

# **THE FIVE LOVES OF GOD**

## **AND BONUS BOOK:**

### **THE TRIUMPH OF CHRIST CRUCIFIED**

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# CHAPTER ONE: GOD'S LOVE WITHIN THE GODHEAD

It has been pointed out that there are five ways in which the Bible talks about God's love. In this book we hope to explore each of them in turn. Perhaps it's worth beginning by saying what we'll not be talking about. We won't be saying that God's love has nothing at all in common with ours. If the Bible encourages us to love one another even as God loves us – and it does (1 John 4:11) – then does that not require there to be some overlap at least between the nature of our love and that of God? There is, of course, a certain kind of divine love which is very different from human love. And this has usually been referred to as 'agapé love' after one of the Greek Bible words for love. But that's an over-simplification – one which forgets the golden rule which tells us we must understand the meaning of any Bible word by its context. In Matthew's Gospel, sinners are said to love other sinners, and it's this agapé word that's used (Matthew 5:46); and on at least one occasion in the Bible when that same word is used for love, the context includes the rape of the young woman concerned – hardly a selfless act (2 Samuel 13:1 LXX).

So there's nothing about this word that guarantees it's automatically always going to be referring to a very different divine kind of loving. Rather, its introduction into the Greek Bible was the result of understandable factors which have to do with the changing use of words in general circulation – just as still happens today. Yet, at a later time in history, the introduction of this particular word was seemingly re-interpreted by people whose

view was that God's love was almost exclusively to do with the will – and not about the emotions. But, over against that, there are Bible passages that unmistakably present God's love to us in terms that loving human parents can easily relate to whenever they are called upon to discipline their children (Hosea 11:8). In other words, God is most certainly not without feelings, although they are not flawed as ours so often are.

No, the old clichés won't do. The Bible uses different original language words for 'love' quite interchangeably when talking about how God loves us – and even of God the Father's love for his Son. So, let's follow a rather different approach in our study of God as a God of love: one that acknowledges five different contexts in which it's meaningful to talk about God's love.

The first is the love of God within the Godhead itself. The Bible statement that 'God is love' (1 John 4:8) conveys to us that God exists within a relationship in which love is expressed between distinct persons: those being the Father, Son and Spirit, who together comprise the Godhead. John's Gospel has things to tell us about the love of the Father for the Son; as well as telling us something about the love of the Son for the Father. What's more, we learn that the way in which the Father expresses his love for the Son is different from the way in which the Son expresses his love for the Father. We tend to see the cross, and our salvation, purely in terms of God's love for us. But John's Gospel presents the cross to us in the more sublime context of the Father's love for the Son, and the Son's reciprocal love for the Father.

It humbles us to the point of worship when we come to see how this mutual love within the Godhead lies at the very heart of

everything in Christianity. And there's something more, something very practical, as we're shown how these two different ways of expressing love (the Father's for the Son; and the Son's for the Father) are applied respectively to how the Lord shows his love to us, and how we're to show our love to him. In other words, the love within the Trinity – specifically between Father and Son – while not presented as a model for all relationships, does have a direct relevance for love as expressed between Christ and his followers.

Twice in his Gospel, John tells us about the Father's love for the Son. Let's briefly examine the second mention which we find in chapter five:

“For this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because He was doing these things on the Sabbath. But He answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working. For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God. Therefore Jesus answered and was saying to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing.” (John 5:16-20)

The background to all this is that on this Sabbath day in question, Jesus had healed a man and then told him to pick up his

bed and walk. What had further provoked the hostility of these Jews was the fact that Jesus had then defended his working on the Sabbath by saying: “My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.” In other words, Jesus was acknowledging God the Father’s providential working on the Sabbath; but was also associating his own Sabbath day working along with it, even as he called God his Father!

There’s probably a cultural understanding of father-son relationships assumed in this section which we need to surface at this point. Sons in those days and in that kind of society were trained to follow in the father’s business, and to learn their trade from their father. The cultural expectation was that the activity of any son would be the same activity as his father. This type of thinking lay behind a person being called a ‘son of encouragement’ (Acts 4:36). In other words, encouragement being so typical of his activity leads us to suggest that his father must be someone extremely encouraging – in fact could well be encouragement personified!

And so, from him, the son also learned to be encouraging. In a similar way, a peacemaker might be called a son of God (Matthew 5) simply because it was well-known that God was a God of peace and was in the business of making peace. However, it’s one thing to claim such a relationship with regard to a transferable attribute like being peaceable; but to base a claim to relationship with God – not on any shared attribute – but on divine providential working was in a different league – and these Jews realized that!

Jesus, however, didn't leave it there, but went on to expand on this claim by explaining something quite wonderful. Let's again try to understand it based on what happened in their culture. For example, any father who had a fishing business would show his son how to handle the fishing boat; where to look for the fish; how to interpret the weather; the way to mend fishing nets and so on. Now, remember Jesus' words? He said:

*"... the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing."* (John 5:19-20)

This first of all clarifies that Jesus, the Son, is in subjection to his Father. He doesn't do his own thing, but is subordinate. But in case that should raise the wrong thought in any of our minds that Jesus, the Son, is inferior to the Father, Jesus adds that he does **whatever** the Father does. Did you register the full significance of that? The extent of his working is as great as the extent of the Father's working. They are equal. And then, most wonderfully, and for the second time in this Gospel (see John 3:35), Jesus tells us that the Father loves the Son, and that's why the Father shows the Son all that he himself does. Recall that in village life at that time, a loving father would show his son how to do things just as he did them. That's why this explanation meant more than than it does now perhaps in many areas of the world.

