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## Great Spiritual Movements

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**PART ONE: GOD MOVES IN  
MYSTERIOUS WAYS**

# CHAPTER ONE: THE SPIRIT MOVING OVER THE WATERS (GENESIS 1:1,2)

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**F**amously, in its opening lines, the Bible declares:

*“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light”* (Genesis 1:1-3).

We often hear about a President’s first 100 days. That’s thought to be enough time for an early assessment to be made on his performance thus far. If so, what of the first 10 words of the Bible? Are they not sufficient to settle quite categorically, and for all time, a biblical Christian’s worldview, at least with respect to origins: *“in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth?”*

The Apostle Peter, writing much later in the New Testament (2 Peter 3:1-7), in a more sceptical time, presented a ‘back to Genesis’ appeal. He referred to mockers in the last days. He then laid bare the basic problem with their wrong view of the world. They misguidedly believed the present was the same as the past, continuing without change. They would, doubtless, have just as readily maintained that the present was the key to the past. By adopting this perspective, modern sceptics rule out the possibility of

any kind of supernatural intervention, simply because they don't see any supernatural intervention occurring now. So, they reason it also didn't happen in the past.

As the Apostle Paul would say in a different but related context, they are wilfully rejecting divine involvement – and they are doing this by rewriting history. Informed by Genesis, and under the Spirit's control, the Apostle Peter affirms what the book of Genesis says - that the Earth was formed out of water and by water through which it was also destroyed, a reference first to creation and then to the great flood of Noah's time.

If his opponents were to have locked horns with him, they might have complained Peter was taking altogether too plain a reading of the text of early Genesis. But should it be read in any other way? Bear in mind that it doesn't contain any of the distinguishing features of Hebrew poetry. The late Oxford Professor, James Barr, had this to say on the meaning of Genesis:

'... probably, so far as I know, there is no professor of Hebrew or Old Testament at any world-class university who does not believe that the writer(s) of Genesis 1–11<sup>1</sup> intended to convey to their readers the ideas that: (1) creation took place in a series of six days which were the same as the days of 24 hours we now experience; (2) the figures contained in the Genesis genealogies provided by simple addition a chronology from the beginning of the world up to later stages in the biblical story; and (3) Noah's flood was understood to be world-wide and extinguish all human and animal life except for those in the ark.' [James Barr, Oriel Professor of the interpretation of the Holy Scripture,

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1. <https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Gen%201%E2%80%9311>

Oxford University, England, in a letter to David C.C. Watson, 23 April 1984. Barr, consistent with his neo-orthodox views, does not *believe* Genesis, but he understood what the Hebrew so clearly taught. It was only the perceived need to harmonise with the alleged age of the earth which led people to think anything different—it was nothing to do with the text itself.]

In other words, James Barr thought every world-class Old Testament Hebrew professor understood Genesis to speak of six actual days and a literal global flood. This expert's assessment - that the text of Genesis really does mean what it says - seems perfectly consistent with the Apostle Peter's understanding, with emphasis on the third point: that of a global, world-changing flood. As plainly as that can be read out of Scripture, it can equally plainly be read out from some of the global features of our planet.

But, it must at once be conceded, any study of our planet's features is also subject to interpretation of the evidence. All evidence, of course, requires us to interpret it, simply because the evidence we're investigating exists in the present and we're trying to infer things from it about the past. At one extreme end of the spectrum, the atheistic worldview interprets all natural evidence as supporting a continuous natural development without the need to invoke the deity. Supernatural global floods are ridiculed, despite three-quarters of the world's rocks having been laid down under water, and bearing continental-scale features.

But this atheistic alternative, in attempting to avoid any need for miraculous intervention by the deity, simply requires miracles of a different type. And miracles they undoubtedly still are: for they've got to believe in the virgin birth of the universe - that is,

it did the philosophically impossible thing of existing to create itself while not yet being in existence (thereby violating the Law of Non-Contradiction). Personally, I'd sooner believe in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ our Lord, according to the Bible.

What's more, they'd have us believe in a fish with rather peculiar fins which somehow once upon a time managed to grow into legs so that it could walk out of water (see, for example, Stephen Jay Gould's writings). I'd rather choose to accept the reasonable belief that Jesus Christ, as God come in human flesh, walked on water.

But more positively, and on the front foot now, Prof. Edgar Andrews (Professor Edgar H. Andrews BSc, PhD, DSc, FInstP, FIMMM, CEng, CPhys. is Emeritus Professor of Materials at the University of London and an international expert on the science of large molecules) takes the first 10 words of the Bible as a working hypothesis and claims it leads to 6 testable predictions. The thing that should not be astounding to us is that modern science indisputably affirms all 6 of these predictions as being satisfied. Let's look at the predictions of 'the God hypothesis': namely, that God created the heavens and the earth.

They are:

**(1) That the origin of the material universe should not be able to be explained in purely material terms**

Nor can it - for, looking back into the past, science arrives at a 'singularity' (that being a point where the laws of physics break down, as vouched for by the late Professor Stephen Hawking).

This simply means that there is no available technical explanation for the actual point of origin as such.

**(2) That there should be a principle of rationality underlying the entire universe**

And there is. According to Albert Einstein, 'The most incomprehensible thing about the universe is the fact that it's comprehensible.'

**(3) That the existence of all laws should best be explained by a supernatural law-giver.**

This claim sits comfortably with a common-sense interpretation of the facts. Sir Fred Hoyle once suggested that a super-intellect had monkeyed with physics, or at least that was what it looked like.

**(4) That the essence of life is not chemistry but (intelligently organized) information.**

As Professor Lennox has argued, a printed page of text is chemically identical to one of gobbledygook (one which uses the same characters, only now they are all shuffled). Mere chemistry cannot distinguish the page that makes perfect sense to us from the one that doesn't. While there's obviously a difference, it's not explained by reducing it all down to chemistry alone. To put it another way, it's well-known that a tin of sardines contains all the chemicals for life, but is non-living!

**(5) That there should be irreducibly complex design features.**

And what does research show? Research does indeed show that all living things seem to have a minimal complexity requirement (Stuart Kauffman, origins researcher), What's more, 'we cannot reach back to a simple beginning' (Fred Hoyle).

**(6) That there was a beginning before which time did not exist.**

Science absolutely verifies that all things get more disordered with time, and yet because they're not yet totally disordered, this has got to mean that time had a recent beginning (Prof. Andrews).

In other words, and summarizing now, without 'the God hypothesis,' there's no explanation for the singularity; nor for cosmic comprehensibility. Also, there can hardly have been purely accidental fine-tuning; and we'd be left with no basis in chemistry for intelligently organized information. Finally, science also agrees with 'the God hypothesis' that there's been no simple beginning; and no previous deep time.

Nobel laureate Dr. Arno Penzias has discussed his opinions regarding the philosophical ramifications of a discovery he famously made, and has discussed quite openly. You may remember that Penzias, along with his colleague Robert Wilson, in 1964 detected radio noise of very low energy. After ruling out terrestrial sources, they realized that the noise was cosmic microwave background radiation, apparently a remnant of the creation event. They shared the 1978 Nobel Prize in Physics for this discovery. Penzias stated<sup>2</sup> to the New York Times on March 12,

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2. [http://www.newcollege.unsw.edu.au/lecture\\_pdf/1099874611879bb\\_hawk.NCL.pdf](http://www.newcollege.unsw.edu.au/lecture_pdf/1099874611879bb_hawk.NCL.pdf)

1978: “The best data we have [concerning the Big Bang] 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.”

In a subsequent radio interview, Penzias concluded by saying that his discovery could bring about an overcoming of the historic mistrust existing between science and religion. **There is certainly no need for Bible-believing Christians to be intimidated by the new atheism.** We can take the Bible seriously beginning at its very first verse!

