – the Son of God, even Jesus – has the life, this new life from God.

I want to be very clear and plain. Religion – of any sort – is not the answer to the human problem: the problem of each individual human heart before God. The Apostle Paul spoke about “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

I want you to think back to the true story of Lukas Clark's heart beating in Jordan Drake's chest and so giving her renewed physical life. It can get so much better than even that wonderful story. This is the Bible's message: Your only hope of glory is Christ living in you (Colossians 1:27). The Apostle Paul spoke of going through certain experiences, and then he added: “so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh” (2 Corinthians 4:11). God wants the life of Jesus to be lived out in you. We can't imagine God's joy when in a miracle of divine

grace, a sinner is transformed by receiving God's son through faith, and then God sees Christ living in that person. I wonder if Heather Clark has ever thought of that greater joy? But, more importantly, have you? The way to heaven is not 'Try harder,' 'Must do better.' No, it requires radical spiritual transplant surgery that deals once for all with the source, not the symptoms.

## CHAPTER FOUR: WHEN YOUR NAME IS CALLED – OR NOT

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I've never been the best with names - never have been very good at remembering them or even recalling well-known ones, which is why I'm not too worried that it's a sign of senility. I have excellent recall of the initial letter, however. I'm trying to remember Kenneth, but all I've got is a K, and so I try Keith ... or maybe it wasn't Kenneth after all, it could just as likely be Kevin. If God knows the name of every star, and the number of hairs on our head, we can be totally sure he knows our name too, whoever we are.

We read in the Bible about God calling people's name, sometimes twice. That reminds me of an airport. You know how there always seem to be those repeated announcements: 'This is the last call for John Buchan. Flight XY3418 for Dubai is now boarding, please report to Gate 15 at once.' Where do these people find to spend their time out of earshot of the name-calling that gets everyone else fed up listening to it on their behalf? Talking of airports, I had a rather different experience once. There was no chance of my name being called out that day. It was Davao in the south of the Philippines. Out of habit, I'd turned up on a Monday morning at the end of my mission trip. When the check-in desk opened, I sauntered up to it and handed over my passport and e-ticket along with my itinerary print-out. The next thing that registered was that the young woman behind the desk was telling me she couldn't find my name on

her list on the computer screen. She looked carefully at my paperwork, more carefully than I'd done, that's for sure. It was then she explained that I was not due to be flying until the following day.

Someone else had booked my ticket on this occasion, and the only day available had been one day later than my usual departure time. And so there I was ... being denied access to the departure lounge as my name was not on the written list of registered names. But that's a fairly small problem. What about our departure from this life and access to the world to come? Let's read some solemn words from near the end of the Bible:

“Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is *the book* of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one *of them* according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:11-15).

On the last day, before God's great white throne, the all-important books will be opened and you'll be denied access to God's presence in heaven if your name is not found written in the book of life. There's a hymn that says: 'When the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there.' But what if our name isn't on that list; what if it isn't included in the roll-call? Is there a more chilling verse in all of Scripture than the one we read last? "And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."

Going back to my problematic check-in at the Philippines' airport. I remember trying to casually ask if there were any seats at that moment ... a day early. The assistant kindly obliged by checking availability of her screens. 'There's no problem from Singapore onwards,' she said, 'but no seats are showing between here and Singapore, that's the problem.' Then she added: 'Why don't you sit down and pray about it?' I thanked her, commenting that I thought that was excellent advice. About five minutes later, the PA system crackled into life: 'Would Mr Johnston return to the check-in desk.' When I reached it, the young lady beamed. 'A seat, 27K, has become available.' I thanked her profusely, pleased to notice it was a window seat, my usual favoured selection. My prayer had been graciously answered. This further reminded me of a time when the Lord had sent out his disciples on a mission.

"The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name." And He said to them, "I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning. "Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all

the power of the enemy, and nothing will injure you. Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven.” At that very time He rejoiced greatly in the Holy Spirit, and said, “I praise You, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from *the* wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight” (Luke 10:17-21).

There are names recorded in heaven, that’s what we pick up on from Jesus’ words. If your name’s written there, there’ll be no difficulty in departing this life and accessing God’s presence. There’ll be no difficulty comparable to the difficulty I had boarding for departure at Davao airport. But how can you be sure that your name is in fact written above or recorded in heaven – the very thing the Lord taught his disciples to rejoice in?

Well, I’ve told you how I prayed at the airport, and the way to know our name is written in heaven, is to be sure we have prayed the sinner’s prayer ... that’s the one that begins by us acknowledging to the Lord that what the Bible says about us is true: we are sinners. In Romans 3:23, it says ‘all have sinned.’ The sinner’s prayer begins by confessing: ‘Lord, I’ve sinned, my actions, words, and thoughts have not reached your perfect standard. At times, even I’m very conscious they’re not what they should’ve been.’ In the second place, we confirm our agreement with the Bible, when in Isaiah 64:6, it informs us frankly that we can never make it up to God because, as it says, the best

we can do is still like polluted clothing in God's sight. In other words, our very best performances aren't free from the stain of sin. Everything about us is blemished.

Having made such a full confession of our guilt before a holy God whom we've offended by our sins, and freely admitted that the solution to this problem doesn't lie within our power, we turn from our sin and throw ourselves on his mercy. Once again, we state that we accept as absolutely trustworthy the testimony of God's Word, the Bible, when it tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:3 that 'Christ died for our sins.' There on the cross outside Jerusalem almost 2,000 years ago, Jesus Christ, God's Son, took our blame and suffered the just for the unjust that he might bring us to God (1 Peter 3:18).

It remains, as the fourth step, to make a personal commitment of faith by receiving Christ into our lives as our saviour in the unwavering belief that this is all that God requires for the eternal forgiveness of all our sins: past, present and future. If that makes a deep impression on your heart right now, it's most likely that God is calling you – calling your name. Will you respond – right now? Don't let the opportunity pass. Receive Christ now, so you can gratefully serve him.

Talking of serving the Lord, it's instructive to read of the first believers as they gathered to discover how to serve God, that ... in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples, and ... (the number of names together were about an hundred and twenty)" (Acts 1:15). Notice it actually talks about the 'number of names' gathered together, obviously representing the number of persons meeting there at that time. This was the

original nucleus from which New Testament Christianity began. I'm reminded of how in the Old Testament we read of God's meeting-place in the midst of his gathered people being a place specially selected by God and described as the place where God had caused his name to dwell (see Deuteronomy 12 etc.).

Once again, the name of God stood for the presence of God. When we come in to the Book of Acts in the New Testament, we find that the local church fellowships which the Apostles established were consistently described as being 'of God.' In every such location, disciples of Christ called upon the name of the Lord (1 Corinthians 1:1,2) identifying themselves overall as forming the house 'of God' on earth. Once again, as in the Old Testament, God had put his name there – in that they were said to be 'of God.' It remains God's plan for believers today that we should place our name where God has put his.

## CHAPTER FIVE: THE SHAME OF BEING KNOWN

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Some cultures are described as guilt cultures; whereas others are spoken of as shame cultures. In either kind of culture, if I believe I'm guilty, AND society believes I'm guilty, then I'm in big trouble, and I'll be punished. On the other hand, if I believe I'm not guilty AND so does society, then there's no problem.

Where it gets interesting is when I believe something different about myself from what society thinks of me – or more to the point perhaps their view of me is different from how I view myself. Let's suppose I live in a guilt culture, and society doesn't believe I'm guilty - but I believe I'm guilty. In that case, I can't live with myself. In a guilt culture it's what I believe about myself that controls my response. I can't cope with believing I'm guilty - irrespective of what others believe about me. Sometimes, someone who's been found not guilty in a court of law, will later – quite voluntarily – make a confession to the police that they really did commit the crime that they were previously accused of. They just couldn't live with the personal knowledge of their guilt.

But it's the opposite way round in a shame culture. There, it doesn't matter if I believe in my innocence, because as long as society believes I'm guilty, I simply can't live with the shame that brings. In a shame culture, it's what society believes about me that controls my response. I can't cope with the shame of

them thinking I'm guilty - irrespective of whether I am or not. Sometimes, in such a culture, the mere shameful suspicion of others thinking that a person is guilty is sufficient for that person to feel like life is no longer worth living.

At a purely personal level, as opposed to the cultural level, I think we can all relate to that last idea. We're all concerned about what others know and think about us. That's why we have secrets AND yet - at the same time - feel a need to share them in a controlled way. A few years ago, one man had an idea. He decided to start a blog - intended to be a temporary community art project - in which individuals would mail post-cards on which was written just one secret which they hadn't told to anyone. This blog is now an online community with over 80,000 members. Those with secrets seem to feel the need to tell them to somebody, but only in a safe or controlled way because being truly known outside of that brings fear. Being known opens us up to exposure, and if we're exposed we risk being rejected. Normally, we prefer to keep hidden from others whatever shameful secrets lurk in the dark recesses of our souls. We hide our secrets and put on our public face hoping that what we really are will never be seen or known by anyone else. But even deeper down, secure behind the protection of anonymity perhaps, we also long for the relief of unburdening.

Given this fear of being known, the invitation "Come, see a man who told me all the things that I have done," might have been heard more like an accusation than an invitation. Yet, this invitation - given by an unnamed, Samaritan woman in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of John's Gospel - is an invitation to see, and to be seen

by someone who's told her all that she'd done. That someone was Jesus. Now, his knowledge didn't reject or destroy this relationship. The knowledge of her which Jesus demonstrated had obviously restored her sense of worth, judging by her elated response.