The Son's love for the Father, however, is expressed in a different way as the Lord's words reveal: "*... so that the world may know that I love the Father, I do exactly as the Father commanded Me*"

(John 14:31). The Father expresses his love for the Son by showing him all that he himself is doing; and the Son expresses his love for the Father by obeying all his Father's commands. This is significant because nowhere is the Son said to commission the Father, nor do we ever read of the Father obeying the Son. And John's Gospel goes even further, and teaches us that this 'two-way street' (the Father's love for the Son and the Son's love for the Father) is a model that has special relevance for the Lord's relationship with us and our relationship with him. He says, "*You are My friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.*" (John 15:14-15)

As the Father lovingly shows the Son what he himself is doing, even so the Lord lovingly makes things known to us. And as the Son obeys the Father, even so we express our love for the Lord by obeying our Lord's commands (John 14:15). As Jesus said: "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." (John 14:15) What greater motivation could there be for our obedience to the things we've learnt than the incentive of modelling the relationship of God the Father and God the Son!

(The author wishes to acknowledge that the opening section of this book has been influenced by D.A. Carson's book, 'The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God,' published by IVP, in 2000.)

## CHAPTER TWO: GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL LOVING CARE FOR ALL CREATION

We've already thought of how there are unhelpful ways of thinking about God's love. They are unhelpful because they are generated by our own flawed human ideas about love. They are also a serious obstacle to evangelism. Back in the 60s popular singers began to sing, 'What the world needs now is love, sweet love, It's the only thing that there's just too little of ...' (Hal David)

It seems that since then we've continued to take an increasingly sentimentalised view of God's love. God's love is not 'love, sweet love'. God doesn't fall hopelessly in love with sinners. But even in Christian circles, God's love gets purged of anything we might find disturbing, until all that seems to be left is 'love, sweet love.' That's a totally mistaken idea of the love of God. I remember once after I had preached on the cross of Christ and shared the Good News of how we can have our sins forgiven, someone commented there was little or nothing about God's love in the message. I had explained how our sin merited only God's judgement and how God's intervention through the sacrifice of his Son at the cross to die for us has provided us with the offer of eternal life. I would venture to say that if a message like that is not thought to be about the love of God, then we've got a very skewed and distorted idea of what God's love really is. But I had tried to show how God's love and judgement operate together, and that's not 'love, sweet love.'

But neither should we fall into the trap of thinking about God's love as doing good for others out of sheer willpower and with zero passion. In the great hymn of love in First Corinthians chapter 13, the apostle Paul says that we can be so determined to help others that we're at the point of giving away all our possessions and even sacrificing our own life, and yet there may be nothing of true love in our motivation (1 Corinthians 13:3). As for God's love of sinners, God says some pretty amazing things through the Old Testament prophet Hosea:

*"So My people are bent on turning from Me. Though they call them to the One on high, none at all exalts Him. How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I surrender you, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart is turned over within Me, All My compassions are kindled"* (Hosea 11:7-8).

After that, we dare not strip God of passion and emotion! In love, he refused to utterly destroy his ancient people. As we've just seen from Hosea, God has emotions, but they are controlled in a way ours so often are not. With us, our heart can easily rule our head. God's emotions, however, are in perfect harmony with his power, holiness and justice. To those who have embraced the Christian faith, the apostle Paul writes:

*"In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved"* (Ephesians 1:5-6).

This is majestic, sovereign love with nothing of whimsy about it. God's love is not some fleeting feeling. It does not depend on – or react to – the circumstances of the moment.

*“Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.”* (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).

Perhaps you've heard it said that: 'God loves everybody just the same.' This is another potentially mistaken idea about the love of God. It's true when we're talking about one category of God's love: namely when the context is his providential love or care for all his creatures. But if we apply this to other categories of God's love, we're going to end up in serious error. Sadly, this is precisely what some do who say that, because God loves everybody the same, then everybody will be saved. In that way, they end up in the error of universalism which teaches that the idea of a loving God is incompatible with the thought of any human experiencing a lost eternity.

Having thought already of what the Bible has to say about God's love in operation within the Godhead, let's now concentrate on God's providential love for all his creation. Later in our studies, we'll move on to think specifically about God's love towards a fallen world; and then his love for a select chosen number; and furthermore in this we'll see there's both a distinctly conditional as well as an unconditional aspect in that last category

of God's love. Confusing these different contexts for God's love, only manages to confuse the whole picture which the Bible draws of both the nature of God and of his salvation. But in the category of God's providence we do actually find that God loves everybody just the same. Take, for example, this reading from Matthew's Gospel:

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:43-48).*

So God treats, in love, both the righteous and the unrighteous person in the same way in regard to his provision of rain and sunshine, causing both their crops to grow alike. But, for the believer on the Lord Jesus, our Lord continues to say some wonderfully reassuring things:

*“For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor*

*gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? And why are you worried about clothing?*

*Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith! Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' Or 'What will we drink?' Or 'What will we wear for clothing?' For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." (Matthew 6:25-34)*

It's great just to savour this insight which the Lord gives us of how the eye of God appreciates the splendour of his creation, even down to enjoying the grass of the field clothed with glorious lilies. Equally remarkable is the detail which the Lord picks out for us. The transcendent God sees, and we would surely have to say, his will sanctions every sparrow that falls, whether in death or in simply swooping down to the earth.

What is the main teaching for us from the Bible's revelation of this dimension of God's love? Is it not that we can rest in a love like this? We're encouraged to rely on God's unfailing provision

for us, just as the birds of the air instinctively do. Such reliance on God breeds a very proper and godly contentment. And contentment like this is liberating. It frees us from the distraction of worrying about everyday necessities so that we can concentrate on advancing God's kingdom on earth. This is quite something, is it not? We're invited to abandon all worry over details, and over daily necessities, by grasping the promise that none other than the God of Creation will attend to our personal needs, if we truly focus on advancing God's agenda in the bigger picture of his purposes for ourselves and others.