**Questions to Discuss:**

1. Why should we treat the early chapters of Genesis as narrative?
2. In what ways were the sceptical in Peter's days aligned with sceptics today?
3. Does the scientific debate (either confirming or challenging a plain reading of Genesis) hinge on the acceptance or not of hard evidence; or does it come down to different interpretations of the same hard evidence?
4. Do you think it is possible to support any view of the distant past without assumptions, speculations and even admitting a little mystery? (Please explain).
5. Some world-class scientists maintain there's no conflict with the Bible. What is the basic conclusion that may be drawn from this?

## CHAPTER TWO: GOD'S SPIRIT MOVED THE BIBLE AUTHORS (2 PETER 1:21)

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Some so-called superfoods are reported to have a beneficial effect on our memory. Blueberries and walnuts are among some of those that have been singled out. One testimonial by a lawyer describes how his 82-year old mother had lost the ability to recognize him. But after switching to a diet rich in fruit and nuts, she had regained the memory of who he was, and could relate to him again. As we get older, we face the distinct possibility – if not the inevitability - that our power of recall is going to reduce significantly.

It does seem as if the Apostle Paul had a brief memory lapse that gets recorded in the first chapter of his Bible letter to the Corinthian church. It happened as he was trying to recall any believers at Corinth whom he'd personally baptized. Just read this from verse 14:

*“I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one would say you were baptized in my name. Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void” (1 Corinthians 1:14-17).*

It seems as if the Apostle remembered only the names of Crispus and Gaius as having been baptized by him, but then it suddenly came to him that he'd also baptized members of Stephanas' household. Nothing special about that kind of momentary forgetfulness - just a slip of the mind, and quickly corrected. Except this forms part of Holy Writ. Christians believe all of the Bible was inspired by God. When writing to Timothy, the Apostle Paul himself declares this very thing. He said, 'All scripture is inspired of God,' or 'God-breathed' (2 Timothy 3:16). Some people have the wrong idea that the human authors of the Bible acted exactly like dictating machines - in the sense that they wrote down word for word what the Spirit of God told them to write. The trouble with that idea is that Peter and Paul, for example, had different writing styles. If they were simply acting like machines, then we'd expect there to be no difference in their styles.

What's more, the different writers had their own favourite words and phrases. And now here's Paul, at the beginning of his Corinthian letter, evidencing a very typical human trait, namely an initial, short-lived, slip of the mind. This indicates that it was more a case of the Holy Spirit supervising the words selected by the human authors, while at the same time accommodating to each human author's personal style and idiosyncrasies. The way the Bible puts it is that God's Spirit moved the Bible writers. Here's what the Apostle Peter wrote in the first chapter of his second Bible letter:

*"But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Peter 1:20-21).*

In one other place, the same word is used when describing a sailing ship being driven by the wind (Acts 27:15). Try to picture a yacht with the wind filling its sails and moving it through the water. That's the idea of God's Spirit moving the human Bible authors. This means the Bible has both a human and a divine nature. One preacher, R.A. Torrey, put it this way. He said suppose stones for a temple were brought from quarries in Rutland, Vermont, Berea, Ohio, Kasota, Minnesota, Middleton and Connecticut. Each stone was first hewn into its final shape at its own quarry before being transported to the actual temple site. Among the stones was a great variety of shapes and sizes, like cubes and cylinders. But when they were all brought together, it turned out that every stone fitted perfectly into its allotted place. What would that show?

It would show, Torrey said, that at the back of all these individual quarry workers was a single architectural mastermind. Then he said, it's exactly like that with God's temple of truth - the Bible. How else could some 40 different human authors contribute to this one, vast project spanning some 1600 years from start to completion? The marvellous cohesion, the wonderful consistency of the Bible, with its focus on the central picture of Christ can only mean one thing - that behind all those individual human authors there stands one divine author, who masterminded the Bible as his communication to this world.

What's more, the Bible contains many predictions originating with God's Spirit who so moved the human authors. In fact, it's been estimated that, at the time of writing, about 25% of the Bible was prophecy. In other words, claims about the future. Now, anyone can make predictions, but having those prophecies

fulfilled is something else. What's the chance, for example, of predicting in which city some future world leader is going to be born? Or the exact way in which he's going to meet his death? But this is what the Bible did – hundreds of years in advance of the events.

The late Professor Emeritus of Mathematics and Astronomy at Pasadena City College, Peter Stoner actually calculated the chance or probability of one man fulfilling the major prophecies made in advance in the Bible about the Messiah, Jesus. The estimates were worked out by twelve different classes which amounted to some 600 university students.

Professor Stoner also encouraged other sceptics or scientists to make their own estimates to see if his conclusions were more than fair. Finally, he submitted his figures for review to a committee of the American Scientific Affiliation (Peter Stoner, *Science Speaks*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1969, 4). For example, concerning Micah 5:2 which says that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, Stoner and his students determined the average population of Bethlehem from the time of the prophet Micah right through to the present; and then they divided it by the average world population over the same period. By expressing that ratio, they calculated that the chance of one particular man being born in Bethlehem was one in 300,000 (in the same sense as the chance of getting 'heads' in any one flipping of a coin is one in two).

Then they examined not one, but eight different Bible prophecies about Jesus, the Messiah. The likelihood of them all being true by chance was found to be so small that we'll have to de-

scribe it by means of an illustration. If you make a mark on one out of ten tickets, and then place all the tickets in a hat, and stir them thoroughly, and then ask a blindfolded man to draw one, his chance of getting the one ticket which you've marked is one in ten. Now suppose that instead of tickets we take small silver coins - and not just 10 of them - but we take a very large number of coins. Next, let's suppose we lay all these silver coins all over the state of Texas in the US until we cover the whole of that state to a depth of two feet or in other words to a depth of about 60 centimetres. Now once again, let's mark just one out of all these silver coins and stir the whole lot of them thoroughly, all over the state. By the way, you may be interested to know that Texas is almost 3 times the size (area) of the UK.

Once again, we're going to blindfold a man and tell him that he can travel as far as he wishes within Texas, but he must pick up just one silver coin and hope that the very first one he picks up is the right one. What chance would he have of getting the right one? [It's 1 chance in a number that's a 1 followed by 17 zeros]. Just the same chance - Professor Stoner worked out - that the prophets would have had of writing these eight prophecies and having them all come true in any one man, from their day to the present time, providing they wrote them in their own wisdom alone, assuming God had nothing to do with the Bible.

But, of course, there are many more than eight prophecies. One Bible expert (Edersheim) reckons there were actually up to 456 different prophecies available for Professor Stoner to select from, had he so wished. Obviously, the chance of all this being pure coincidence is vanishingly small.

We should point out that no originals of any ancient literary work remain to this day. We have some ten copies of Caesar's report of his Gallic Wars and they date to a thousand years after the events they describe. However, there's little or no dispute that these writings are the real deal. Compare this situation with the case of the New Testament. Thousands of manuscript copies remain dating back to a mere one hundred or so years after the events they describe in the New Testament. If the authenticity of any piece of ancient literature is to be judged acceptable, then it must be the Bible. And, with all those manuscript copies available for cross-checking, practically all human copying errors can be identified and the correct option selected from among the manuscript copies. It all points to the confidence we can have in our modern Bible as accurately representing what God himself conveyed as his Spirit moved the human authors.

**This should encourage us not to doubt the Bible nor compromise** by saying that it merely contains God's Word - it is God's Word for us - all of it. And it should be read normally, reading the plain meaning out from the Bible text itself and not reading our own desired meaning into it. No Bible verse can mean something that denies what it first meant to its original readers or hearers. It must at least be consistent with it. The true meaning we seek is to be determined by its biblical context. May God's Spirit move in our hearts to give due attention to God's timeless Word, the Bible.

**Questions to discuss:**

1. Give some reasons why human Bible authors were not acting like mere dictating machines.
2. What features of the Bible make it inconceivable that it could be a hoax?
3. The chapter uses prophecy to establish the supernatural origin of the text. Are there other supporting grounds for its divine authorship?
4. Give some reasons why we should compare different Bible translations.
5. Why should we read the Bible in paragraphs rather than as a series of isolated verses?