We're only given a few details about this woman. She was a Samaritan, a long-despised ethnic group. We're told that she'd had five husbands and was currently living with a man to whom she wasn't married. It could well be that this is the source of her shame. Women in the ancient world derived their social standing as well as their economic viability from their husbands. With neither husband nor male child, a woman such as this was dependent on a society that often abandoned them. It's often thought this woman was coming to draw water when no other women were around so that she could hide her shame. This is because it's reckoned unlikely that she'd outlived five men; more likely that they'd chosen to use her and then abandon her. In that place where she lived, hers is an open secret but still one that's too painful to sit comfortably with out in the open.

Yet in her brief encounter with a stranger who asks her to give him a drink, her secrets are exposed - but not for the sake of shaming her or exposing what she feared the most. The stranger by the well at no point invites repentance nor, for that matter, does he speak of sin at all. That would indicate to me that this woman already had the right attitude towards her past life.

"Sir, I can see you are a prophet," she said - which is interesting, because Jesus hadn't told her future, which is the thing many

would equate with prophecy. In fact, he'd actually told her past. "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband" (John 4:17-18). From his knowledge of her shameful personal life, the woman at the well concluded that Jesus was nothing less than a prophet. As the conversation continued, she began to wonder if Jesus wasn't in fact more than just any prophet, but the very one the Old Testament promised.

We said it's immediately after Jesus describes her past that she says, "I see that you are a prophet." She *sees* because Jesus has *seen* her - seen her past pain. He's seen her including her shameful secret, but offered her something of incomparable worth: namely his acceptance of her, all bound up in the offer of living water. He has *seen* her - and, boy, was she thirsty for the worth, value and significance that are available from him. All of this is treatment to which she's unaccustomed to receiving - from anyone. Perhaps she'd given up expecting it from any female, far less a man. Never mind the fact that this man is a Jew and not one of her own Samaritan people! Racial and cultural taboos don't seem to matter to this man. When he speaks knowingly and compassionately of her past, she realizes she's in the presence of a prophet. She leaves her water pot, runs into her city, and invites all the townspeople to "come, *see* a man who told me all the things I have done."

'Come, see a man who told me all the things that I have done' becomes an invitation to be welcomed into living life in the open. Jesus knows the most intimate details of our life - both our guilt and shame and all our secrets, but from the example

of her case, we see that needn't make us feel afraid or ashamed. That's because his knowledge brings a sense of worth because it conveys his acceptance. It's interesting that before John in his Gospel tells us of the Lord's insight into this woman's past, he also records Jesus' insight into the life of two men. The first is someone called Nathaniel. We read in John 1:45-49:

“Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and *also* the Prophets wrote - Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” Nathanael said to him, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him, and \*said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” Nathanael \*said to Him, “How do You know me?” Jesus answered and said to him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” Nathanael answered Him, “Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel.”

So Jesus first revealed what was in Nathaniel's heart, and so exposed his character, and this led to the further revelation to Nathaniel that the one who could do this was their long-awaited Messiah – Philip had been right after all! This is evidence to support what we're told in the next chapter:

“But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man” (John 2:24-25).

Next up is a man called Nicodemus. He arrives on the scene straight after our being told that Jesus knows us and all that's in us.

“Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God *as* a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:1-3).

At first, it seems like Jesus is answering a question that's never been asked. But, of course, this is the very matter that's been playing on Nicodemus' mind. And so the stage is set for the question about how we may be born again to be answered by one of the most well-loved of Bible verses - John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” By this means we can know for certain that we're no longer guilty before God because our sins are now forgiven and our worrying about being shamefully exposed is also dealt with as we, through faith, are fitted for heaven and become acceptable to God through being found in Christ by faith alone. For those in either a guilt or shame culture, this is good news indeed.

## CHAPTER SIX: ONLY TWO QUESTIONS ARE NEEDED

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Life has many questions, such as: Will the British pound fall still lower? Will it rain today? But when all is said and done, only two questions need to be faced by each of us, and answered. U.S. chat show host, Larry King, was once asked who he would most like to interview from across all the centuries. Among the names he put forward was that of Jesus Christ. The interviewer couldn't resist it: 'Mr King, what question would you want to put to Jesus Christ?' Larry King said, 'I would ask him if he really was virgin-born because the answer to that question defines history'. He's right; he's absolutely right. For we're dealing here with an event that not only defines history, but one which proves the love of God to us.

Needless to say, I want to submit that's the first of the two necessary questions. I would like to think Mr King would accept the answer. Pontius Pilate was quite a famous person in his day, and his name is immortalized in the Bible. He was someone who had the opportunity that Mr. King relished. He did interview Jesus Christ. But he didn't quite seem able to muster up enough confidence in the answers he got, at least not over against a hostile crowd baying for Jesus' blood. As Jesus said then, only those on the side of truth can receive the answers he gives.

What about you? Are you sceptical? So was Joseph, Mary's husband to be. Is it credible to believe in a child being conceived

and born without a human father being involved? You'd not be alone if your reaction was: 'Come on, you don't really believe that, do you? We've mentioned Joseph; what was his take on it back then – in those simple times when people allegedly believed anything – no matter how unscientific it was? Here's how Matthew opens his Gospel:

“Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. “She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL,” which translated means, “GOD WITH US.” And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took *Mary* as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus” (Matthew 1:18-25).

When Joseph saw his fiancé was going to have a baby, he didn't stroke his beard in wonder. He started filing for divorce! Now why on earth would a simpleton want to do that? Could it be because he already had a pretty good working knowledge of biology? Yeah, that was it. The laws of Nature dictate that a girl doesn't ordinarily have a baby unless she's been sleeping with a man. He knew that fact just as well as we do – and he knew he wasn't that man. So he drew what he thought was the obvious conclusion.

Do you get it? Joseph didn't buy the 'myth'! His actions remove the argument for all this being irrational superstition. Good old Joseph. He was a cynic like the best of us! He acted just exactly as modern sceptics do – with the difference being: he was a lot closer to the action than we are. And the point is: something changed his mind. In the end Joseph didn't divorce Mary. Instead, he became a believer! Which helps me to see that faith doesn't have to be a denial of biology or any other science for that matter. Joseph did not have blind faith. He first of all agreed with the usual science of child-birth, but was persuaded by the evidence to the contrary.

Our modern objections were already built into the original story, meaning Joseph's faith wasn't blind faith. His decision not to divorce Mary was as rational a decision as any that he, you or I have ever made. Without any doubt this was the biggest decision of this man's life – and one he took with the greatest of care – when he'd every reason at first to come to the opposite conclusion. His final decision (not to divorce) was one for which he'd have needed - and did clearly receive undeni-

able evidence that something – or Someone – had wonderfully stepped into the picture.

Joseph became a totally convinced believer in the identity of the child in the manger. Remember, he'd everything to lose if he was deluded. Until the day he died he had to put up with the town gossip wherever he went, with all its smirking innuendo. Joseph's actions are a small, but significant, part of the reason why I'm not an atheist.

But now it's time to consider what the other question is. Remember, we started out by saying that there really were only two questions that we each needed to answer as we journey through life ... just two, out of the millions that might occur to us to ask at some point. So, what's the second? I'm thinking of a painting I once heard about, hanging in a pastor's office in Puerto Rico. It was directly in front of his desk. And it was the picture of a little girl holding the hand of Jesus, even as he tenderly gazed at her. She was clasping his hand as she asked him, "What happened to your hands?" Here's the answer of one eyewitness, the disciple we know as Peter, when recounting the story later:

"Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know - this *Man*, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put *Him* to death. But God raised Him up again, putting an

end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power” (Acts 2:22-24).

If the answer to our first question (Jesus, were you virgin-born?) defines history, as Larry King put it; then the answer to this question (Jesus, what happened to your hands?) defines our destiny. Are you skeptical, once again? Instead of Joseph, this time let’s call Thomas as our witness of the authenticity of Jesus’ death and resurrection. John’s Gospel, chapter 20, describes for us the early scenes of the disciples struggling to come to terms with what appears to be Christ’s resurrection:

“But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples were saying to him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.” After eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst and said, “Peace *be* with you.” Then He \*said to Thomas, “Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing.” Thomas answered and said to Him, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:24-28).

Thomas asked for evidence, and he got it. Another original skeptic convinced. He was there and was convinced by the evidence. The whole recorded incident in so many details has the

ring of truth about it. The frailty of the disciples' faith was being advertised for all the world to see. The role of women as the primary witnesses of the resurrection was not the stuff of make-up stories, due to the fact that the testimony of women at that time wasn't admissible in a court of law.

The answers to these two questions, taken together, define Christianity. They confront us respectively with the foundational truths of the Incarnation and the Atonement. That is, the claim of the Bible that God became a human being, and it was for the reason that the Immortal might be capable of dying our death – that death being the price of our human rebellion against God's authority.

We say again, life has many questions, but we only need answers to two of them, and they are: 'Was Jesus virgin-born?' and 'What happened to his hands?' The hands of one born to offer you eternal forgiveness were wounded for you on the darkest day of this planet's history. That's the claim of the world's best-selling book. You owe it to yourself to have second thoughts ... to be like Joseph ... to be like Thomas. It's good to be cautious, but only so as to be sure of being correct.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: THE GREAT DIVIDE

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Flying over to British Columbia from the United Kingdom, I always enjoy gazing out of the aeroplane window and looking down on the magnificent Rocky Mountains. I can so easily visualize, as I look down on the mountain ridges, the distinct possibility – one that’s often quoted - of one raindrop landing inches away from another - on a certain ridge peak in the Rockies – and them both beginning journeys that’ll take them thousands of miles away from each other finally. One flows to the west and ultimately arrives in the Pacific Ocean while the other flows to the east and arrives in the Atlantic Ocean. Their destinies are far apart from one another because of that watershed – but, back then, for a moment, they were side by side.