## CHAPTER THREE: GOD'S LOVE FOR THE WHOLE WORLD

'*God is love*' is a true statement, and we know that for sure because it comes from the Bible. But there's also a common saying – which is not a biblical quote: 'God hates sin; but he loves the sinner.' Is that true? Well, there's some truth in it, but taken at face value, it can also be misleading. God's hatred against sin never changes, but his love for the sinner does need some qualification. For starters, there are sinners mentioned in John 3:36 about whom John's Gospel says, '*the wrath of God remains on them.*' And the Apostle Paul in Romans 11:22 invites us to consider God's goodness to some sinners and his severity to yet other sinners. There's a variation in God's love for sinners that's not reflected in his hatred of sin. That's my point.

In this chapter, I want to think about God's stance towards this fallen world. Up until now, we've covered the topic of God's love for his Son; and then his providential love for all of creation as he still actively maintains it. But the Bible makes two further affirmations. In John 3 verse 16 we're famously told that God loves the world. And then, Ephesians 5 says something slightly different; it's there that the Bible explains Christ's love for the Church. Now, obviously, the world and the Church are not the same. And that means two different things are being said here.

That's why we're into this discussion on the 5 dimensions or contexts of God's love. Statements that are capable of being criticised are made whenever a Bible verse expressing truth in one category of God's love is misapplied to another category of God's love.

We're back to the well-known issue of needing to understand a Bible verse in the context in which we find it. One of the most famous verses in the Bible, at least among evangelicals, is ... *"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."* (John 3:16) When we focus on God so loving the world that he gave his one and only Son, it may be possible to read this as saying the same as we find in the Apostle Paul's first letter to Timothy: *This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time.* (1 Timothy 2:3-6). Notice, Christ gave himself a ransom for all. God's desire is for all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4). This is the same truth expressed in the Old Testament through Isaiah the prophet: *"Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; For I am God, and there is no other."* (Isaiah 45:22)

But, in this Church age, for example – which is of most relevance to us because we're

living in it – it's the 'all' who belong to the Church (the one mentioned in Ephesians 5) who will actually be saved, and not all who are in the world. By the way, I should confirm that we're referring to the Church Christ spoke of when he said, "I will build My Church" in Matthew chapter 16. It's this same Church which the Bible discusses in the New Testament letter to the Ephesians, particularly at the end of chapter 1 and again in chapter 5. This is not to be confused with any so-called denomina-

tion; this Church consists of all truly born again believers from the time of Acts chapter 2 until the time of Christ's return in 1 Thessalonians 4.

Coming back to the distinction we were making between God's love for the world and God's love for the Church, we seem to be contrasting two different boundaries or limits of God's love: extending in the one context to all in the world who receive the offer of salvation, but in another context God's love extends only to the Church, that is, all in this present age of grace who experience the reality of salvation through receiving Jesus Christ in personal faith.

For some, that will raise the question: 'For whom, then, did Christ die?' To answer that, would we not have to say there's a true biblical sense in which he died for all? Now, the Apostle John writes: "*And if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and he is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for the whole world*" (1 John 2:2 RV). There, the Apostle John speaks of how Jesus Christ died for the sins of all believers. Then he adds: "but also for the whole world." If this is understood to be talking about the extent of the atonement, must it not simply be conveying the truth that some from the Gentile population as well as from the Jews are included. In this latter view, it begins to blend with the real biblical sense in which Christ died particularly for 'his people', 'his own', or 'his sheep' – as the first part of the verse shows. As we'll explore more fully in the next chapter, there is this different sense, which is just as clearly stated in the Bible, in which Christ died only for all who believe on him (Romans 8:32).

In other words, we're saying that God loves, and Christ died for, the whole world in a real sense, but in a different sense, God loves, and Christ died for, believers on the Lord Jesus. It's not so much the extent of God's love – or even the extent of Christ sacrifice – that distinguishes these two cases; it's more the intent behind each case that differs. God's love for the world in providing Christ, and the availability of the offer of salvation through his cross to 'whoever' in the world, may differ in its intent from the love which God in Christ has shown to the Church, but it's still real love. The Apostle Paul writes in the

first couple of chapters of Romans to those who were in the world, but who did not belong to Christ's Church – that is, those who were not Christians ...

*“Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things. But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God” (Romans 2:1-5).*

They might wilfully forget and willingly suppress the truth and by doing so lightly regard God's kindness, tolerance and patience. But what they are regarding so lightly is God's genuine love for this world, and specifically towards them. God's stance towards a fallen world is a truly loving one – one that invites and entreats – and does so in kindness and faithfulness, even to the point of superintending the sending out of missionaries and apologists to a world that largely rejects him and makes nothing of his love.

God is grieved by the sin of the Christ-rejecter, and finds no pleasure in the death of the

wicked (Ezekiel 33:11). In fact, there's an emotional intensity about God's judgements and wrath in the New Testament as well as in the Old Testament. God was grieved in his heart at the wickedness of the world before the great flood in Noah's day (Genesis 6:6). Turning to the New Testament, take, for example, how the Gospels record Jesus lamenting and mourning over the city of Jerusalem:

*“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling.”* (Matthew 23:37)

Can we read such verses, and doubt the reality of God's love for a fallen world (even if it does not result in the salvation of all)?

## CHAPTER FOUR: GOD'S LOVE FOR HIS CHILDREN

'God is love' is a true statement, one which is found in the Bible, but we also often hear it said that 'God loves everybody just the same.' Now, that's not found in the Bible nor is it true – except perhaps in the sense of God's providential love. We've seen how: "[God] causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). True, the word 'love' is not used there, but from that verse it can be seen that God treats all his moral creation equally in terms of his caring provision of sun and rain in order to make their crops grow. Surely we'd say, on that basis, God treats everyone in the same loving way.