## CHAPTER THREE: THE SPIRIT MOVED THE CHILD IN THE WOMB (LUKE 1:35)

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It's remarkable that we're not told that Mary, the mother of our Lord, was full of the Holy Spirit, and yet this seems to be all the more honourable a distinction for her, compared with Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. Elizabeth, we are told, was filled with the Spirit. But, although we surely can't have any doubts that Mary was under the influence of the Spirit of God, her resulting actions and words appear to be more a personal reflection connected with her own faith and life with the Lord - bound up with her habit of communing with God. Her song is her response to God rather than a revelation on his part, as Elizabeth's was.

Mary then stays three months with the woman whom God had selected to be the mother of John the Baptist, God's voice in the desert. Luke in his Gospel tells us how these two instruments of grace, each selected for God's supreme purpose, enjoy fellowship together unknown to the world. As little known to the world as were these poor women, God is there at work in their lives, accomplishing what angels desire to figure out. Hidden in the hill country, these two women shared with each other how God was using them. Their hearts, visited by God, touched by his grace, respond to each other - and to God. Their exchanges recognize God's hand and greatness, and submit to his will.

We're surely favoured in being admitted into this scene, from which the world was excluded by its unbelief and alienation from God. Soon, Mary returns to follow humbly her own calling to fulfil the purposes of God. In due course, the Saviour of the world is born. He was both simultaneously upheld as an infant by Mary; while upholding the entire universe himself. As we reflect for a moment on that tiny infant form, we realize that God's greatest purposes sometimes have the smallest physical manifestations. And actually that is the very point I particularly want to explore with you in this chapter - that God's greatest purposes sometimes have the smallest physical manifestations.

To take another example of this: compare God's small portable residence on earth in the time of Moses, known as the Tabernacle – compare and contrast it over against the gigantic mind-blowingly huge scale of the known universe. Scientists have a 'guesstimate' of there being one hundred thousand million stars in each galaxy; and there being also one hundred thousand million galaxies - or thereabouts! Yet it's with a remarkable economy of words that the formation of the stars is described in the Bible! It's all dismissed in a mere two words (in the original language) united people in Genesis chapter 1. But now contrast the fifteen entire chapters in the book of Exodus alone which are absorbed with the minute details of that special tent (and its furnishings) that was God's dwelling-place among his chosen people. That's despite the fact that the tent and its enclosure was not so dissimilar in size to a modern football or soccer pitch.

If these examples tell us anything: it must be this: that God is simply not impressed with physical size in the way we are. Churches of God today that we may be personally acquainted

with could well be small, but **don't be focused on size or depressed by lack of numbers**. Clovis Chappell, a minister from over a century ago, used to tell the story of two paddleboats. They left Memphis about the same time, and were both travelling down the Mississippi River to New Orleans. As they sailed side by side, sailors on one boat made a few remarks about what they saw as the slow progress of the other boat. Soon challenges were made, and a race began. Competition became fierce as the two boats roared through the Deep South. One boat began falling behind as it ran out of fuel. There'd been plenty of coal for the trip, but not enough for a race. As the boat dropped back, an enterprising sailor took some of the ship's cargo and started using it as fuel. When the sailors saw that the supplies burned almost as well as the coal, they fuelled their boat with the material they'd been given to transport from Memphis to New Orleans – which also lightened their load, of course. They ended up winning the race, but only by burning their cargo.

God has entrusted his cargo to us, too. By 'cargo' I mean Bible truth, if you'll permit me to refer to it in that way (Cp. 'deposit' in 1 Timothy 6:20). Our job is to do our part in seeing that this cargo reaches its destination. We hear a lot today about programs to help churches grow faster. But when the church program takes priority over truth, the testimony of the Lord suffers. That's not an appropriate go-faster strategy. If some numerically larger churches have dispensed with even a little of the cargo of truth God has given to us, who would dare to call that success?

Then there's the 'Big is beautiful' way of thinking. 25% of churchgoers in the United Kingdom are said to attend a congregation that's over 400-strong. Now, a whole lot of things could

motivate that trend: perhaps it's a retreat into the comfort zone of a religious ghetto; or it could be a desire for anonymity or a means of avoiding having to take personal responsibility. After a busy week at work, it might be tempting to want to just 'chill out' at church. Perhaps, the desire to be associated with something big is driven by a wrong view of success. The God of the Bible is a God who specializes in minorities and who works through remnants. The Bible's measure of authenticity is not numerical. The 'mega-church' phenomenon wasn't there at the beginning of Christianity. The number of disciples in Jerusalem certainly did grow quickly into thousands, but the internal evidence of the Bible is that they met in smaller units or companies all belonging to the one Church of God at Jerusalem (see Acts 4:23 RV).

Which brings us back to the original mould or pattern of Christianity, and the keeping of God's cargo of truth intact. When Churches of God reformed in the late nineteenth century, only ten percent of their 'parent' association (known as the Brethren Movement) participated and sixty percent of those newly re-established churches were to be found in Scotland. The number of churches today which belong to that Fellowship which emerged again over 125 years ago, while not vastly greater than the number in those early years, is now made up of churches that are far more globally dispersed - which in itself is a good response to the Great Commission. To reach out into the whole world was the Master's directive, but numerical size was never a specified objective. In fact, as we've seen from the earlier examples given that some of God's greatest purposes had small physical manifestations.

When you track the Bible's record of movements that were of God by design or groups of people whose actions God explicitly endorsed, perhaps a common if not invariable feature is their smallness. Only 42,000 of God's people returned from Babylon to rebuild for God at the site of the previously destroyed Jerusalem temple. The majority remained in what may have become their comfort zone. And it seems that the city of Bethlehem was singled out in the time of Boaz and Ruth as being home to faithful folk in contrast to the general texture of the time.

Might we not also conclude from the Bible texts of Acts 27 and the ending of Romans 15 that the outworking of the will of God - while not always large in scale - is also not always plain sailing? Was Paul correct in thinking God wanted him to head first to Jerusalem, and then onwards to Rome, at the heart of the Empire? We need have no doubts about that. But now think of Acts chapter 27 - the story of Paul's epic and hazardous adventure on the high sea. Why is this shared in such graphic detail? It's equally important to interpret this correctly - tempting as it is to make applications involving salvation, anchors, harbours and not making shipwreck of our faith ... That's not why God has set it in such detail in Scripture. That's not the exposition of the narrative. It's there to simply mean what it says.

And is it not there to speak to our discouragement today, by showing that the Gospel's greatest servant, while devotedly giving his all, in full accord with the will of God, wasn't guaranteed plain sailing in this life? Paul (Acts 23:11) has a word from the Lord that he'll witness at Rome. And yet here he is, navigating great difficulty on the high seas as he heads to Rome. Even being in the current of God's will doesn't stop him from being ex-

posed to the perilous currents of the high seas! Through all that epic storm-tossed journey, Paul had God's word. So, whatever literal or metaphorical storms we battle through - whatever the difficulties and disappointments of the way, yes, even numerical decline and church closure - here's what these things don't mean: it doesn't mean you've got it wrong and it doesn't mean that you're in the wrong place after all, nor does it mean you've misread God's plan for you.

Arriving at his destination eventually, Paul finds himself imprisoned at Rome, by the time he writes his second letter to Timothy he's counting down the days, ruefully reflecting on a blanket declension among the churches in Asia. He'd experienced real danger, and was now faced with declining church numbers, but here he was at Rome to defend the truth of the Gospel at the heart of the Empire. He'd arrived with all the cargo intact! His confined space in the dark, dank dungeon there may have seemed to offer such bleak prospects, but it was all lit up with the glorious anticipation of his safe arrival in the heavenly kingdom beyond.

Faithfulness, as we say, is often associated with smallness in the Bible, as shown by the days of the Judges and in the days of the exiles and in the fading glimpse we are permitted of the New Testament Churches of God - but that's no excuse to have regrets or indeed even to think small! Paul encouraged the captain, sailors and soldiers in their every endeavour to keep the ship afloat. This inspires us to press on - and to preserve the cargo! (Until we arrive at last on the farther shore of our final destination.)