I looked out over the crowd in the Philippines before I spoke to them while my colleague was making the usual introductions. My theme was going to be about emphasizing God’s grace. I went on to tell them how everyone in heaven will be there by God’s grace, and not by their own efforts. My text was Ephesians 2 verses 8 and 9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

To stress the point, and make it personal, I recall saying: “You may be standing close to your friend tonight, but one of you may end up in heaven and the other in the lake of fire.” The

latter is such a solemn possibility to consider. But consider it we must, because it's based on the plain teaching of the Bible – teaching that was often, in fact, spoken by Jesus Christ, the kindest and truest of men. As we presented the cross where God's son, Jesus Christ, gave himself as a sacrifice for our sins 2,000 years ago, I declared that night, under the tropical sky, that the cross of Christ is the Great Divide. Of course, that's the name taken from the Rocky Mountain range, the name that indicates what I was saying a moment ago: about two raindrops falling and landing side by side, but one just ever so slightly one side of the Great Divide; and the other ever so slightly on its other side. From that moment they begin their respective journeys to end up separated by a great distance.

I then brought the crowd's attention back to the cross where God's son, Jesus, was crucified for us. I did this by referring to the two thieves who'd been crucified alongside Jesus on that same day. One thief on the one side; and his accomplice on the other. But one was destined for Paradise, and the other we presume for the lake of fire – all despite the fact that they knew each other well, and probably had been part of the same gang, indeed both living the same violent and godless lifestyle. Luke, in his Gospel, tells us the facts:

“Two others also, who were criminals, were being led away to be put to death with Him [Jesus]. When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. But Jesus was saying, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots, dividing up His gar-

ments among themselves. And the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One."

The soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine, and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!" Now there was also an inscription above Him, "THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS." One of the criminals who were hanged *there* was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!" But the other answered, and rebuking him said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed *are suffering* justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!"

And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise." It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour, because the sun was obscured; and the veil of the temple was torn in two. And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, "Father, INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT." Having said this, He breathed His last. Now when the centurion saw what had happened, he *be-*

*gan* praising God, saying, “Certainly this man was innocent” (Luke 23:32-47).

Perhaps, there’d been three of them earlier, all members of the same gang, the other being the prisoner named as Barabbas. He was the one who got released, you may recall. The Roman governor had found no fault with Christ whom the Jewish religious leaders were trying to be rid of because they were envious of him. This was because of the following he was attracting among the ordinary people. Pilate thought he could set Jesus free by reminding the people that at this time of year he always released one prisoner. But his strategy backfired when the priests incited the people to demand the freedom of Barabbas, a murderer, and not Jesus.

The two remaining gang members – if we may refer to them like that – may well have cursed the fact that it was neither of them who got released. Barabbas, being more notorious perhaps, had been more readily identified. That hardly seemed fair, not if it really was a case of the worst offender getting the ‘get out of jail free’ card. On the other hand, as one of the remaining two later came to realize, they could hardly claim their treatment was unjust. They both deserved to die under the law for the crimes they’d done.

That truth had only just begun to dawn on one of the two crucified thieves some time after he’d been hanging alongside Jesus. Jesus was on the middle cross, crucified between them. The Bible had predicted Jesus would be with the transgressors and the wicked in his death. The Bible tells us (Romans 8:3) that Jesus’ human life condemns us all. It certainly condemned that

dying thief, and he began to be acutely aware of that. Before then, he'd joined in with his comrade, his accomplice in crime. They'd both been mocking Jesus, as we read a moment ago, but the thinking of one of them was becoming transformed. Jesus had never tried to resist, far less retaliate. While they'd cursed the soldiers who drove home the nails; Jesus had prayed for them to be forgiven.

The contrast between his demeanour and theirs couldn't have been more marked, and now that difference began to convict one of the thieves. He called on his companion to stop the mocking. He wouldn't be party to it any longer. He urged him instead to consider how they truly deserved to die for their sins, but Jesus he now confessed, had done nothing wrong. So, he'd evidently heard about Jesus, the man of whom it was rightly said: 'he went about doing good.' And yet, as he acknowledged, Jesus was undergoing the same sentence of condemnation. How could that even be possible?

The Apostle Peter later explained that Christ died 'the just for the unjust' (1 Peter 3:18), and this particular thief seemed to come to some kind of awareness of that. His eyes must've glanced up at the superscription written above Jesus, nailed above his head on the cross. It might be expected that this would be his charge sheet, detailing the crimes he was guilty of. Since there were none, it simply stated the truth: 'Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews.' How incongruous! A king suffering the worst kind of death by execution – the one Romans reserved for the slaves and despicable criminals. By now, this thief was not only repentant, confessing his guilt, but he was now also evidencing faith. Somehow, he found he could indeed

believe that the man dying next to him, under the same form of execution, was in actual fact a king. His whole bearing and conduct was utterly dignified after all, yes, even regal.

‘Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom,’ he heard himself call out. And he meant every word. We don’t know if his accomplice poured scorn on his changed attitude, for nothing further about him is recorded. We’re left to assume he went to his death an unchanged man, and so dying condemned – not only under Roman law, but under God’s law.

The Lord answers those who sincerely call upon him. And Jesus turned to the repentant thief and said the most welcome words this man had ever heard: ‘Today, you will be with Me in Paradise.’ Later that day, the thief’s soul went to the same place the Lord’s soul had gone to. This is described in Psalm 16 in the Hebrew language as ‘Sheol,’ or the underworld, the part at least reserved for the souls of the righteous dead, while waiting (ultimately) to be resurrected to life.

In one of his teachings, recorded in Luke’s Gospel, in chapter 16, Jesus had earlier revealed that the departed souls of those who’d been credited as righteous through their faith were kept apart from the souls of those who died outside of faith in the Lord. Indeed, Jesus said there was an almighty chasm separating them – a gulf that could never be spanned. This is the biblical ‘Great Divide,’ much more awesome than the feature of the same name in the Canadian Rockies. This man had probably lived very closely among his fellow gang members. In the proverbial expression, they’d been as ‘thick as thieves.’ But there

was now an ultimate and eternal divide between them. How will it be with us – and our family, neighbours and colleagues?

## CHAPTER EIGHT: LOST & FOUND

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It's common knowledge that Jesus told stories known as parables. Strictly speaking, these parables were not allegories – which is where everything has an alternative meaning (making an allegory a sort of extended metaphor). Parables, or at least many of them, were really more like a kind of pointed joke at someone's expense – a story that's getting at someone by means of leading up to a very loaded punch-line. Very often, Jesus' critics, the Pharisees and other religious groups, were the target of his parables. I would now like to share some thoughts on one of Jesus' famous stories. This is what Jesus said, as recorded in Luke's Gospel, chapter 15:

“Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!' In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

The telling of this story is part of Jesus' response to the criticism made against him by religious leaders, when they said Jesus was a friend of tax-gatherers and blatant sinners. You'll gather they didn't like the tax-collectors in those days. There was an ex-

tra reason for that, one that went beyond any dislike in handing over our hard-earned money to the government. These tax-gatherers were considered traitors to their own nation, because they were in the employment of the occupying Roman power. Not only that, but they charged the people more than they should, and put the extra into their own pockets. It's hardly surprising then that they weren't liked, and their behaviour was viewed as despicable. But what they did do was that they listened to Jesus, and he would at times have meals with them. This was too much for the Pharisees and other religious groups to tolerate; so they criticised Jesus for this which, as we say, led Jesus to tell this story against them, that is, against the Pharisees.

The nine coins which the woman didn't lose serve as a reference to the Pharisees; and the one lost coin refers to the tax-collectors and sinners – those whom the religious leaders back then couldn't be bothered with; quite frankly, they thought they were a waste of space. So Jesus is now about to use this story as a shock tactic to face those religious people up to the fact that theirs was not God's valuation of the tax-collectors and other 'big' sinners.

Before we go further, as we consider this story, I want to suggest it gives us all 4 things to think about. Here are four messages from it: (1) You are valuable; (2) but could it be that you are lost? (3) however, if God is looking for you ... then (4) might this be your opportunity to repent?

Let's get started. Remember how – in the story told by Jesus – the woman continued to sweep the house and search carefully

until she found the coin which was a thing of great value. The coin in question which she'd lost was a 'drachma', a Greek silver coin which is only referred to here in all of the New Testament. This coin equalled about a full day's wages. Now remember how we said that this one lost coin referred to the sinners whom the religious leaders despised? The point would have been clear to Jesus' listeners: the sinners with whom Jesus was associating were being portrayed as being extremely valuable to God (cf. similar wording in vv.6,9.)

But we said we're also trying to connect with this story for any contemporary significance. Let's explore the overall message that you, too, really matter, and so need to be found. You're valuable to God! The story is told of a man who loved old books. He met an acquaintance who told him he'd just thrown away a Bible that'd been stored in the attic of his ancestral home for generations. "I couldn't read it," the friend explained. "Somebody named Guten-something had printed it." "Not Gutenberg!" the book-lover exclaimed in horror. "That Bible was one of the first books ever printed. Why, a copy just sold for over two million dollars!" His friend was unimpressed. "Mine wouldn't have fetched a single dollar. Some fellow named Martin Luther had scribbled all over it in German" (*Our Daily Bread*, June 7, 1994.).

Of course, Martin Luther was the famous German Reformer, and any copy of an early printed Bible with his handwritten notes would be a highly sought-after collector's item! But, so the story goes, the person who found this book was ignorant of these matters, and therefore to him it was simply an old book with little or no value. Similarly, you might not think you mat-

ter to God, but you **are** valuable in God's sight. You might dismiss the idea that God could be interested in you. But if so, then you need to understand this story to discover you really are valuable to God.