But that's not the whole story. And we'll see that there are very strong biblical reasons why we can't make any absolute claim that 'God loves everybody the same' – certainly not one which would imply salvation for all (see Matthew 25:41). It's true, as we learned from the previous chapter, that God loves the world, with a love that encompasses all of humanity (John 3:16).

And yet, from other equally clear Bible verses, we definitely get the clear sense that God loves some more than others. For example, take this short reading from the Old Testament. It's from the book of Deuteronomy and concerns God's selection of the people of Israel to be his special people in Old Testament times. It addresses the issue of why did God choose them and not some other people. Moses says to the Israelites:

*“For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the LORD brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”*  
(Deuteronomy 7:6-8)

It seems from that, that there was no distinguishing feature in the object of God’s love. Love like that is unusual, to say the least, by human standards. Sometimes, it’s hard for us to think beyond the ‘boy meets girl’ kind of romantic love. Isn’t it always true that something about the other person impresses us? Even if our attraction is not based on anything as shallow as is usually portrayed by Hollywood. Love that’ll last will surely have to be based on more than the sparkle in the others’ eyes, for that will likely fade with time. But even if our love is based on the appealing personality or even the character of the other person, that still becomes the feature which, in our eyes at least, distinguishes them from all others.

But our text from Deuteronomy states that God wasn’t impressed by any of Israel’s credentials. We’re told that God set his affection on them for no other reason than he loved them. This divine love for his people was an uncaused love, at least as far as it not being caused or brought about in any way by the object loved, namely Israel. Indeed, since God knows the beginning of

a thing from its end, he already knew all about the treachery this people would be guilty of committing against him. But not even that could deter him from loving them.

In fact, God goes out of his way in the Bible to show us that his love, in this sense, is not performance-related. The Apostle Paul pinpoints this key principle in operation at the time of the birth of Jacob who would come to be re-named as Israel, and from whose 12 sons the 12 tribes of that nation were to descend. Paul, writing by the Spirit of God, had this to say:

*“And not only this, but there was 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.” Just as it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated” (Romans 9:10-13).*

With this, the last book of the Old Testament is in agreement: *“The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi:*

*“I have loved you,” says the LORD. But you say, “How have You loved us?” “Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?” declares the LORD. “Yet I have loved Jacob; but I have hated Esau, and I have made his mountains a desolation and appointed his inheritance for the jackals of the wilderness” (Malachi 1:1-3).*

Who would have thought the subject of God's love could be so difficult? We might have suggested God's knowledge or even his justice or wrath as being the really difficult subjects. But, because God's love must be consistent with all of God's attributes, it shares in their difficulties too. God's love is a challenging subject. It's made so clear that God's preferential love for Jacob, the younger son borne by Rebekah, was not based on him being a more likeable boy. The cause of God's love did not lie in Jacob. In fact, the narrative as it follows Jacob into manhood, reveals major character flaws in this object of God's love. Despite that, God says: 'Jacob I loved.' Once again the consistent message is that there's no distinguishing feature in the thing loved. God simply sets his affection on chosen ones in a way he doesn't on others. Jacob was chosen, Esau wasn't.

Now I want us to come to Paul's letter to the Ephesians where the Apostle Paul begins by saying:

*"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved"* (Ephesians 1:3-6).

And then Paul goes on to say, clearly in its context, in the flow of the letter, this is the same ones he's described as being chosen in Christ – he goes on to refer to them as Christ's church, fully

known biblically as the Church which is his Body – and this is what he’s got to say to them, now in chapter 5:

*“Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless”* (Ephesians 5:22-27).

So, God loves, and Christ died, for the world in a real sense, as we’ve previously seen, but in a different sense, God loves, and Christ died, for believers on the Lord Jesus: those who by God’s own choice become his children. It’s not the extent of God’s love or even the extent of Christ’s sacrifice that matters in these two cases of God’s love for the world and Christ’s love for his church, but it’s the intent behind each that differs. God’s *desire* for the salvation of all in the world and his *will* for all his children to be saved have different intents, but they both express his love.

There’s a true biblical sense in which Christ, God’s son, died for all, for absolutely everybody (1 Timothy 2:6). But equally, there’s a real biblical sense in which he died for ‘his people,’ ‘his own,’ ‘his sheep.’ At the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel, we read:

*“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”* (Matthew 1:20-21).

Jesus didn't die with the intent of saving everyone from their sins. That's what I mean when I say there was a sense in which Christ died for the world, and a different sense, also found in the Bible, in which he died for all who believe on him, and it's this second sense that Ephesians chapter 5 deals with. God's chosen children, Christ's Church, are the ones whom he loved and the ones for whom he died - such that he's made them holy through his death, and cleansed them (which is effective when the preaching of God's Word is responded to). If Jesus is your personal saviour, rejoice in his love today!

## CHAPTER FIVE: GOD'S CONDITIONAL LOVE FOR BELIEVERS

I've heard it said, and I'm sure you have too, that's God's love is unconditional. Sometimes in a counselling context, someone assessed as an over-committed 'workaholic' may be told that even if he or she were to lie on the floor of the church building for a month (instead of following their usual frantic schedule), then they should realize that God would love them just as much. It's always worth clarifying biblically that no true believer on the Lord Jesus can ever lose his or her salvation. We have ultimate security in God's love mediated through Christ and his cross. The end of Romans chapter 8 makes that abundantly plain:

*“Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, “For your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*  
(Romans 8:35-39)