**Questions to discuss:**

1. What other examples can you think of that demonstrate God is not impressed by physical size?
2. Why, do you think, we tend to be attracted to large groups?
3. Notice the three points of Paul's prayer as he was headed for Jerusalem (Romans 15:31,32). How were they answered?
4. In a sense, Paul wrote his own obituary in 2 Timothy 4:7. How might this differ from what you would have written in summary of his achievements by God's grace?

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE SPIRIT MOVED IN OUR HEARTS (2 THESSALONIANS 2:13)

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God's Holy Spirit required no assistance at our spiritual new birth: that was the time in our life when we first received Jesus, God's Son, as our personal saviour. Little did we suspect it then, but later the Bible informed us that we'd been chosen from the beginning. God's sovereignty in choosing together with human responsibility in believing the truth of the Gospel are found together side by side here in one verse in Second Thessalonians 2. It's verse 13:

*"... we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth."*

**Don't be confused by those who say we can be lost again.** Such a misguided view seriously underplays divine sovereignty. In Romans chapter 8, we're given a brief history of our place in God's eternal purposes. Believers are described there as predestined, called, justified and glorified (v.30). Note that the last of the four events is still future for the present-day believer. But God has caused it to be written in the past tense: he says we're glorified! What's God saying? Simply this: that it's so certain, it's as good as already happened. In other words, no-one can fall out of that sequence that spans from eternity to eternity!

Another way of explaining this deeper Bible teaching is to learn what God wants us to learn from the story of Jacob in the Old Testament. It does seem that in his early life Jacob couldn't wait to get his hands on what was his brother's! I just want us to notice how God had told Rebekah in advance the way things were going to be – how her older son would serve his younger brother. And God said this, not based on their respective early years' performance, but he decreed this before they were even born – so obviously it was quite independent of anything they'd done or even would do. That didn't come into it. In fact, God specifically wants us to notice this very point. Let the Apostle Paul explain it from Romans chapter 9 – where he's talking about God's purposes with Israel:

*“Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; for though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, “THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER” (Romans 9:10-12).*

And in case we should think this is an isolated case, as opposed to something illustrating a divine principle, Paul adds the further example of the Pharaoh at the time of the Exodus ...

*“What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For He says to Moses, “I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION.” So then it does not*

*depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH"* (Romans 9:10-17).

There's something profound here. We're being allowed some insight into the sovereign workings of God. In this latest Bible example of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, if we were to check back with the book of Exodus, and the story of how he refused to give the Israelites their freedom, we'd find that we sometimes read of Pharaoh hardening his own heart; and at other times, it's said to be God who's hardening his heart – which raises the potential conflict in our minds between divine sovereignty on the one hand and human responsibility on the other. How can we have a real choice if God has actually already chosen what's going to happen?

Perhaps we could try an analogy here? Even with our modern scientific understanding, in the natural realm there are other things we just can't seem to reconcile. Take the nature of light, for example. There's real evidence that light exists as light waves: some experiments show it to behave in a way comparable to, say, water waves. You may even remember the simple experiment from high school that shows this. But, at the same time, there's equally good evidence to show that light, and its energy, come in little packets, more like particles. The only way we can live with that state of affairs in the natural world is by inventing a name for it. An 'antinomy' describes the situation where we have two

things which to us are contradictory, and yet there's good evidence for both. In a similar way, the Bible most definitely teaches both divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

But we tend to shy away from things that are difficult for us to understand – like when it comes to God's involvement in making things happen - and so it's tempting to try to respond to this by saying, 'oh well, God knows in advance what's going to happen, and so he can tell us in advance what the future holds. But that doesn't fully satisfy the language God uses here. Listen to this inspired commentary as Paul continues ...

*"So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use? What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory ..." (Romans 9:18-23).*

In any case, when the Bible speaks of God knowing the future, the word means to know with approval – it's not a passive knowledge, nor can it be, where God is concerned. The question was asked there: 'Who resists his will?' In terms of our salvation and

eternal destiny, the Bible would fully support that no more than 'God wills' to be saved will be saved; but equally, no fewer than the 'whosoever wills', will be saved. In other words, no fewer than all who willingly come to Christ for salvation will be saved; but equally, no more than those whom the Father draws to his Son will be saved (John 6:44).

As with Jacob and his twin, God had decreed what he'd already determined would take place. This demonstrates God's sovereign grace. It's not something based on any good found in us as simply foreseen by God. Really Paul, by the Spirit of God, has anticipated in that passage we read from Romans chapter 9, all the questions we, too, want to ask! For example: if it does all come down to the will of God operating in our lives, how come God can still find fault with us?

Well, if we stay close to the language of the Bible - and in a subject like this we really have to - then we'd have to say that being of a depraved mind, and being dead in sins, we'd no ability of our own to come to Christ for salvation, so it simply had to be God's work; but at the same time we were held responsible. After all, didn't Christ describe unbelieving Jews of his day as being like chicks that wouldn't come to the mother hen? He was holding them accountable, responsible for their response.

We then find an almost irresistible urge to cry out: 'but that's surely not fair!' (because we have no ability, but God still holds us responsible!). And it's good that we feel like this, for again Paul by the Spirit anticipates exactly that kind of reaction - which reassures us that we must be on the right lines after all! And this is where Paul parks the debate: for it's ridiculous to

think of the mere clay of humanity criticising the divine potter. But does that mean God is responsible for people going to a lost eternity? Not at all! There can be no injustice with God. All the clay was spoilt, but that wasn't the Potter's fault; and he certainly has the right over the clay to do with some spoilt part of it something which that part deserves no more than the rest.

This hard teaching of the Bible does, however, have two very practical impacts on our life. First, it strips away any remaining pride we may still have in thinking we made even the tiniest contribution to our salvation. More importantly, this impressive teaching of God's sovereignty provides us with the last word in complete assurance that once saved, we can never be lost again. So, as we finish this chapter, let's not be foolish enough to expect we can fully get our heads round God and his perfect ways, but instead simply bow our hearts in worship – worship to God for a totally secure salvation that we never deserved in the slightest degree.

All this brings us back to what we said in opening. God's Holy Spirit required no assistance at our spiritual new birth. In his sovereignty, the Spirit of God moved in our heart to bring conviction about our sinful failings and God's righteous judgement. As a result we were born spiritually when we acted responsibly and believed in God's son dying for sinners like us, born not by our own will, but God's – an irresistible movement that was conceived in eternity.

**Questions to discuss:**

1. Read Romans 9:11 again and list all the points God makes so as to underline the basis of his purpose with the twins: Jacob, in particular.
2. Compare Exodus 8:32 & 9:12. Use these verses to explore the idea of an 'antinomy' as presented in the chapter.
3. In what way does the language and tone of Romans 9:19 indicate that God simply knowing in advance and acting accordingly is not the solution?
4. Think of a voyage on a cruise ship. It sets out with a predetermined destination. En route, the passengers are faced with numerous choices of diversionary activities. Does this analogy help us to distinguish between specific things God has decreed as regards our destiny and the view that sees everything in terms of a blanket determinism?

## CHAPTER FIVE: THE SPIRIT'S MOVEMENT OF CHRISTIANS TOWARDS UNITY (EPHESIANS 4:3)

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When in the first century, churches began to spread around the Mediterranean and onwards and westwards into Europe, it was the answer to the Lord's promise. In John 14:12, the Lord promised greater works lying ahead and these were to be performed by his followers who planted these churches. The arrival of these churches was also the answer to the Lord's own prayer recorded in John chapter 17. You remember, he prayed in this way:

*"I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.*

*Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before*

*the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, although the world has not known You, yet I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me; and I have made Your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:20-26).*

The historic New Testament community of Churches of God was the result of the Apostles initially doing the promised greater works of God (John 14:12) by fulfilling the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) – and even as an expanding community they remained God’s united people in answer to Jesus’ prayer in John 17. This people united in God the Father and God the Son reached out to neighbouring cities, and so additional churches were planted around the eastern seaboard of the Mediterranean and its hinterlands.