But not only valuable, but lost! The famous author, George Orwell, describes a wasp which he said "was sucking jam on my plate and I cut him in half. The wasp paid no attention, merely went on with his meal, while a tiny stream of jam trickled out of his severed oesophagus. Only when he tried to fly away did he grasp the dreadful thing that had happened to him." That wasp and people without Christ have much in common. Severed from their souls, still greedy and unaware, people continue to consume life's sweetness. Only when it's time to fly away might they grasp their dreadful condition.

But some even with their last breath are oblivious to their state: P. T. Barnum the circus magnate on his deathbed asked: "How are the circus receipts today?" But so you may not be oblivious like that to the true state of affairs, we ask: How do you know if you're lost? We're going to take our answers to that question from Ephesians 4. It's there that Paul describes 'lost people' as being of a **futile mind** – in other words, their lives are devoid of God's purpose. Paul next writes about their **darkened understanding** – meaning they're without God's revelation to guide or enlighten them. Then Paul goes on to say that they've got **hardened hearts** – in other words, they're insensitive to God and his ways. Finally, Paul mentions **impure greed and deceitful lusts** – which means lost people are living for self-gratification in some form. Please consider if these things could possibly describe you.

Well, it's time to get back to the parable. In the parable, the woman had to light a lamp in the darkened room of her house and painstakingly she began to search for the coin. You see, her trustworthiness is on the line. This makes a difference between the story of the lost coin and the other two stories of lost things which Jesus told in Luke chapter 15: namely about the lost sheep and the lost son. The shepherd didn't lose the sheep, nor did the father lose the son, but this woman lost the coin. She'd been entrusted with the money and was responsible for it. She needs to find it, and she knows the coin must be in the house. If she looks hard enough, she realizes, the coin can surely be found.

I wonder if you're also willing to take responsibility for the way you are? Perhaps, you're lost - but there's hope. If God's looking for you, you'll be found. There's that certainty for all those who belong to him. Perhaps, this is your opportunity to repent?

Let me try to illustrate for you what it means to repent, because we need to understand what God is calling upon us to do. Ernest Miller Hemingway (July 21, 1899 - July 2, 1961) was an American author who died as a result of a self-inflicted shotgun blast to the head. That shotgun had previously been his young son's proud boast, a possession he'd taken pleasure in, something he could brag about to his friends. But after that fateful day when his father used it to end his own life, the boy's attitude towards the gun changed completely. His mother told him to take it and throw it into the lake. He did so. The thing he'd previously taken such delight in, the trophy that had adorned their house, and in the young's boy's thinking at least had once deserved pride of place - that very same gun was now

a hated object. And what had brought about such a reversal of opinion, such a total change of attitude? It was because when he looked at the gun, what he now saw was the very weapon that had taken his dear father's life. From being something he'd been proud of, that gun was now something he hated.

So, when the Bible calls on us to repent of our sin, it means we're no longer to take pleasure in sin as we once did, but now instead to hate it since it was our sin which led Christ to die on the cross for us. To truly repent first means that we recognize that we've done wrong. But for some it's possible to recognize wrong-doing but not be sorry for the sin – only for the fact they've been caught. Repentance, therefore, also includes remorse, which is to be sorry for what we've done. Again, some may get that far, but stop short at begging for forgiveness. It's as if they can admit their shameful guilt to themselves, but not to others.

So, repentance involves a recognition of having done wrong, having remorse for it, as well as requesting forgiveness. Some may even go that far, but they're thinking 'given half a chance I'd do it again!' That kind of attitude also is one that stops short of repentance. True repentance definitely includes a preparedness to renounce what we've done. That is, to take the view that I've learnt my lesson, and I aim never to do the same thing again. But there also needs to be a readiness to restore or hand back anything by which our actions have defrauded others of what's rightfully theirs.

As you listen now, I hope you'll remember the value of the lost coin, and realise that you really do matter to God. Then, re-

member the woman searching for that coin and realize that God's looking for - and missing - you. Remember, finally, the joy of the woman when she found her lost coin, and the joy there'll be in heaven when you turn to God. You now have an opportunity to take responsibility and repent. Will you take it?

## CHAPTER NINE: DEAD MAN WALKING

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A man working in the produce department was asked by a lady if she could buy half a head of lettuce. He replied, “Half a head? Are you serious? God grows these in whole heads and that's how we sell them!”

“You mean,” she persisted, “that after all the years I've shopped here, you won't sell me half-a-head of lettuce?”

“Look,” he said, “if you like I'll ask the manager.” She indicated that would be appreciated, so the young man marched to the front of the store (to where his manager was located). “You won't believe this, but there's a lame-brained idiot of a lady back there who wants to know if she can buy half a head of lettuce.” He noticed the manager gesturing, and turned around to see the lady standing behind him, obviously having followed him to the front of the store. “And this nice lady was wondering if she could buy the other half” he concluded.

Later in the day the manager cornered the young man and said, “That was the finest example of thinking on your feet I've ever seen! Where did you learn that?” “I grew up in Grand Rapids, and if you know anything about Grand Rapids, you know that it's known for its great hockey teams and its ugly women.” The manager's face flushed, and he interrupted, “My wife is from Grand Rapids!” “And which hockey team did she play for?” was the young man's reply.

In the early part of 2014 there may have been times when the French President wished he'd such diplomatic nimbleness. He could have used it when he was attempting damage limitation in the romantic muddle he'd got himself into. Instead, he appeared to fumble. Followers of France's political love story may have been intrigued by some expressions he used in the media. What, for example, did they make of a presidential statement that the woman he'd previously been associated with had succumbed to 'the blues'? It seemed callous to underplay the extent of her distress. You wouldn't normally go to hospital with a case of 'the blues,' but this jilted companion had been hospitalised.

But enough of that. One of the Bible's great characters, Abraham, made a bigger blunder by far in relation to the statements he made about the most important woman in his life, his wife, Sarah. Here we have it recorded for us in Genesis 20:

“Now Abraham journeyed from there toward the land of the Negev, and settled between Kadesh and Shur; then he sojourned in Gerar. Abraham said of Sarah his wife, “She is my sister.” So Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. But God came to Abimelech in a dream of the night, and said to him, “Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is married.” Now Abimelech had not come near her; and he said, “Lord, will You slay a nation, even *though* blameless?

“Did he not himself say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she herself said, 'He is my brother.' In the in-

tegrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands I have done this.” Then God said to him in the dream, “Yes, I know that in the integrity of your heart you have done this, and I also kept you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her. Now therefore, restore the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not restore *her*, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours.”

So Abimelech arose early in the morning and called all his servants and told all these things in their hearing; and the men were greatly frightened. Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, “What have you done to us? And how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done.” And Abimelech said to Abraham, “What have you encountered, that you have done this thing?” Abraham said, “Because I thought, surely there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.

Besides, she actually is my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife; and it came about, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said to her, 'This is the kindness which you will show to me: everywhere we go, say of me, “He is my brother.”' Abimelech then took sheep and oxen and

male and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and restored his wife Sarah to him. Abimelech said, "Behold, my land is before you; settle wherever you please."

To Sarah he said, "Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; behold, it is your vindication before all who are with you, and before all men you are cleared." Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his maids, so that they bore *children*. For the LORD had closed fast all the wombs of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife" (Genesis 20:1-18).

This was certainly not Abraham's most glorious moment. His lack of courage here borders on cowardice. The faith for which this man is justly renowned is not in evidence here when any semblance of chivalry has disappeared right out the window. It is just as well for Abraham that God was taking care of him. Indeed, Abimelech comes out of this episode with much more credit than Abraham. But what a shock it must have been for him to have God come to him in a dream and tell him 'you are a dead man' – and that because he'd innocently taken Abraham's wife for himself. He realized at once the danger he was in, and not only him but his people. 'Will you slay a nation, although blameless?' he asks. This illustrates something Abimelech understood about the character of God which, we, in modern times, appear to have forgotten. Something which even professing Christians need to be reminded about.

We hear talk about the personal name of God, revealed by God in the Bible as Yahweh. In former times, this was the name which was misread as Jehovah. Its various double-barrelled forms were once well known. Names such as Jehovah-jireh as 'the LORD who provides' was made famous in the story of Abraham being prepared to offer up his son, Isaac; and Jehovah-rohi was made familiar in the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm as 'the LORD who is my shepherd', and so on.

But two names which don't usually feature are Yahweh-nakah and Yahweh-gemula. These two names show aspects of the character of God which the incident of Abraham's encounter with Abimelech demonstrates. Yahweh-nakah (Ezekiel 7:9) is 'the Lord that smites', meaning he smites or strikes the rebellious. It's the same word 'to smite' (or strike) that's found in the story of the prophet Balaam who struck his donkey when it appeared to him to be acting stubbornly in refusing to continue its journey. And it also describes God actions against Sodom and Gomorrah; and later the land of Egypt when pharaoh, its king, refused to let God's people go in freedom. As a result, God struck the land of Egypt with the famous plagues.

The other name, Yahweh-gemula (Jeremiah 51:56), means 'the Lord who repays' and this is exactly what God did to Babylon after using them to discipline his own people's disobedience. They had God's permission to take Israel captive, but they exceeded in cruelty more than was necessary, and were held accountable by the God who repays. In turn, God raised up the Medo-Persian Empire and broke the power of Babylon. God 'paid back' the Babylonians for their cruelty.

These names of God, and the story of Abraham's encounter with Abimelech, reveal realities that we ignore at our peril. God is certainly gracious, and compassionate, and loving, and all the things we enthusiastically commend in our preaching. But we're not faithful in the testimony we bear to God, nor to the scope of the Christian message, if we suppress these other attributes of God just because they're not in sympathy with modern thought. God knows the integrity – or otherwise – of our heart in the same way as he knew the integrity of Abimelech's heart, and will repay us with what we deserve in the judgement to come unless we take advantage of his offer of a free pardon – one made possible through Christ and his sacrifice on the cross for our rebellion.