However, in this book, we've been covering 5 different dimensions of God's love. Putting that in another way: we've been studying God's love in 5 different contexts. God's love for his Son, God's love for creation, God's love for the world, and God's love for his children have all occupied our attention. We've noted certain distinctive features in each of these categories. For example, in the context of one category God loves everybody the same, but that doesn't apply across the board. Lastly, we want to consider a conditional aspect of God's love. Now, when we were thinking of Christ's love for his Church in the last chapter, we were certainly thinking of unconditional love – a love from which nothing can separate us, no matter how we respond to the trials of life. While we acknowledge that's true, we're moving on now to explore a context where God's love is described as being conditional. Jude says:

*“But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life” (Jude 1:20-21).*

Clearly, this is something we're held responsible for. It's something we must do: we must keep ourselves in God's love. As if to reinforce it, the Lord had earlier said directly to his disciples:

*“Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love” (John 15:9-10).*

In John chapter 15, in the vine-and-branches metaphor, we see how just as a branch grows through its connection with the vine, so we grow because of our connection with Christ. Also, a branch is nothing apart from the vine, and similarly we can do nothing apart from him. A branch draws strength from the vine, and we become strong through him. In this picture or metaphor of John 15, Christ is the Vine and the Father is the vinedresser. He prunes the fruit-bearing branches to make them bear more fruit. He removes the fruitless branches, and they are burned. Through continual pruning, the fruitfulness of the vine is increased. The branches that abide in the vine grow and bear fruit, and the Father lovingly tends them.

Some think that only the branches that remain or abide in the true Vine represent those who are genuinely saved. They say the branches that don't remain are people who pretend to be Christians but have no real connection to Christ. In other words, they say the removed branches were mere professors. But that is to misunderstand this beautiful picture. Many totally genuine believers, sadly, grow cold in their love for the Lord. In his famous parable of the Sower, the Lord spoke of categories of true believers whose hearts he likened to either rocky ground or thorny ground. These represent truly genuine Christians whose lives sadly proved shallow or became overcrowded with other temporal things such that they never brought much fruit to God's glory. However, it's a serious misreading of the Bible to think that someone who has received God's gracious gift of salvation can ever lose it.

Yet others, who do also accept eternal security, conclude that if a person 'falls away' from faithful discipleship, this reveals that

they were never a true Christian at any time. While this is trying to defend the biblical truth of eternal security in Christ, it commits another error. A plain reading of the Bible, for example in Hebrews chapter 6, shows that a true believer can fall away. But we misread our Bible if we say it's a falling away from Christ and salvation - or even necessarily a demonstration that they were never genuinely saved in the first place. It is not.

Rather, God's Word teaches us that we're saved for a purpose. We're saved not so that we can do as we please, but so that we can honour God with our lives by serving his Son as we live according to the Bible's instructions for Christian service. The Lord when he left this world, left behind in his teaching an original mould which he intended to shape all Christian service for all time (Romans 6:17). The Bible tells us that quite clearly in Romans chapter 6 verse 17. There's a mould or form or pattern of teaching that's was given by the Lord through his apostles and this comes down to us on the written pages of our Bible (2 Timothy 1:13). It's God's command and expectation that we obey this prescription for serving him.

But the world around us influences us to consider it outdated or only advisory. The result is that many true Christians fall away from following this pattern of biblical teaching. This, in context, is the falling away the Bible speaks about. It's a falling away from service, and not at all from salvation - which is impossible. In Revelation chapter 2, the Lord's message to the Church of God at Ephesus was that their hearts had grown cold and they'd fallen away from their first love. Such a falling away from love would be reflected in a falling away from keeping the Lord's commands,

because we show our love by our obedience. If our love wanes, our obedience will be the first thing to suffer.

But let's be positive again! How can we avoid such a falling away from loving obedience to the Lord? It's by daily enjoying our contact time with the Lord who directs our service. We maintain our loving obedience by practical communion, delighting to be in his presence through time spent with him in Bible reading, meditation, prayer and praise. And these all belong together, they flow one into another. In our life as a believer, we simply must cultivate an attitude of dependence on Christ. That's the picture of the branch in the vine, as it draws all its resources from the vine. Independence is the way to ineffectiveness. By ourselves, without him, we can do nothing. The Lord who died to save us, and for whose glory we live, desires to spend time with us each day. Isn't that amazing?! He appeals, 'remain in My love.' And he personalises it, by telling us that through obeying all his Father's commands, he kept himself in his Father's love.

How can we begin to understand this? Perhaps we're Christian parents: imagine then the heartache of discovering a son or daughter wasting their lives by drug-abuse. Perhaps before this took place they once had a happy marriage, family and home. We loved every minute of the time we spent with them laughing at the meal-table and enjoying fun activities on summer vacations. But then it all changed somehow – whether by drug use or some extra-marital affair or whatever. Something shattered the picture. Now, there's a real sense in which we still love our son or daughter, but those happy love-filled earlier days are gone. There's a distance now between us that wasn't there before. In a similar way, sin stops us actively remaining in God's love. In

this connection, there are some thrilling verses in John's Gospel which introduce us to a way in which we can experience the Father's love for us which is presented as being conditional (14:21,23; cf.16:27).

In Ephesians chapter 3, as Paul prays for those in the Church of God there, one reason for requesting that they might be spiritually empowered, he says, is so that they might grasp the limitless dimensions of Christ's love. Paul's prayer is asking that they – and we – might grasp the dimensions of Christ's love in our experience. We can't be as emotionally or spiritually mature as we ought to be unless we're supernaturally empowered to grasp the length and breadth and height and depth of Christ's love. We need the Spirit's power to help us grasp it – and so to peel away our self-centredness in order that we might reach maturity, and become fully the person God wants us to be.

May we even now come to live as Christians with a real sense of God settling us down in his love as he exults over us with loud singing (Zephaniah 3:17)!