And so, as we say, this was the answer to our Lord’s prayer in John chapter 17. The scope of that prayer was self-evidently the whole Body of Christ for the Lord was praying for all believers in himself. The objective of the prayer, and the answer to it, however, narrows down upon those who become so visibly unified they form an effective testimony to the unbelieving world. And the very next book of the New Testament unfolds in detail the sequel to this prayer. Notice how the Lord prays in John 17:18: “As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.” We can compare verse 18 of the Lord’s prayer in John 17 with the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20:

*“And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.*

*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”*

As a result of this, based on what we find in Acts chapter 1, and the rest of that book, we find the answer to the Lord's John 17 prayer - and his Matthew 28 commission - specifically in the community of local churches that are described in that first Christian history book of the Acts of the Apostles. Throughout the book of Acts, we have documented for us how, over time with the spread of the Good News, individual churches known as Churches of God came into existence at various locations around the eastern seaboard of the Mediterranean. Notice, I said 'individual,' but not 'independent.' For indeed, they weren't independent. They each bore testimony to the essential character of the Body (of all believers). And, what's more, they were decidedly interdependent on each other in one overall early Christian community. That's why the various collective nouns of the New Testament were so fitting – they were a nation, a kingdom, a priesthood, and of the household of God. As a collection of close-coupled churches, they further bore witness to the essential unity of the Body of Christ, for they were without doctrinal variation and they also showed a real practical care for each other.

The universal Church of all believers, known biblically as the Church which is his Body (Ephesians 1:23), is a mystical unity and so for that reason it's an invisible unity. In answer to Christ's prayer of John 17, the emerging nation, kingdom, priesthood etc. to which the disciples of Christ then belonged, came into exis-

tence to give visible expression on earth to this mystical Body or universal Church. What we're saying is that Christ's prayer was answered then – and will always be answered - when the essential unity of the Body results in an actual expressed unity of a single community of local churches: on earth, and arranged according to the biblical pattern.

Those who belong to Christ are seen as a completed number of persons ('his own') in our Lord's prayer in John 17, and not overlapping with the world of unbelievers (John 17:9,14,21,25). All members of Christ's Church have been 'chosen ... to obey' (1 Peter 1:1,2). However – and this is the key point to notice - that particular referred to obedience is not automatic, so the Lord prayed in advance for it to happen. In other words, he was praying that the same maturing process for the Body of Christ that's outlined in Ephesians chapter 4 (vv.11-13) would actually materialize as believers co-operated with the Holy Spirit's promptings in their lives. As Body members spoke the truth, even doctrinal truth, lovingly with each other, Christian unity on earth was to be reached through each submitting in obedience to the Lord's teaching.

This teaching of the Lord Jesus is found today preserved in the New Testament Scriptures: the same as was first taught orally by his Apostles two thousand years ago. And so, in those early New Testament times, believers in Christ attained to what the Bible calls 'the unity of the Faith' (Ephesians 4:13). The Christian Faith which was delivered once for all to believers on the Lord Jesus (Jude 3) leads to a single community with 5 features clearly visible across the New Testament landscape: namely:

- (1) there was only ever one local church per city;
- (2) when believers were added in one locality to a church, they were added to the overall community of churches;
- (3) each local church had elders in the plural; and
- (4) it was co-ordination between these elders that gave the churches their connectional structure; such that
- (5) they could claim that they uniquely constituted God's house – a status that was and to this day remains conditional on maintaining the Apostles' teaching or, in other words, the Apostolic Faith.

If the early answer to the Lord's prayer is found in the progress of 1<sup>st</sup>-century New Testament churches of God in 'The Acts of the Apostles,' then it can again be answered in churches that operate as a community today in the same way as they did in the 1st century. The Spirit was sent to facilitate this (Acts 1:8). This is the only movement of the Spirit that we can thwart!

Before he went back to heaven, the Lord provided his leading disciples, principally the Apostles, with the blueprint for unity. Just as flat pack furniture manufacturers really want you to successfully build their furniture and go to great lengths to provide you with detailed instructions; it's the same with the Lord – he went to great lengths to leave behind a plan for success. The Lord longed for unity, and prayed for it, so is it conceivable that he

didn't prescribe a unique set of instructions which if repeatedly followed in every place in every era would lead to it becoming the answer to his prayer? And his prayer, as we've seen, was the prayer that the essential character of the Body would come to be expressed in a practical, visible unity on earth. Independent designer churches all of different man-made ideas can never hope to do justice to representing the mystical unity of the universal Church with its perfect oneness.

There's one plan for one visible community on earth and it's never changed since the Lord prayed this prayer and passed the plan on to his Apostles. The Lord's prayer here reverberates still – it is, in effect, that he still wants us to follow his one original plan. Will we all submit to it? We will – if we want to be part of the answer to Jesus' prayer.

**Questions to discuss:**

1. Some researchers estimate there could be more than forty thousand Christian denominations. How does that suggest we've treated the prayer the Lord prayed in John 17?
2. Do you think this was a one-off prayer? The Lord still exercises a prayer ministry on behalf of believers. What might lead you to think the content of this particular prayer remains current?
3. There's a saying that says if you keep trying to do the same thing again and again after it's proven to be hopeless, it's the mark of insanity if you expect to get a different result (think of trying to open a door with the wrong key). What if we try to do again today the same thing the first Christians did successfully? Explain why you think it would be rational to be able to make the same claims today as they once did.
4. Explain in your own words why you think unity is important among believers today?
5. Is the kind of unity Jesus prayed for satisfied by a kind of 'lowest common denominator' approach where differences are ignored? If not, why not?

## **PART TWO: THE DOWNFALL OF SATAN**

## CHAPTER SIX: PRIDE GOES BEFORE A FALL

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We have in the Bible the greatest story of vaulting ambition. That is, of someone over-reaching himself, and it all ending in disaster – and in this case it’s a disaster of truly cosmic proportions. Before we turn to that, let’s remind ourselves that in past times every student at school in the United Kingdom, had to study the works of William Shakespeare, a famous poet who lived in England in the 1500s. He wrote many plays for the theatres of those times, and in one of them, in Shakespeare’s play *Macbeth*, we find the words:

“I have no spur

To prick the sides of my intent, but only

Vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself,

And falls on th’other ...” (*Macbeth Act 1, scene 7.25–28*)

In this scene *Macbeth* is debating with himself about a murder he’s preparing to commit. It’s the murder of King Duncan. As *Macbeth* has just explained to himself, there’s no real justification for the crime - Duncan is his relative, a gentle and godly man. He’s also a good king and, on top of all that, *Macbeth*’s a guest at his castle. All this argues against the act of murder he’s considering.

Unlike a cowboy on horseback or knight of ancient times, he's no 'spur' to press on with his intent, which Macbeth compares to a wild horse. In other words, he's no justifiable motivation for this murder. Again, picturing someone leaping or vaulting up into the saddle of a horse, he says he can only draw on 'vaulting ambition.' This refers to his intense desire for power. It knows no bounds for it 'o'erleaps itself.' It's like a horse and rider jumping at speed over an unknown boundary wall, and as a result falls on the other side - probably suggestive of unknown territory, as well as being beyond reason.

Many a person has been drawn to reckless actions, and to disastrous effect, by uncontrolled pride and ambition and greed. In the Bible book of James, we're told that God is opposed to the proud (James 4:6). The Apostle Peter repeats the message, saying God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble (1 Peter 5:5). God knows how to abase the proud, how to bring them down. Both Hannah and Mary in their songs, which are recorded in the Bible, praised God for the reversals in fortune he brings about – you could say he specializes in it. Bringing down the proud, the godless rich, the power-hungry land-grabber ... the list could go on. And God lifts up the humble, the poor, the meek of the earth. It has to be said of course that these reversals may take longer than we hope for.