When writing about that Peter says: "... and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed" (1 Peter 2:24). Actually, in the original language, the word used is the word for a single wound or stroke. This is describing Jesus on the cross bearing the punishment, the penalty, which we deserved, while taking our place, and as the hymnwriter says: 'That fearful stroke, it fell on Him, and life for us was won.' We're all 'dead men walking' (Ephesians 2:1) until we realise this, and put our faith in Christ's sacrifice for us. He paid the awful price, so that believers on him may go free!

## CHAPTER TEN: JESUS IS GREATER!

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Someone hearing the title of this chapter for the first time, might well ask, ‘greater than what?’ After all, that’s totally understandable because ‘greater’ is, after all, a comparative term. So, what are we saying Jesus is greater than? Perhaps, we could give lots of answers. But Jesus himself in the twelfth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel gives three specific answers, and so let’s restrict ourselves to those.

We’ll start by reading about the first of them. Before we do, I should say that our reading relates to an occasion in Jesus’ life with his disciples when he was out for a walk with them, and without doubt it was a purposeful walk. It turns out that they weren’t alone: others, who weren’t identified as being Jesus’ disciples, were observing what they were doing – and these observers included some people who were drawn from the ranks of the then religious leaders in Israel, people known as Pharisees. They were persons who tried very hard to keep strictly to the Law of Moses, which originally, of course, was God-given. However these people, among others, had embellished it with lots of extra details. So, with that background, this is what Matthew records in chapter 12 ...

“At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and His disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads *of grain* and eat. But when the Pharisees saw *this*, they said to Him, “Look,

Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath.” But He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he became hungry, he and his companions, how he entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat nor for those with him, but for the priests alone? Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent? But I say to you that something greater than the temple is here” (Matthew 12:1-6).

Did you hear that? Jesus described himself as greater than the temple. Now, it's worth pointing out that the Jews had great respect for their temple. The temple standing then in Jerusalem had been built by Jews after returning to their homeland in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. King Herod had lately carried out what many judged to be improvements, doubtless it was a modernisation of sorts. So when Jesus claimed he was something greater than the temple, it must have sounded quite shocking in their ears. Basically, the temple was where people then came to connect with God. Does that help us, I wonder, help us to understand what Jesus is saying here when he referred to himself and declared that something greater than the temple was among them? Jesus is where we meet God. He's how we connect with God; he's the bridge, and the one and only bridge at that, the only way to God. Later, Jesus would famously declare to his disciples that no-one can come to the Father except through him (John 14:6). He, and he alone, is the way, the truth, and the life.

So, that's the first of three similar statements made by Jesus which Matthew recorded, and all of them are found in his twelfth chapter – if you want to easily look them up for yourself. What we've learnt from this is that Jesus knew that the temple he spoke of would very soon be abandoned by God. Soon, a torn curtain within the temple – occurring supernaturally at the time of Jesus' death on the cross – would testify to this fact. God was no longer in residence there: he couldn't be reached by that route any more. Jesus himself, in perfect humanity, and risen from the death of the cross, is declared in the Bible to be the new – and living – way to God. That makes him greater than the temple for sure.

It's another brush with the religious Pharisees that links us to the second similar statement Jesus makes in Matthew chapter 12:

“Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Him, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.” But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and *yet* no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as JONAH WAS THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS IN THE BELLY OF THE SEA MONSTER, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment, and will condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here” (Matthew 12:38-41).

Imagine you'd been there hearing those words, with their reminder of the judgement that's to come. Imagine belonging to that condemned generation. We don't like to think of such things. Today, people try to convince themselves that God doesn't exist. They subscribe to the hopeless notion that we're here because of some freak cosmic accident. They try to say mindless matter somehow acquired a mind of its own – even though all our experience and knowledge shows that it doesn't make any sense to think that way. It's pure escapism. Make believe. But that's the faithlessness of our generation. Jesus compared the faithless generation of his time rather unfavourably with the brutal pagan enemy of Israel some six centuries before.

At least they'd turned from their depravity to respect the true God of heaven, their creator. But it was so different with these privileged Israelites who were talking to Jesus and to whom Jesus had spoken about Jonah. Six centuries before, the preaching of that one man, Jonah, had made a massive impact, with 120,000 lives being spared the awful doom which had been predicted. For sure, Jonah was a prophet of doom. He wasn't a compassionate man. He didn't waste any pity on his audience: they were his people's national enemy after all. He'd actually have preferred to see them burn. God had finally to take him aside and correct his attitude.

The people in Jesus' day, on the other hand, had something greater, a prophet better than Jonah living among them – because Jesus' message was as much about compassion as it was about judgement. He'd come to save and not condemn; but despite that there was no massive reaction to Jesus' preaching – as there had been to Jonah's - at least not before his death. If, as

we've seen earlier, Jesus is where we meet God; he's also where we encounter God's mercy.

And lastly, we come to the third and last announcement Jesus made which Matthew records like the others in his twelfth chapter. This one follows on in the same vein as the last one. Jesus now added: "*The Queen of the South* will rise up with this generation at the judgment and will condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here" (Matthew 12:42).

Earlier in the Bible, in the first part, the Old Testament, we read about the time when this took place: when the Queen of Sheba satisfied her curiosity by visiting king Solomon at Jerusalem and was overwhelmed and so impressed by all she saw and heard. She was in awe of the great wisdom God had given Solomon. In fact, she said the reports had not done it justice. Solomon had been able to answer all her questions. But the sad thing was these religious leaders were not at all impressed with Jesus – who could here claim to be something greater and better than Solomon. They came to him with their questions: some sincere but many of them trick questions to trip him up in his answers – but, of course, they never could. Jesus' answers did not satisfy idle curiosity, but exposed the intentions of the questioner's heart.

It remains true that in Jesus we have answers to life's urgent questions. What are the basic, urgent questions of this and every age? They're about life's origin and meaning. And they deal with the heavy issues of morality and destiny ... Discover

for yourself that in him everything was not only created but holds together. Find out for yourself that in him all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden. He's God's standard of righteousness, and what's more your future is in his hands.

What's the proof that Jesus is 'something better'? It's his death, burial and resurrection over the 3 days we call 'Easter'. Just as Jesus is the Bible's central figure; those 3 days are the most important of his life – essential to all the claims he makes. Jesus' dying and rising again was so that, through it, we can meet God, experience compassion and find truly satisfying answers in the person of God's son, who is Jesus. Don't you want 'something better' in your life? Something or someone greater than the mere religious rules and rituals associated with a historic Temple. Something or someone greater than the stark doomsday predictions of a Jonah. Something greater or deeper than the theological answers of someone as wise as Solomon. Then find it in the man who died and rose at Easter-time.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN: FOUR MOTHERS

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Something we all have in common is what we owe to our respective mothers. Many people would lavish praise on their mother's nurturing role, sometimes expressing that in the subjective opinion that they're the world's best etc. Sadly, there are exceptions to this where for some reason the relationship has gone disastrously wrong.

I would like to speak with you about four particular mothers – they're mothers from whom we can all learn. The first I want to introduce to you is a mother who spoke about 'sin'. She's Susanna Wesley. You may guess from her surname that she's related to John. John Wesley's mother, Susanna, was an extraordinary woman! As a young man, Wesley (the founder of the Methodist Church), once asked his mother for a definition of sin. She said in a letter: 'Take this rule: whatever weakens your reason, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sense of God, or takes off your relish of spiritual things; in short, whatever increases the strength and authority of your body over your mind, that thing is sin to you, however innocent it may be in itself.' (Susanna Wesley in a letter, June 8, 1725).

What a thoughtful answer! I would say that's entirely consistent with what the Bible says in defining for us what sin is. Romans 3:23 describes sin as a falling short of the glory of God. That's the target, the goal of human experience: that we're

meant to arrive at the glory of God. When we don't, we sin. Sin is therefore missing the mark or purpose for which God created humanity. From its earliest pages, and affirmed in the New Testament, we read that we humans were created in God's image and so were meant to be the glory of God. But what does it really mean: to be the glory of God?

I suggest we might think of it in this way. Just as a masterpiece of a painting might be said to be an artist's glory – because people admire it and so honour the artist who created it – so we were intended to be the crowning glory of all God's handiwork, his creation. But look what's happened. Do people tend to look at us and then be filled with admiration for God? Do any give praise and honour to the Creator because of us? That only shows how far we've fallen short; and by how much we've missed the mark. In Bible language: this means we've sinned. I'm emphasizing this because it's not the common (mis)perception of sin that's around in society these days. This true definition of sin is not a definition of sin that's conveniently narrowed down to avoidable behaviours like gross immorality or criminal activity, but is certainly something which catches us all out. And that much was certainly conveyed by Susanna Wesley's thoughtful answer. When the verb is to sin; the subject of the verb is every single one of us at some time or other – and very much more often than we might suspect.

Susanna Wesley had a sense of God, and the more sense of God we have, then the more conscious we'll be of sin in our lives. Those who talk today about even quite blatant acts of immorality or fraudulent dealings as being only 'errors of judgement' or mere 'indiscretions', display their ignorance of God and the al-

most total lack of respect for him in their lives no matter how high a standing they have in public office. So, sin in the Bible's terms, is a failure to reach the mark, and how disappointing it is to be conscious of the fact that we're not achieving what we were designed to be and do in our role as the image and glory of God. Yes, failure and disappointment are inherent in the human condition as we find it now. So much so, that we must ask the question: 'Is there any hope – or is it hopeless?'