# **BONUS BOOK: THE TRIUMPH OF CHRIST CRUCIFIED**

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

This short book aims to explore the Bible's use of the imagery of a Roman triumph. The New Testament twice employs the Greek word 'thriambeuo' - meaning 'to lead in a triumphal procession'.

We'd like to view the big picture of the progress of Christianity in strategic terms as a triumphal procession through the world, and across the pages of history. Of course, this view of things contrasts sharply with the marginalisation of Christianity today in much of the western world; and, wherever we live, it may also contrast with our personal struggles as Christians trying to live true to Christ's teaching in a hostile world.

So, we're thinking about a Roman triumph. What was one of those, you may ask? Well, it was the victory parade of a military hero. If his achievement had been significant enough, he was given this great honour when he returned to Rome. The honour consisted of a procession from the banks of the River Tiber into the heart of the city of Rome, into the Forum, to the very Capitoline Hill itself and so to the altar of Jupiter. Along the way the temples stood open and their altars smoked with fragrant incense. At the head of the procession were the captive leaders and soldiers, usually walking in chains. Their captured weapons and treasures were carted along behind them.

Next in line, and all on foot, came Rome's senators and magistrates and civil servants; then the general – the celebrated hero of the hour - in his four-horse chariot. A favoured companion might share the chariot with him, or sometimes his children. His officers and soldiers followed. Somewhere in the procession, two flawless white oxen, garland-decked and with gilded horns, were led for sacrifice to the Roman god, Jupiter. Finally, bringing up the rear of the procession were the lowest of the low – the captive slaves. And all of this, went to the accompaniment of music, clouds of incense and the strewing of flowers.

Without a doubt, this was one of the most extravagant displays of Roman supremacy. The general was celebrated as god-like in his ability to channel divine favour in support of the cause of Roman imperial expansion and in the subordination of all its foes. This was a wonderful piece of ancient street theatre – which, above all, projected the vision of Rome as the greatest show of power on earth.

Such was the profile of this kind of event in those days, it's no surprise to us that the Apostle Paul should develop it as an analogy for the all-conquering Christ: he being the one who would make a spectacle of the apostles; who leads believers in triumph; who's already led captivity captive; and this same analogy of a Roman triumph, when applied to the crucified Christ, even features a public subordinating of angelic authorities. But more on these things later in the book ...

## CHAPTER TWO: CONDEMNED TO DEATH

As we begin, may I ask: how do you view your Christian progress? Perhaps different possible views can be related to this background picture which we've painted. Let's take one of them, to get us going, our first snapshot of a Roman triumph as it might relate to our experience of Christianity. The snapshot we're going to zoom in on comes from a particular moment in the life and work of the Apostle Paul, as he records it in First Corinthians 4. Allow me to set the scene for you – because Paul is writing this Bible letter to the Church of God at Corinth. At the time, he was based across the sea at Ephesus, where there was also a Church of God to be found – that is, a company of Christian disciples carefully following the Apostles' teaching.

The apostle Paul was based at Ephesus for about 3 years during his third missionary journey. Like Antioch before it, Ephesus became his second base in his overall, God-given, life mission – which was to evangelize the Gentile world. Ephesus became the gateway for opening up the Roman Province of Asia. From there he wrote his Bible letters to Corinth. The church at Corinth had been planted during the return leg of Paul's second missionary journey – one on which he'd stopped by Ephesus, but only very briefly. Now on his next missionary journey, Paul returns to Ephesus by taking the high road through Galatia.

The start of his time spent at Ephesus was encouraging enough. Paul soon found a nucleus of 12 disciples for church-planting at Ephesus. These were busy, dramatic times for Paul when the Spir-

it of God was moving mightily in these parts. But the Adversary, who always opposes the purposes of God, was soon to get busy also. Indeed he'd never stopped attacking, and Paul was no stranger to troubles of many kinds, but here at Ephesus matters would come to a head very soon.

It was from here Paul wrestled with a major problem then existing in the Church of God at Corinth – which was directly across the Aegean Sea from Ephesus. Sometimes, with a newly planted church, there's impressive growth and many good things to report, but then the church comes under the influence of strong personalities who blow it off course. Paul learned at Corinth what it was to become weak in Christ. Opponents there challenged Paul's apostolic authority in what was possibly a misguided attempt by some to impose the authority of 'the mother church' at Jerusalem over the (Gentile) Christian world. Let's listen in as Paul tackles the contentious Corinthians head-on, as we might say:

*“Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy. But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives*

*of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God.*

*Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other. For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and indeed, I wish that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you. For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor.*

*To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now. I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children” (1 Corinthians 4:1-14).*

So the snapshot developed for us here in our Bible reading has captured the apostle embroiled in an insider power struggle within the Church of God at Corinth. There were some there who were arrogant, and felt themselves superior even to Paul, and so they challenged his apostolic authority. Clearly, life in a church of God wasn't always easy or pleasurable for Paul. At times he struggled against opposition from within – as well as suffering persecution from external forces. While coping with all this, Paul invokes, for himself and his fellow-apostles, what seems at first rather like defeatist imagery: it's the picture of tail-enders in one of those Roman victory processions described in the Introduction. He identifies himself with the lowest of the low in such a spectacle when he writes that God exhibited the apostles last of all ... as a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. Wow! This is Paul, expressing how he felt, evoking the imagery of captives trudging along in chains.

Have you ever had to remind yourself that your faith has overcome the world at some time when it feels more like you're walking through treacle and things are getting you down? This resonates with Paul's mood as captured here amid the very real struggles of Christian life. If that should also be you right now, then the message here to you is: lift up the heads that hang down and glimpse again the bigger picture – the picture of all the aspects of the triumph of Christianity, of which we as believers are a part!