Jesus Christ, God's Son, taught His followers to select a lowly place whenever they should find themselves as invited guests at a function. It was better to be invited to sit in a better place; rather than presume you had any right to it, and find yourself being asked to downgrade. When we read repeatedly that God is opposed to the proud, it should certainly not surprise us to discov-

er that His adversary is defined by pride. Satan, whose name in the Old Testament language simply means ‘adversary,’ once held a very responsible position. Satan, or Lucifer at that time (Isaiah 14:12), is a created spirit being, or angel. In fact, the greatest of all the angels whom God created. Let’s explore that fact now – and what became of him – as we turn to an intriguing passage from the Bible, from the prophet Ezekiel, chapter 28:

*“Again the word of the LORD came to me saying, "Son of man, take up a lamentation over the king of Tyre and say to him, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "You had the seal of perfection, Full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; Every precious stone was your covering: The ruby, the topaz and the diamond; The beryl, the onyx and the jasper; The lapis lazuli, the turquoise and the emerald; And the gold, the workmanship of your settings and sockets, was in you. On the day that you were created they were prepared. You were the anointed cherub who covers, and I placed you there. You were on the holy mountain of God; You walked in the midst of the stones of fire. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created until unrighteousness was found in you.*

*"By the abundance of your trade you were internally filled with violence, and you sinned; Therefore I have cast you as profane from the mountain of God. And I have destroyed you, O covering cherub, from the midst of the stones of fire. Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty; You corrupted your wisdom by reason of*

*your splendor. I cast you to the ground; I put you before kings, that they may see you. By the multitude of your iniquities, in the unrighteousness of your trade you profaned your sanctuaries. Therefore I have brought fire from the midst of you; It has consumed you, and I have turned you to ashes on the earth in the eyes of all who see you. All who know you among the peoples are appalled at you; you have become terrified and you will cease to be forever”* (Ezekiel 28:11-19).

In this Bible section, an earthly king, known to us from history as Ethbaal III, is portrayed as a representation of Satan. The wording with its setting within a Garden situated on the holy mountain of God in heaven leads us to the view that this earthly king is being seen as representing Satan. Ethbaal's pride made him a highly suitable candidate to represent Satan in this figurative way. What we're able to gain from this representation is the insight that before Lucifer fell he was in a very privileged position as the covering cherub. This is the limit of what the Bible tells us about how sin originated. It occurred within this created being. We can go no further than these words of Scripture. He was blameless when created, but he corrupted himself. His inward response to his splendour and beauty was to become proud. And so God's judgement fell on him and he was deposed from office.

His destiny was to become the Lake of Fire, but this doom was not immediate. In fact, as we count time it would be a long time in coming, but no less certain for all that. It's the Lord Jesus who tells us that this place, the Lake of Fire, was actually prepared for Satan, that is, the Devil, and those other angels who rebelled

with him. There is no redemption for angels when they sin. How we should praise God that he sent His Son to take hold on humanity, not angels, that He might bring about a way of salvation for us through his death on the cross as man. Jesus, the kindest and truest of men, is the one who has the most to say about such punishment. It's factual, fearful, fair and final. The good news is that at least some humans will not go there.

Sometimes, we read of a government minister, a prominent politician, who makes some serious error of judgement. It may not end their career, but they are removed from the inner cabinet, and relegated to a much lower profile on the back benches. That may or may not be a helpful way to think of God's immediate response to Satan's sin – this one that was the true original sin, coming before Adam's transgression in the earthly Garden of Eden. Adam's sin, under the influence of Satan, took place in what appears to have been a special place on earth reflecting the scene of Satan's fall likewise in heaven. The Lord adds further detail in Luke 10:17 where we can read:

*“The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!” And he said to them, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”*

Jesus had sent these followers of his on a mission trip. They returned happy with the results they'd witnessed by God's power

given to them in their commissioning. The special power they'd been given over demons had thrilled them. The Lord, however, put it in perspective for them. He'd seen the power of Satan himself being subdued in a far greater way. And then He pointed out that to know our sins are forgiven, and that we have a place reserved in heaven, is a far greater wonder of grace than the wonder of judgement inflicted on morally fallen spirit beings.

I wonder if this was the Lord referring to the time we've been considering when Satan was originally dismissed from his leading position among the company of angelic orders. If so, it was a third of the angels that followed Satan into rebellion and judgement (Revelation 12:4). Satan's fate was sealed from that moment, it would be the Lake of Fire, but as our further studies in God's Word will show, there would be distinct stages to his downfall.

**Questions to discuss:**

1. Why do you think God is more concerned that we should focus on the reality of sin and evil, rather than knowing about its origin?
2. Some have taken Ezekiel's reference to Eden, the garden of God, as being to the earthly location featuring in Genesis chapters 2 & 3. Unless you agree, what makes you conclude Ezekiel has his sights set higher and earlier?
3. What can we learn about Lucifer / Satan from Ezekiel chapter 28?
4. Why, do you think, Satan's downfall was designed in stages?
5. What practical lesson may we learn from this chapter?

## CHAPTER SEVEN: A KING INFLUENCED BY SATAN

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**W**e're thinking of how God knows the correct way and the correct time in which to abase the proud. And we've taken Lucifer as a case study. He'd so far to fall down from. He was 'the anointed cherub that covered', and whatever that signifies it surely is intended to convey the importance of the high office that once belonged to this greatest of all the angelic beings, created by God. We've just explored how the prophet Ezekiel draws our attention to the king of Tyre (ch.28). But behind the description of this earthly king, we saw, we're given a much more sinister outline of a darker figure - beyond the character of the mere earthly king - like a back projection onto the wall behind him.

The picture painted by Ezekiel switches from earth to heaven. There we find a garden and an awesome being described. He's not only beautiful, but becomes ambitious. It's this that becomes his downfall. Over-weening pride and vaulting ambition bring him crashing out from the inner circle of angelic orders (Luke 10:17) to a more distant orbit, as it were. Satan still had real influence, however. An early witness to this is found in the story of Job:

*"Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. The LORD said to Satan, "From where do you come?" Then Satan answered the LORD and said,*

*"From roaming about on the earth and walking around on it." The LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil" (Job 1:6-8).*

Consistent with that insight into the celestial counsels of angelic watchers, the Bible would indicate that the present world was placed under the control of angelic beings. We may conclude this from Hebrews 2:5, which says *"For He did not subject to angels the world to come, concerning which we are speaking."* The clear implication there is that the present world was subjected to angels. Even after the fall of Satan from the powerful position given to him by God originally, it would seem this state of affairs continued. The Apostle John tells us in 1 John 5:19 that, "We know that ... the whole world lies in the power of the evil one." Satan wasn't bluffing when he tempted Jesus with the gift of all earthly kingdoms and their glory (Luke 4). Not having the flawless nature our Lord has, this state of affairs is no longer a good one for us. It means we're living in a system that's anti-God. This is, in fact, what the Apostle Paul indicated when writing to the Ephesians in the first two verses of the second chapter:

*"And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience."*

The moral atmosphere that we're exposed to all around us is not a healthy one. Satan is powerful and very successful in corrupt-

ing the minds of men and women. There was a time when he surely filled the heart of the King of Babylon (Isaiah 14) to move against Jerusalem, the seat of God's residency on earth. This is what we have described in the book of the prophet Isaiah, chapter 14:

*"... take up this taunt against the king of Babylon, and say, 'How the oppressor has ceased, And how fury has ceased! The LORD has broken the staff of the wicked, The scepter of rulers which used to strike the peoples in fury with unceasing strokes, Which subdued the nations in anger with unrestrained persecution. The whole earth is at rest and is quiet; They break forth into shouts of joy. Even the cypress trees rejoice over you, and the cedars of Lebanon, saying, 'Since you were laid low, no tree cutter comes up against us.' Sheol from beneath is excited over you to meet you when you come; it arouses for you the spirits of the dead, all the leaders of the earth; it raises all the kings of the nations from their thrones. They will all respond and say to you, 'Even you have been made weak as we, you have become like us. Your pomp and the music of your harps have been brought down to Sheol; maggots are spread out as your bed beneath you and worms are your covering.'*