At this point, I'd like to introduce another mother. This time, it's the mother of Jesus Christ. Let's think of the time when she saw the Saviour, her son, dying on the cross being crucified by the Roman soldiers at Pilate's command. One man has employed his imagination, in an appealing way, I think, and written this simple verse of poetry:

*'Her face showed grief, but not despair*

*Her head though bowed had faith to spare.*

*And even now she could suppose*

*His thorns would somehow yield a rose.*

*Her life with Him was full of signs*

*That God writes straight with crooked lines.*

*Dark clouds can hide the rising sun*

*And all seem lost when all be won.'*

The author of those lines was a man going through a terrible time. A time which had evidently caused him to reflect serious-

ly on the cross of Christ and the great sacrifice our Lord made for all of us there. He shared much of his gruesome experiences in a book entitled *When Hell Was In Session*. The author was Jeremiah Denton, who subsequently rose to the rank of rear admiral in the US Navy. In November 1980, Denton became the first retired flag officer ever elected to the U.S. Senate. In 1987, he was appointed by President Ronald Reagan to be Chairman of the Presidential Commission on Merchant Marine and Defense.

But, back in 1973, Jeremiah Denton walked to freedom after being held captive in North Vietnam for more than seven years. He'd been captured in July 1965, after leading a bombing attack on enemy installations where he'd been shot down and captured by North Vietnamese troops. While held prisoner, Denton became the first American subjected to four years of solitary confinement. In 1966, during a television interview by the North Vietnamese and broadcast on American television, Denton gained national attention when, while being questioned, he blinked his eyes in Morse code, repeatedly spelling out the covert message "T-O-R-T-U-R-E".

At times, life's experiences deepen mere disappointment into utter despair. We struggle to remember Betsy Ten Boom's words at the height of her own war-time sufferings: 'There's no pit so deep but God's love isn't deeper still.' Denton had penned that poem about his felt sense of hopelessness – the poem we read a moment ago – when taking inspiration and courage from the thought of Mary looking at Jesus on the cross.

*'Her face showed grief, but not despair'*

*Her head though bowed had faith to spare.*

*And even now she could suppose*

*His thorns would somehow yield a rose.*

*Her life with Him was full of signs*

*That God writes straight with crooked lines.*

*Dark clouds can hide the rising sun*

*And all seem lost when all be won.'*

Evidently, this helped him travel from hopelessness and disappointment back to hope again. It's only by looking to the cross, as he pictured Mary doing, that any of us can find true reason to hope. We need to look to the cross of Jesus in faith ...

So let's conclude with a couple of mothers whose lives evidenced genuine faith. That was the verdict of the Apostle Paul when he wrote to Timothy saying: "I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also." Like them, to come into the full experience of God's love - to be sure of God's forgiveness - with all our guilt removed - we need to profess faith in the one God sent - Jesus. On four occasions, the Bible tells us 'whoever believes in him [that's Jesus] will not be disappointed' (Isaiah 28:16; Romans 9:33; 10:11; 1 Peter 2:6). This is the only complete antidote to disappointment that sinners can ever find. He or she who believes in Jesus will not be disappointed in any ultimate sense.

Our four featured mothers have impressed on us sensitivity to the ways of God, but then also strength of character in being able to express hope in the face of adversity and, finally, genuine faith which may even impact the rising generations among us. These are all things which are vital. We do need to be sensitive to our failure through sin (even for the best of us, God's original intention can no longer be realized in the way we are now); but we also need to be open to the hope for the hopeless that's available through the cross of Christ; and finally we must avail ourselves of that hope by applying for its benefit through faith. Will you do that?

## CHAPTER TWELVE: DEATH-BED CONVERSATIONS

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**W**e talk about people wanting to have the last word. But I don't suppose there are many, if any, who want the words they've just spoken to be the last they'll ever utter. During evangelistic crusades held in London in 1883 and 1884, renowned preacher D. L. Moody once threw down the gauntlet to all the atheist clubs there, challenging their members to come to a special service to be held exclusively for them. Thousands came, curious perhaps, but certainly determined to make a fool of this upstart American preacher.

Once in the pulpit, Moody preached from the Bible verse found in Deuteronomy 32:31 – 'Their rock is not as our Rock, even our enemies themselves being judges.' He then proceeded to tell story after story from his repertoire of bedside conversations with dying men and women, both believers and unbelievers. He spoke with compassion and devastating effect to a full hall, and called on his sceptical audience to judge for themselves between the death-bed statements of believers and the death-bed statements of unbelievers as to whose 'rock' was the best. As he continued preaching, God broke through in these free-thinking hearts, and from that night until the end of the week, about 2000 atheists were drawn to the Saviour, who is Jesus Christ.

If we were to do something similar to what Moody did then, we'd tell of the 18<sup>th</sup> century French Enlightenment writer, Voltaire, who cried out in death 'I am abandoned by God and man, I shall die and go to hell alone.' His condition had become so terrible that his associates were afraid to approach his bedside, and as he passed away, his nurse said that for all of the wealth in Europe, she would never watch another infidel die. Voltaire, one of history's best-known atheists, often stated that "by the time I'm buried, the Bible will be non-existent." A few years after he died the Geneva Bible Society purchased Voltaire's home and turned it into a print shop to print Bibles.

Sir Walter Raleigh (1554 –1618) was an English aristocrat, a writer, poet, soldier, courtier, spy, and explorer – one especially well known for making tobacco popular in England. He was a favourite of Queen Elizabeth, but greatly disliked by her successor, James the First, who ordered his execution. When the time came, the executioner was advising him how best to place his head, when Raleigh replied 'it matters little how the head lies, my friend, so long as the heart is right.' And so ended one of the more colourful characters of the Elizabethan era.

Speaking of which, Elizabeth I (1533 – 1603) was the last monarch of the Tudor dynasty, being the daughter of Henry VIII. Dying, she famously said: 'All my possessions for a moment of time.' But that's one thing money can't buy. One report says she grabbed the sleeve of her physician and pulled him down over her bed and said: "Half of the British Empire for six months of life." He could not even give her six minutes, and she died. I also found these words about Stalin's deathbed scene,

as related by his daughter Svetlana to Malcolm Muggeridge. This was Stalin who murdered millions of his own countrymen. While on his deathbed, he “suddenly sat up ... shook his fist at the ceiling as if he could see beyond it, then fell back and died.”

That reminds me of Julian the Apostate, who was a Roman emperor who hated Christians, was leading his forces in the battle for Persia in 363 AD. He was mortally wounded, and as he lay dying on the battlefield, picked up some of his own blood, mingled with dirt, flung it skyward and said: “You have conquered, O Galilean!” (that being a reference to Jesus, of course).

Michael Faraday, (1791–1867) was an English scientist of whom another scientist, Rutherford, stated; “When we consider the magnitude and extent of his discoveries and their influence on the progress of science and of industry, there is no honour too great to pay to the memory of Faraday, one of the greatest scientific discoverers of all time”. This great man Faraday was asked when he was near death: “What are your speculations now?” He answered: I have no speculations. I rest upon Jesus Christ who died, and rose again from death.” Contrast that with the case of Thomas Hobbes, 17<sup>th</sup> century English philosopher, who said famously when on his death-bed: “Now am I about to take my last voyage - a great leap in the dark.” Sir Walter Scott the sceptic said: “Until this moment I thought there was neither a God nor a hell. Now I know that there are both, and I am doomed to perdition by the just judgment of the Almighty.”

President George Washington said at the end of his life: "Doctor, I am dying, but I am not afraid to die." He then folded his hands over his chest and said: "It is well." Michelangelo, the famous painter and sculptor said at the end of his life: "I die in the faith of Jesus Christ, and in the firm hope of a better life." The final words of David Brainerd, (a well-known missionary) were: "I am going into eternity and it is sweet to me to think of eternity."

Talleyrand, someone who has been called the most brilliant mind of his generation when asked about his condition while on his deathbed, replied: "I am suffering the pangs of the damned." William Pitt, the renowned British statesman: "I throw myself on the mercy of God, through the merits of Jesus Christ." Charles Haddon Spurgeon, famous preacher and author, on his deathbed, said: "I can hear them coming!" He sat straight up in bed and asked: "Don't you hear them? This is my coronation day. I can see the chariots, and I'm ready to board."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German theologian, standing in front of a firing squad during World War 2, for speaking out against Nazism, "This may seem to be the end for me, but it is just the beginning." Sir Julian Huxley, English evolutionist, biologist and staunch atheist, on his deathbed said: "So it is true after all ... so it is true after all." P. T. Barnum the circus magnate on his deathbed asked: "How are the circus receipts today?" Cesare Borgia, a famous writer and politician was a meticulous planner. He planned everything to the minutest detail. When he knew he was dying said: "When I lived I provided for everything, except death. Now I must die, and I am totally unprepared and unprovided".

Adams, the infidel said: "I'm lost, lost, lost. I am damned forever." His agony was so great that as he died, he tore the hair from his head. And what of the American preacher who set us off on this train of thought today? While on his deathbed, he asked: "Can this be death? Why it is better than living! Earth is receding, heaven is opening. This is my coronation day."

I think you will agree, that it's safe to conclude there's a very great difference between the last words of believers and unbelievers. Let unbelievers with their final words be our judges.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN: HE PAID MY FINE

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A police officer in Texas - who wanted to remain anonymous – has nonetheless gained attention after he gave a man a citation – in other words, he gave him a summons to appear in court or else pay the penalty for the traffic offence he'd committed. When Hayden Carlo, was stopped by the (Plano) police because his car registration had expired, he told the police officer that he was struggling financially. "I don't have the money," he told the officer. "It was either feed my kids or get this registration done." The officer then handed him a citation, but when Carlo opened the paper, he saw a \$100 banknote. Carlo said he "broke down" in tears in his car - "What else can you do?" he said. He was able to update both his and his wife's registrations with the money.