There are so many facets to this overall victorious picture – the one we're considering in this booklet concerning a Roman triumphal procession. At times, as we'll see in the following chapters, Paul also sees himself as like an incense-bearer; at yet another

er like one of Christ's trophies; there again he sees his co-workers as good soldiers; and even believers as family and friends honoured in the general's chariot. His view of it all embraces good as well as bad angels; and the saved as well as unsaved of humanity – all following God's script as we march through history to our destiny.

Whatever hardships we endure now which are truly for the sake of Christ, will all be compensated for in answering glory in a day to come. The cross with all its shame has become the victor's chariot. For us, to be triumphed over by Christ now is to share his triumph for ever! This realisation, graphically captured for us in biblical triumphal imagery, transforms our struggle with difficulties into veritable shouts of victory! All hail to the triumphant, crucified Christ! Life may, at times, be hard – but we're on the winning side because the war was won for us at the cross. Let's say it again, by being triumphed over by Christ, we find our triumph – that is, our share in his triumph!

## CHAPTER THREE: LED IN TRIUMPH

We now move on to think about how believers are led in triumph in Christ. These words are found in 2 Corinthians 2:

*“Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord, I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia. But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things? For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God” (2 Corinthians 2:12-17).*

In the previous chapter, we briefly considered some of the disappointments faced in a life of service by the Apostle Paul. Those hard times recalled to his mind, under the Spirit’s divine guidance, a scene taken from a Roman general’s victory parade. He spoke of himself as if he were one of the lowest grade captives – those who were effectively chained to the general’s chariot wheels. But there were also ‘highs’ in Paul’s mission work, of course. And what highs they were too! Doors of evangelical opportunity had swung open for him, new vistas of missionary ex-

pansion were opening up elsewhere. Reliving the ground-breaking thrill of leading souls to Christ and planting churches in virgin soil, in the chapter we read from a moment ago – 2 Corinthians 2 – Paul now sees himself as if for a moment among the incense-bearers on one of these triumphal processions.

You'll remember we said these victory parades were always very aromatic experiences: in other words, there was a lot of fragrance in the air coming from the burning of incense in the pagan temples which lined the route of the triumphal procession. For the victorious allies, this was, of course, the sweet smell of success; whereas, in stark contrast, for the captives – vanquished but with unconquered hearts, that same fragrance heralded a very different fate – the smell of the death that awaited them at the journey's end.

The progress of the Gospel always makes for uplifting news – but even more importantly - it's spreading further the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ. When our local brethren on one of the world's great continents first visited a new area with the preaching of the Gospel of Christ, there was great opposition to the preaching of Christ. In that particular place, the national cult had as much grip on the hearts and minds of the residents as had the even more traditional false religion of the worship of ancestral and nature spirits. In one way or another, these were people bound and blinded by the Evil One, and living in deep spiritual darkness. There were threats, and our witnessing brothers were warned it may be best for them to leave.

But God visited, and the whole scene was transformed, as the main ring-leader who'd been fomenting the opposition was him-

self gloriously converted. He experienced a Damascus road-type turn-around. Now he gathers as many as he can, and is passionate for the truth which he so recently and vehemently had set himself against. Recently, they hired a jeep for 30 of their number and travelled all day to observe the Breaking of the Bread at our nearest Church of God location to this distant place. How often those who come from deepest darkness are the most zealous for truth! We've assisted them to build a meeting-shack where some 2 dozen were recently formed as a church of God and so able to break bread biblically.

But there are times when we witness, and follow it up carefully, and yet the response is strongly negative. I can recall just as vividly working in another land and asking people at their doors if they had any personal hope. The response was bleak: a shake of the head, a shrug of the shoulders or a blank expression or a mind blinded by some very unorthodox spiritual views. They all had one thing in common – which was no desire for, or slightest bit of interest in, the Good News which the Bible had to offer. According to Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 2, this also – solemn thought – is an outcome that spreads the fragrance of Christ. God savours our evangelistic efforts even when the results are not positive nor even tangible to us.

Overall, Paul here is saying to us: never give up on gospel preaching or personal witnessing. It's fragrant to God – always – because what we are spreading is the fragrance of Christ regardless of the response we receive.

Our efforts in presenting the true knowledge of this divine Christ to others may seem odious to them, but let's be assured it's fragrant to God!

Overall, in the Bible's use of the analogy of a Roman triumph, we see Christ as the universal conqueror marching in triumph down through the corridors of time and over all of this vanquished world until all creation owns his sway - though for some that acknowledgement will come too late to save them.

## CHAPTER FOUR: LEADING A HOST OF CAPTIVES

In this chapter we would like to pick up on the idea of ‘taking captivity captive’. Now what might the Apostle Paul have had in mind by that? Here’s where read of it, in Ephesians 4:

*“Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift. Therefore it says, “When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, and He gave gifts to men.”*

*(Now this expression, “He ascended,” what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things.) And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowl-*

*edge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.”*  
(Ephesians 4:1-13)

So, there we find the words which tell us that Christ led captivity captive and gave gifts to humanity. Now, I know some have linked this with the emptying of (‘Upper’) Sheol ... but let’s examine the context!

First of all, the captives are closely linked together with the gifts which are also spoken about here. The Apostle Paul was certainly one of God’s gifts to his people. When Christ ascended and led captivity captive – just like a triumphant Roman general – he gave back captives who are here referred to as gifts for the building up of ‘the body of Christ’. Judging by the fact this language in Ephesians 4 is lifted from Psalm 68, it appears that Paul is blending in a second analogy – not from the then contemporary Roman world, but from Israel’s historic Old Testament experience. Let’s check it out...