*"How you have fallen from heaven, O star of the morning, son of the dawn! You have been cut down to the earth, you who have weakened the nations! But you said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, And I will sit on the*

*mount of assembly in the recesses of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.' Nevertheless you will be thrust down to Sheol, to the recesses of the pit. Those who see you will gaze at you, they will ponder over you, saying, 'Is this the man who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms, who made the world like a wilderness and overthrew its cities, who did not allow his prisoners to go home?' All the kings of the nations lie in glory, each in his own tomb. But you have been cast out of your tomb like a rejected branch, clothed with the slain who are pierced with a sword, who go down to the stones of the pit like a trampled corpse" (Isaiah 14:4-19).*

At first glance, this seems very similar to how the prophet Ezekiel, whom we studied before, had used an earthly king as the basis or reference point for giving to us a portrayal of Satan. But this is different. The language of this description is altogether more down to earth. The body of the person being described rots in the ground with the maggots and worms, while his soul descends to the underworld. When Ezekiel took up his story of the king of Tyre, he latches onto the pride, the splendour, the greed and the ambition of that earthly king to project our thoughts into a heavenly realm that's quite graphically described in order to trace a parallel with the similar characteristics of an angelic being whom we now commonly refer to as Satan (or the Devil).

But in this text, from Isaiah chapter 14, the same flawed ambition and boastfulness features, but it's all surrounded with the language of death and earthly destruction alongside that of others. This means it doesn't fit as a backstory in the same way as

Ezekiel's treatment of Satan does. Isaiah's approach seems to be more one of seeing Satan's influence as he uses the king of Babylon as his vehicle. Satan was playing the king of Babylon in the way we might play a pawn in a game of chess.

I think we may confidently state what Satan's objective was in all this. He'd failed to access the far north or what are described as the sides or 'the recesses of the north' (Isaiah 14:13) in the heavenly Zion above; and so he now turns to move against 'the sides of the north' belonging to earthly Zion (see Psalm 48:2). At this stage of history, Babylon was a vassal state to the king of the Assyrian Empire who actually took the title 'king of Babylon.' What we find in Isaiah's writing is that 'the Assyrian' or 'the king of Babylon' is a man who is Satanically-inspired in his opposition to God's purposes involving his chosen people on earth.

Satan had been hopelessly unsuccessful in his heavenly ambition to stage a takeover for heaven's throne, the place of God's residence above. He contents himself afterwards by trying to make a pitch for the capture and destruction of the place of God's residence on earth. We should make it clear that God's purposes on earth reflect the way things are in heaven. This can be seen very clearly in the way the Old Testament in particular uses the name 'Zion.' It has a double meaning. At times, especially in the Psalms, it carries the sense of being a citadel in heaven in which God's throne is central. This idea comes through clearly in the New Testament passage found in Hebrews chapter 12 starting at verse 22, if you care to look it up.

But when king David captured the city of the Jebusites, and made Jerusalem his capital, God made it clear that he'd chosen

this location, referred to as Zion on earth. God had made this to be the one place on earth where his presence was to be known in a very special sense. Solomon's temple had to be built here at the city of Jerusalem, on the earthly mount Zion. Satan, as we said, had been hopelessly unable to ascend to the heights of God's throne in Zion above, so he now set his sights on disrupting God's enjoyment of his plans on earth, reflecting what was in heaven. In this scheme he enjoyed much more success. God's earthly city was vulnerable through the weakness of humanity, ever prone to rebelling against God as a result of their morally fallen human nature from the Garden of Eden onwards.

And what of today? Does he not move the world against the spiritual representation of Zion above, even that which is found in New Testament churches of God?

**Questions to discuss:**

1. Does Satan still have access to heaven and God's presence? Justify your answer from Scripture.
2. What differences between Ezekiel's lament (in chapter 28) and Isaiah's taunt (in chapter 14) suggest they are using different ways to give us an insight into the working of Satan?
3. Why would Satan want to turn the Assyrian king to hostility towards Jerusalem?
4. Look at Psalms 48, 84 & 87. What are the primary and secondary meanings of 'Zion'?

## CHAPTER EIGHT: COMING RIGHT DOWN TO EARTH

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**O**ur previous studies have focused on God's judgement on Satan. Sometimes we hear about the rise and fall of some person or even of an empire; but taking Satan as our subject means what we're dealing with is a case of the fall and fall. His trajectory is ever downward, as recorded by the Bible.

To date, we've seen Satan expelled from the inner circle of angelic orders (Ezekiel 28; Luke 10:17). Don't take this analogy as being too accurate, but perhaps at that initial stage, we could roughly think of Satan being put out of the boardroom and sent down to the shop floor. It's important to register the point that when Satan sinned, he wasn't immediately denied all heavenly access (see Revelation 12; Job 1). He was certainly around for the discussions about Job, and even to this day he accuses Christians before God (Revelation 12:10).

This has been the state of affairs throughout all the human history that's recorded in the Bible. Satan was clearly already a fallen being while Adam and Eve were still in the Garden during the period of their innocence. So he'd access to the Garden and in that place permission was given to him to do the greatest mischief in bringing down the entire human race. It was this that made the arrival of a saviour imperative.

And that was indeed God's plan, and he used the children of Israel to bring it about, with the saviour of all humankind – should

they receive him – being himself born a Jew. That, of course, was sufficient to attract great wrath from Satan to be vented against this people from whom the saviour came. By the Spirit of God, the Apostle John, in Revelation chapter 12, takes up the narrative. Let's hear it now, and then pause to work our way through its symbolism. John says:

*“A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; and she was with child; and she cried out, being in labor and in pain to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: and behold, a great red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads were seven diadems. And his tail swept away a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she gave birth he might devour her child. And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron; and her child was caught up to God and to His throne. Then the woman fled into the wilderness where she had a place prepared by God, so that there she would be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days” (Revelation 12:1-6).*

Let's pause there in our reading, and check our understanding thus far. The woman pictured in John's vision is not Mary in particular, but represents the whole Israelite nation: the crown of twelve stars suggests the twelve sons of Jacob (aka Israel). The great red dragon is a depiction of Satan, the stars indicating his

following of fallen angels, evidently siding with him in his rebellion.

Now the male child born who is to rule the nations can be none other than our Lord Jesus Christ. Satan used Herod the Great's murderous intent to attempt in vain to eliminate the Saviour at the time of his birth or shortly after. Herod was perhaps only thinking in terms of getting rid of someone who might have a rival claim to be king of the Jews, but Satan was behind his actions, directing them in a hopeless attempt to prevent our salvation. Let's read further in Revelation chapter 12 to discover he's behind much, if not all, anti-Semitism.

*"And there was war in heaven, Michael and his angels waging war with the dragon. The dragon and his angels waged war, and they were not strong enough, and there was no longer a place found for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, he who accuses them before our God day and night.*

*"And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death. For this reason, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in*

*them. Woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, knowing that he has only a short time."*

*And when the dragon saw that he was thrown down to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male child. But the two wings of the great eagle were given to the woman, so that she could fly into the wilderness to her place, where she was nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent. And the serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, so that he might cause her to be swept away with the flood. But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and drank up the river which the dragon poured out of his mouth. So the dragon was enraged with the woman, and went off to make war with the rest of her children, who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (Revelation 12:7-17).*

That last verse we read is the one showing Satan being behind all anti-Semitism. Satan will be, and already is, enraged at the Jewish people. This helps explain media bias against Israel, and even the terrible holocaust itself. But, earlier in this series of studies, we learnt that God knows how to abase the proud. Equally, he knows how to deliver the godly when they are tempted or endangered. He is described here as rescuing the nation of Israel in a coming future day when Israel will have become subject to the full force of Satan's fury. Many of them will find a hiding place for three and a half years. This is the time of the great tribulation

period coming upon the earth. This is the time our Lord spoke about in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 24.