The charitable act would have gone unnoticed, except Carlo's grandfather was moved to contact the police department about the gesture. The officer does not want to be identified, but a department spokesman said he's 43 and is a family man. He apparently has a reputation for doing good deeds at his former post in another police department, The Dallas Morning News reported in an editorial. Apparently, the officer's colleagues planned to honour his generosity.

That's a true story, I have no doubt. But some of the details are not entirely clear to me. For example, did Hayden Carlo receive and pay a penalty fine with the provided money – as well as ob-

taining the car registrations with it? Or was the citation, in effect, a warning which gave the man a few days' grace in which to obtain the registrations or face a penalty fine if he didn't do so? Perhaps, it was the latter. In any case, the essence of the story is: the officer carried out his duty as the law demanded and as a proper agent of the legal system. He didn't turn a blind eye, but he upheld justice. But, in addition to that, as a compassionate individual, he ensured the offender had the means to pay for, or avoid, his penalty fine.

When I hear about a case like that, I tend to think of it as an illustration of what God has done for us through the cross. And to a large extent I think it's a reasonable illustration of what it says in the Bible in Romans chapter 3:

“But now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even *the* righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, *I say*, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Romans 3:21-26).

In other words, what that's saying is that at the cross where Jesus died, God was demonstrating first of all his justice or righteousness – but at the same time, and without contradiction, he was also demonstrating his love or compassion towards us. You'll perhaps see how the news story made me think of this. In a sense, it's as if God charges us with guilt but also pays our penalty through his Son's death on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins. If we're to relate this back to our earlier news story, then we're to think of ourselves as the man, the offender, who couldn't pay; and God is in a way like the law-officer upholding justice but being compassionate at the same time.

I said, 'God is in a way like that law-officer,' and I meant to say that carefully, because there's an important difference. The policeman in the story was an agent of the legal system, but he wasn't the one who'd been personally offended against by the erring driver. In the case of our position before God, the one we face who hands out our penalty is the very one we've all personally offended by our sins. No illustration of what God did at the cross is perfect. It's after all only serving as an illustration. It can't be realistic on all points. It's effective only if it gets one or two main points of similarity across in a way that impacts us because suddenly we see the relevance of something which previously was a bit obscure or remote.

And that true story is a better illustration than many somewhat similar ones we may have heard used – and, indeed, which I may have shared on previous programs. Like the one about the Scottish soldier. Do you remember? It comes from the book *Miracle on the River Kwai* and goes like this ...

During World War Two, the guards at a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp would take the British soldiers out into the fields to do hard manual labour. At the end of one day the guards lined up the prisoners and counted the tools. They found there was one shovel was missing. A guard called out, 'Who stole the shovel?' No one responded. The Japanese guard cocked his rifle and said, 'All die! All die!' Suddenly, one Scottish soldier stepped forward and said, 'I stole the shovel.' Instantly, he was shot dead. His comrades gathered up his body, and the remaining tools, and went back to the prisoner-of-war compound. Back in the prison camp, the Japanese guards counted the tools again. They found in fact that no shovel was missing. The Scottish soldier had sacrificed his life that his comrades might live.

What we said previously was, 'Two thousand years ago God became man. His name was Jesus Christ. He lived a perfect life. He never did anything wrong. He did not deserve to die. Yet He stepped forward and bled and died on a cross to pay the penalty that you and I deserve for having stolen, cheated, lied, dishonoured our parents, and ignored God.' But there are serious shortcomings in that illustration when used like that. If you think about it, God the Father is being pictured as a sadistic camp guard misguidedly screaming for vengeance. Jesus is represented as an innocent party motivated on impulse to sacrifice himself at the hands of the enemy. His violent death is a senseless waste of life (because the charge turned out to be entirely false – no-one was guilty) as well as being a complete travesty of justice.

When we see it like that, we see how inaccurate and unworthy that illustration is as an illustration of the cross, for if we dare

to think of God as sadistic then we're totally wrong, and if we think of Jesus' death as a mere impulse by a third party then we're also profoundly wrong - and what's more, if we think of what happened at the cross from God's point of view as being a travesty of justice then again we're so wrong. There was certainly a miscarriage of justice at human hands that day, but ultimately Romans chapter 3 informs us that in God's sovereign purposes justice was supremely demonstrated that day.

So we need to take care, and when I used that story before, the one and only point of similarity I was emphasising was the extraordinary, self-sacrificial love of the soldier who died as it powerfully illustrates the love of God in Christ for those who believe on him.

As another example of the limitation of human illustrations, I can also recall referring to the story that compares God to a rail-bridge operator who sees his son has wandered onto the track (or track-side equipment) just as a passenger train is racing towards the bridge. If the father pulls the lever his son will live, but those on board the train will die if the rail-bridge remains elevated over the water. If on the other hand, he leaves the lever (which he does do) then the bridge descends in time and those on the train will live, but his son will be crushed.

Again, this picture can be criticised – fairly criticised - because it seems to portray God in a distorted way as an operator upon whom a decision is forced by circumstances outside of his control; while the son makes himself an unfortunate victim because of his own clumsiness. Those differences were never the intention in sharing the story, but rather the main point which

movingly illustrates the substitutionary nature of Christ's death. I've known some whose hearts were so softened that they understood and accepted the good news of the cross through it.

All illustrations need to be used with care, and we when try to represent the cross and the work of Christ, even greater care is needed. In fact, I would venture today's illustration of the compassionate law officer has fewer drawbacks, while simply and tellingly picturing the fact that God in Christ was paying the penalty fine for all who believe at the cross. Similar stories of a judge passing sentence and then taking off his robes and joining the prisoner in the dock so as to serve his sentence for him, are not as good, because they imply a legal scandal since society and not the judge was the offended party. At the cross of Christ, the one who was the offended party was both our judge and our saviour. No illustration can do justice to that wonderful and real truth!

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN: THE LEVER OF THE GOSPEL

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Leading the siege of Syracuse was a Roman general Marcus Claudius Marcellus, whose nickname was “The Sword of Rome.” When Marcellus brought his troops and the Roman navy up against the citadel of Syracuse, the Romans encountered war machines the like of which they’d never seen. These were weapons of destruction far more sophisticated than anything which the Romans themselves had ever invented. Now, one of those war machines was as astonishing as it was terrifying to the Roman navy, for as their ships approached the cliffs outside Syracuse, the sailors looked up and saw huge jaws descending from the sky. These jaws came down, and would grip a Roman ship, hoist it a hundred feet into the air, and then release it so that ship and crew were dashed against the rocks. The Romans couldn’t believe their eyes when they saw such ropes and metal being manipulated by these new technical marvels of pulleys and levers.

Eventually, however, the Romans were victorious. And General Marcellus gave the command that the engineer who’d developed these new weapons was to be unharmed, when and if he was found. But as a Roman soldier approached the engineer as he was sitting with other prisoners; he found him passing the time by doing mathematical equations in the sand. The man was so absorbed in calculation that he didn’t notice it was a Roman soldier who was approaching him. Without taking his

eyes off his calculations in the sand he said, “*Be careful! Don’t disturb my diagrams!*” And the Roman soldier killed him on the spot. And thus *Archimedes* met his death ...

Greek by birth, born in 287 BC in Syracuse to Greek parents, educated in Alexandria, Egypt, Archimedes went on to become a remarkable mathematician, an exacting engineer, a brilliant inventor, a master craftsman, a skilful builder, and something of a philosopher. It was the same Archimedes who, after figuring out the laws of buoyancy while stepping into his bathtub, ran straight out into the streets naked shouting “Eureka! (I’ve found it!).” Archimedes defined the principle of the lever, and is credited with inventing the pulley.

We’re talking about one of the most brilliant men of all time. You may have heard of the words he spoke to the king of Syracuse on one occasion: “*Give me a lever long enough, and a place to stand, and I will move the whole world.*” A little over two hundred years after Archimedes made that statement a lever *was* indeed found that could move the world. Revealed in the Gospel of the cross of Christ is the power of God which alone is able to right a topsy-turvy world. It was the message of the cross, which created the necessary leverage that continues to change the world.

In Acts 17:6 we read, “These men who have turned the world upside down ...” when referring to Paul and Silas who used that same Gospel lever to turn the ancient world upside down. By the way, when the Bible speaks of turning the world upside down, as we said already, it’s really speaking in terms of turning the world the *right side up*. For we live in a topsy-turvy world,

a world where all around us the wicked prosper, and the righteous suffer; where sin is often exalted, and virtue mocked; a world in which it's been said that *"Beggars ride on horseback while princes walk in rags."* Ever since Eden, this world has been the wrong way up. And the message of Christianity is about what God has done, through the cross of Christ, to turn the world the right way up again. Let's let the Apostle Paul in the Bible expand on the revolutionary, or counter-cultural, ideas of the Christian message:

"For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE, AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE." Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not *come to* know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18-24).

You'll have noticed the upside-down character of the Christian message as Paul expands on it there. The world's wisdom is poles apart from God's wisdom; and at the centre of the conflict stands the cross of Christ. The world's verdict on Christ stands recorded at the cross. And by the verdict which it decidedly expressed there – when they said 'away with him' – this world stands judged before God. Because through the apparent folly of a man dying a criminal's death, God has revealed real wisdom and power which are for the forgiveness from guilt of all who believe. Paul continues on this theme of the Gospel into the next chapter, into 1 Corinthians chapter 2, so let's take it a bit further:

“And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power ...” (1 Corinthians 2:1-4).