When Satan is - at this still future time point - expelled from all heavenly access, heaven may sigh with relief. Perhaps, the sentiment could be summed up as good riddance. But the earth has to live with the consequences of the arrival of this malign being, likened to a venomous snake. The Apostle John expressly tells us he was 'thrown down' - to his great fury.

Well, that's in the future, but it's bad enough in the present, isn't it, with Satan accusing us 24/7 before God? But as we'll see, Satan has got some way to go yet on his downward path under God's judgement.

**Questions to discuss:**

1. As remarkable as Israel's continuance as a nation is, the hostility that is generated against is equally so (and has always been the case). What is the deepest reason for this?
2. Why should this still be so in an age when the general attitude advanced is that we should be tolerant of differences?
3. Comment on the suitability of the symbolism used to characterize Satan in John's vision.
4. In Revelation 12:12 reference is made to Satan's knowledge of the future. How much does he know? When did he become aware that his fate was sealed?

## CHAPTER NINE: THE ENDLESS END

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Our study has been tracing the various stages of God's dealing with Satan. We've seen how God is bringing about Satan's downfall in definite stages. So far, in our exploration of this topic, we've reviewed how Satan lost his original role. He'd been created to be the anointed cherub that covered: a highly honoured position of favoured responsibility close to God in his service. But an all-consuming pride, arising from within him, left Satan wanting even more. 'Unrighteousness was found in him,' the prophet Ezekiel tells us, and this powerful being began to entertain ideas above his station. Despite enjoying the highest office in the angelic realm, he was envious of God's status, and desired to exalt his throne higher than God's. Being conscious of his beauty led him to corrupt himself, and so led to his downfall. But his downfall, as we've been charting in Scripture, was not a freefall. It took place in definite stages.

In God's sovereign overruling, and to effect his purposes throughout creation, with human redemption ultimately in view, God planned a staged downfall for Satan. This makes the point very clearly that although Satan is certainly powerful, it's only within the limits that God imposes on him. To begin with – and until now – Satan lost his once favoured position of nearness to God, but has not been denied all access. In the Bible story of Job, we read of how Satan was still at that time included in angelic counsels: at which Job's life on earth was a topic of dis-

cussion in the realms above. This would seem to remain the case throughout this entire Age of grace. For, we read that he criticizes the followers of Jesus Christ before God's presence (Revelation 12).

But the time is coming when all Christians will be taken away from this world. This happens at the return of Christ. Shortly after that, Satan will be thrown out of heaven itself. As a result of this expulsion, this world becomes even more troubled. For Satan goes down to earth in a rage, and stirs up furious anti-Semitism. At the same time God's judgements rock the planet. All this is set out in the last book of the Bible, Revelation, chapters 6 through 18.

After the famous campaign widely known as the battle of Armageddon, Satan is further removed from the earth also (Revelation 20:1-3). In other words, it's as if his downward journey continues. Let's check that out now from:

*Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he would not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were completed; after these things he must be released for a short time" (Revelation 20:1-3).*

There's mention there of a thousand years. That's when in the future Jesus Christ will take his power and rule over the remaining

nations of this earth after they've been judged upon his return to earth. Those who have died in a right standing with God will be raised for this thousand-year reign, but it's not yet the time of the final judgement for all people. In the so-called 'Lord's Prayer,' we find the words: 'Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' This time we're describing will be the time when these words apply. There will be peace on earth in those days. Not only will Christ's presence be known, but Satan's absence will make an appreciable difference. The deceiver of the nations will be kept out of the way for the thousand years.

But this good state of affairs will come to an end, for this is not yet the final and perfect shape of things to come. At the end of the thousand years, God permits Satan to be released from his prison in the bottomless pit. He's then allowed to show his final, contemptuous disregard for God's goodness. He leads a final revolt against the rule of Christ. Only when this is swept aside is Satan banished to his ultimate destiny in the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:10). The Lord Jesus Christ, while here on earth, described the Lake of Fire as having been prepared for Satan and his angels. But Satan is deceptive, and it's his fiendish purpose to take with him as many from the human race as he can.

I think we should read more of Revelation chapter 20 as the authority for what we're saying:

*"Then I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not re-*

*ceived the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection.*

*Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years. When the thousand years are completed, Satan will be released from his prison, and will come out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together for the war; the number of them is like the sand of the seashore.*

*And they came up on the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, and fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the Lake of Fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Revelation 20:4-10).*

How solemn to think of such things! Here we have the final, eternal end of Satan's fall. His fate will be shared with those angels who fell into rebellion with him. Two humans are mentioned: namely, the beast or antichrist and his close ally, the false prophet, a corrupt religious leader yet to emerge on earth. Sadly, they will not be the only humans sharing that tragic and enduring doom in the place of endless loss. Right now, Satan is active-

ly 'blinding the minds of the unbelieving' (2 Corinthians 4:4) to prevent them from understanding God's offer of pardon.

I'm reminded of the story of a man by the name of Wilson. This drama unfolded in the United States back in the time of the Presidency of Andrew Jackson, around the year 1829, if I'm not mistaken. Wilson, along with others, had raided a US mail train. The operation hadn't gone to plan, and an official on the mail train had been killed. The gang were caught and brought to justice. Wilson was sentenced to death for his part. However, it turned out that he'd influential friends, and they appealed to the President. He signed a pardon for Wilson. The twist on the story is that Wilson, for whatever reason, refused to accept it. The day came for the execution to take place. The sheriff didn't know what he was supposed to do. The man had been pardoned but refused to accept it. The supreme court was asked for counsel. The judge declared that a pardon, even if signed by the President, was only a piece of paper if it was rejected by the intended recipient. In the end, Wilson was indeed executed. His death would appear to have been avoidable, but he stubbornly refused to take the pardon that was on offer.

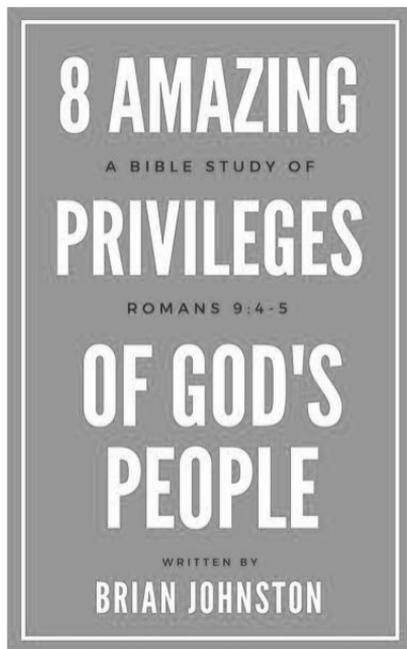
The Bible prophet Isaiah wrote about God's willingness to pardon us abundantly. But over against that, Satan blinds our minds and makes us unwilling to receive God's gracious pardon. How will your life story end?

**Questions to discuss:**

1. Read Luke 22:31, Satan's demand to sift Peter. What comfort can we find in reading through Romans chapter 8?
2. Why, do you think, God allows Satan temporary freedom at the end of the thousand years?
3. What can we learn from the fact that humans still want to rebel during Christ's perfect reign, even when Satan is out of the way and not deceiving them?
4. What motivates Satan to blind the minds of the unbelieving such that they come to share his fate?



Did you love *Great Spiritual Movements*? Then you should read  
*8 Amazing Privileges of God's People: A Bible Study of Romans  
9:4-5* by Brian Johnston!



The apostle Paul says in Romans 9:4-5: "who are Israelites, to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises; of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God, Amen."

Perhaps you hadn't noticed this little gem tucked away in the middle of the letter, but it is a tremendous description of what it meant to be among God's people in the past. We are not so much interested in a history lesson, of course, but in seeing to what ex-

tent each of these eight great can find its answer today in our service for God.

## Also by Brian Johnston

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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 (visit [www.searchfortruth.podbean.com](http://www.searchfortruth.podbean.com)) 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.



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