Let me just pause again there. Paul's just talked about the testimony of God; the cross of Christ; and the power of the Spirit. God the Father, Son and Spirit are involved in giving this message its great leverage through the cross: giving it its power to move the world and overturn human opinion. But we'll let Paul say a bit more ...

“... so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God. Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden *wisdom* which God predestined before the ages to our glory; *the wisdom* which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Corinthians 2:5-8).

We talked a moment ago about toppling human opinion. Heaven's view of the death of Christ (the cross) is totally different from earth's. Like the ancient Greeks, the world in its intellectual pride still disregards the cross as insignificant. And like the Jews of old, the world in its religious systems of thought has emptied the cross of its power. The Bible language here invites us to say that God has in fact scandalized the world at the cross, by the death of Christ his son. Attitudes to the death of Christ expose fundamental misunderstandings of what God has achieved through the cross. But, the cross does make sense! Not only that, but it's the only thing that can make sense of everything! This is the phenomenal leverage of the Christian message of the cross. There's a deep wisdom which God reveals here: one which plumbs the depths of God and eternity, which is why Paul now says ...

“but just as it is written, “THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND *which* HAVE NOT ENTERED

THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.” For to us God revealed *them* through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the *thoughts* of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the *thoughts* of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual *thoughts* with spiritual *words*.

But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one. For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, THAT HE WILL INSTRUCT HIM? But we have the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 9:9-16).

The Roman navy saw things they'd never seen before at Syracuse when they came up against Archimedes' levers and pulleys. When God's Spirit gives you biblical insight into the meaning of Christ's death as it stands for ever at the centre of God's purposes for the human race (and beyond), you, too,

will see undreamt of things. There's such a depth to the meaning of the cross that the most brilliant academic mind and the most impressive oratory won't even scratch the surface – indeed they'll miss the mark completely.

If I can't read even your thoughts, how can I (or you) read God's thoughts? And we need to do precisely that if we're to appreciate the cross of Christ. That's why the preaching of the Christian message in its power to change and bring leverage depends vitally on the operation of God's Spirit - with the person of the Holy Spirit communicating through the preacher. Angels, we're told, have a great desire to research this topic, but even they don't get very far. To share the depths of God, we need the help of someone who is God – the Holy Spirit. He's been speaking and preaching about the cross for a very long time indeed, previously using the Old Testament prophets. But in those earlier times God wasn't permitting a clear advance understanding. He is now. The truth is out. Those who are of the world can't receive this - only those who belong to God, all who are on the side of truth. Now, is that you?

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN: BEGINNING TO GET TO KNOW GOD

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I want us to focus on 4 things God tells us about himself in the first Bible book of Genesis. These four things really demonstrate the foundational nature of this first book. If Genesis 1:1 is true, then we would expect scientists to discover what they now know. That might sound like a rather bold claim, but let me introduce you to the person who made it. He's Arno Penzias - the Nobel Prize-winning scientist who with Wilson discovered the cosmic background radiation – he's on record as saying: "The best data we have are exactly what I would have predicted, had I nothing to go on but the five Books of Moses, the Psalms, the Bible as a whole." So, let's begin with an obvious focus on ...

## 1. God as the Creator

In Genesis, right at the beginning, the first thing God tells us about himself is that he is the *Creator*. The very first verse of the Bible reads: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." The rest of that chapter describes in detail what God created and how he did it, namely by his Word (Psalm 33:6; 2 Peter 3:5), as well as over what time frame. As we read through the Bible, we learn that 'the Word' is a title given to Jesus Christ (John 1:1-14), and that it was through Jesus that everything was created (John 1:3<sup>1</sup>; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:2). We also

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1. <http://biblia.com/bible/esv/John%201.3>

learn, following the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, that God began a new creation - those who repent and put their faith in Jesus Christ are described as being a 'new creature' [new creation] (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Finally we learn that, at some time in the future, God will create a new heaven and a new earth, as prophesied in Isaiah 65:17, and described in Revelation chapters 21-22. But many reject God as creator because if he made us then he also makes the rules we fail to live by. All God's commands are for our good – there's nothing better. I remember hearing about a man flying in the days before there were severe restrictions about entering the cockpit, even by invitation. This man, having expressed such an interest, was invited in. He was struck by the expansive panoramic vista in front of him as he looked out with the captain. 'Can you fly more or less where you want?' was his rather naïve question. 'Oh no,' the captain said, 'we must maintain course within a ten-mile corridor.' 'Ten miles! Isn't that a bit restrictive!' 'On the contrary,' replied the pilot, 'to fly outside of that would be to risk great danger of a collision with another aircraft. True freedom, for us, is to stay within that ten-mile corridor.'

God hasn't given us a 10-mile air corridor for our safety, but he has given us the 10 commandments. To live well, and – paradoxically, as it may seem – to experience the greatest freedoms, we must live within the scope of these ten commandments. To go outside, by breaking them, is to court disaster. This brings us to the second revelation of God in Genesis, namely about ...

## **2. God as the Lawgiver**

A second thing God tells us about himself in Genesis is that he is the *Lawgiver*. This first happens when he says to Adam: “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die” (Genesis 2:16-17). In practical terms, this was a test of Adam’s love for God. That love, or lack of it, that would be shown by whether or not he obeyed this one command. In essence, however, this was the first declaration to humanity of the moral law of God. The fact that God is our Creator gives him the *right* to be our Lawgiver (Ecclesiastes 7:29; Ephesians 4:24). But the fact that ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8) also guarantees that his laws are always going to be in our best interests.

Sadly, when things go wrong in life, some people tend – without thinking – to blame God. If life seems unfair, usually it’s said to be God’s fault or at least whatever has gone wrong is used as a justifying reason for not believing in God’s existence. But the God of the Bible introduces himself as a God of grace, someone who’s much more lenient towards us than we deserve, but sin still having to be paid for nonetheless. Before we move on to think of God as the Judge, I want us to appreciate grace over against fairness.

Notice we’ve said nothing about unfairness. Let me illustrate. I once heard a teacher talk about the time he set his students an assignment, clearly stating when it was to be handed in. There were many students who didn’t have it completed when the day that had been set finally arrived. They begged for more time. The teacher reminded them of what he’d said, emphasized that he meant what he’d said, but on this occasion said he would al-

low an extra couple of days. At the end of the next term, the same thing happened. Again, some were late, and again begged for more time, and it was once more given, but with an emphasized reminder that the same would not happen next time.

Well, at the end of the third term, the very same situation was repeated. This time, the teacher reminded them, of the warnings given, and that this time he wasn't going to give any more time extensions. Assignments that were not completed would be marked as a 'fail.' Those who'd presumed on the same favourable treatment as before complained loudly, 'but it's not fair!' 'Fairness,' the teacher replied, 'You want fairness, then I'll give you fairness. For those of you in this situation, and now demanding fairness, I'm going to go back over the records and replace the status of your past late submissions so that they too are shown as 'fails.' That's what's fair.'

If any of the students did survive to the next year of education, they did so having learnt the meaning of grace – and that their complaints were not actually about unfairness but about fairness. By presuming on grace, they had lost sight of the proper meaning of fairness. They stood condemned – fair and square. So much for God as creator and lawgiver, the next theme we pick up from Genesis concerns ...

### **3. God as the Judge**

In the Apostle Paul's Mars Hill sermon, he tells us that "God has appointed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness" (Acts 17). Sure enough, the third thing that God tells

us about himself in Genesis is that he is the *Judge*. After Adam and Eve had eaten the forbidden fruit, the Bible text says:

“The LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, Cursed are you more than all cattle, And more than every beast of the field; On your belly you will go, And dust you will eat All the days of your life; And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel.” To the woman He said, “I will greatly multiply Your pain in childbirth, in pain you will bring forth children; Yet your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.”

Then to Adam He said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat from it'; cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you will eat the plants of the field; by the sweat of your face you will eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:14-19).

So there God judges Satan through the serpent, and he judged Eve and Adam too. This role of God as Judge is seen throughout the Bible. In the Gospels, the death of the Lord Jesus on the Cross is the expression of God's judgment on humanity's

sin. Christ, our substitute, sweated in anticipation of the cross. There he wore a crown of thorns (see vv.18,19 for mention of 'thorns,' 'sweat,' and 'dust'), as he went down into the dust of death, as the Psalm predicted he would. Every aspect of our curse was taken over by him when dying in our place. But to claim his death as our death, his sentence as our sentence, we must turn from our sins and receive him and be joined to him by a personal faith commitment. This is the means by which we can recognize ...

#### **4. God as Saviour**

And this is the fourth thing that God introduces about himself early on in the Bible, in fact in its first book of Genesis. Alongside the judgment spelled out in the Garden of Eden to our first parents, the Lord God gave the promise of the Saviour who would come and defeat Satan ('bruise his head'), while he himself (in the person of Jesus Christ) would suffer in the process (his heel bruised). The role of God as Saviour, in the person of Jesus Christ, is a major theme of the Bible. The Old Testament points forward to this in many ways such as the sacrificial lambs etc. Then in the Gospels, we have the historical record of the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Saviour, Jesus Christ. The God of the Bible keeps his word – from first to last. Our Maker, Ruler and Judge is also our Saviour. Hallelujah!



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## **About the Author**

Born and educated in Scotland, Brian worked as a government scientist until God called him into full-time Christian ministry on behalf of the Churches of God ([www.churchesofgod.info](http://www.churchesofgod.info)). His voice has been heard on Search For Truth radio broadcasts for over 30 years during which time he has been an itinerant Bible teacher throughout the UK and Canada. His evangelical and missionary work outside the UK is primarily in Belgium and The Philippines. He is married to Rosemary, with a son and daughter.



## About the Publisher

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