*“Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered,*

*And let those who hate Him flee before Him...*

*Sing to God, sing praises to His name;*

*Lift up a song for Him who rides through the deserts,*

*Whose name is the LORD, and exult before Him.*

*...He leads out the prisoners into prosperity,*

*Only the rebellious dwell in a parched land.*

*O God, when You went forth before Your people,  
When You marched through the wilderness, Selah.  
The earth quaked;  
The heavens also dropped rain at the presence of God;  
Sinai itself quaked at the presence of God, the God of Is-  
rael...  
A mountain of God is the mountain of Bashan;  
A mountain of many peaks is the mountain of Bashan.  
Why do you look with envy, O mountains with many  
peaks,  
At the mountain which God has desired for His abode?  
Surely the LORD will dwell there forever.  
The chariots of God are myriads, thousands upon thou-  
sands;  
The Lord is among them as at Sinai, in holiness.  
You have ascended on high,  
You have led captive Your captives;  
You have received gifts among men,  
Even among the rebellious also, that the LORD God  
may dwell there...*

*They have seen Your procession, O God,*

*The procession of my God, my King, into the sanctuary...*

*Ascribe strength to God; His majesty is over Israel*

*And His strength is in the skies.*

*O God, You are awesome from Your sanctuary.*

*The God of Israel Himself gives strength and power to  
the people.*

*Blessed be God!"*

(Psalm 68:1-35)

That Psalm 68 is a majestic psalm which traces God's journey with his people from Egypt and then from Mount Sinai, all the way through the desert, before ascending up Mount Zion where the ark of the covenant, which symbolised his presence, was finally placed into Solomon's temple. The original reference to captives and gifts would appear in the context of this historical setting to relate to the Levites whom God took for himself and gave (back) to assist the priests. That's because this is all about God's procession and ascension to his rightful place among a people committed to serving him in his temple. In Numbers 18 we read ...

*"So the LORD said to Aaron, "You and your sons and your father's household with you shall bear the guilt in connection with the sanctuary, and you and your sons with you shall bear the guilt in connection with your*

*priesthood. But bring with you also your brothers, the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, that they may be joined with you and serve you, while you and your sons with you are before the tent of the testimony. And they shall thus attend to your obligation and the obligation of all the tent, but they shall not come near to the furnishings of the sanctuary and the altar, or both they and you will die. They shall be joined with you and attend to the obligations of the tent of meeting, for all the service of the tent; but an outsider may not come near you. So you shall attend to the obligations of the sanctuary and the obligations of the altar, so that there will no longer be wrath on the sons of Israel. Behold, I Myself have taken your fellow Levites from among the sons of Israel; they are a gift to you, dedicated to the LORD, to perform the service for the tent of meeting. But you and your sons with you shall attend to your priesthood for everything concerning the altar and inside the veil, and you are to perform service. I am giving you the priesthood as a bestowed service, but the outsider who comes near shall be put to death."* (Numbers 18:1-7)

This idea, about who the captives are, agrees better with the New Testament idea of evangelists and teachers – replacing the Old Testament Levites – and being given now by Christ for the equipping of ‘the body’. So just to clarify: it seems that just as God gave the Levites to assist the priests in the Old Testament; when we come to the New Testament, the ascended Lord now gives evangelists and teachers to assist the Body of Christ. The evangelists and teachers now, like the Levites before them, are

the captives who have become the gifts given for the help of others. Certainly, Paul was one of those so gifted and given, and he prized highly the stewardship given to him to proclaim God's grace to Gentiles. So, the message for us here is: let's not give up on speaking doctrinal truth lovingly to fellow-believers as we aim to equip each other for service and aspiring towards unity in it.

There are so many facets to this overall victorious picture – the one we're considering in this short study book on Roman triumphal processions. At times, as we are seeing, Paul views himself as Christ's captive; at another like an incense-bearer; at yet another like one of Christ's trophies; there again he sees his co-workers as good soldiers; and even believers as family and friends honoured in the general's chariot. His view of it all embraces good as well as bad angels; and the saved as well as unsaved of humanity. But does it all hang together? Images of degraded captives as well as those victoriously raised and seated with the victor? It's worth repeating, that the reconciling viewpoint is the realisation that to be triumphed over by Christ is to share his triumph!

## CHAPTER FIVE: TRIUMPHING OVER ANGELS

This analogy of a Roman triumph when it's applied to the crucified Christ even features the subordination of angelic authorities – which is the final aspect we want to pick up, from Paul's letter to the Church of God at Colossae. It's a fascinating insight that we're given there – a dimension of Christ's work on the cross that we seldom think about – but let Paul take up the description in Colossians chapter 2 where he writes:

*“When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him.”* (Colossians 2:13-15)

When the text says ‘triumphed over’, that’s one of the two times when the Bible uses directly the word that relates to a Roman triumphal procession such as we’ve been describing. Now, a careful reading of our text, shows that it is God who’s said to be acting here, in other words, God the Father, not the Lord Jesus. It’s God who’s said to be disarming the angelic rulers and authorities, making a public display of them, and triumphing over them through Christ and his cross-work.

At the cross, we're told, God put off from himself the angels. What does that mean? Well, as we try to unpack it: first of all, there's nothing in the context to suggest we're dealing with fallen angels. In other words, in the cross of Christ, God showed his power by a bold stroke without using angels. Previously, angels had been called upon to assist at the giving of the Law. Stephen tells us in Acts 7:38 & 53 that the Jews received the Law as ordained by angels. In fact, let's read an extract from his last speech before he was martyred. Facing his accusers, he said:

*“You men who ... are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it.”* (Acts 7:51-53)

Paul confirms the same in Galatians 3:19 when he asks: *“Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made.”* And finally – in support of this truth – the writer to the Hebrews referred to the Law as the steadfast word spoken through angels when he said:

*“For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the*

*Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.” (Hebrews 2:1-4)*

So, angels had been called upon to assist at the giving of the Law. The Jews, of course, were aware of this – all too aware, it seems, and part of the heresy of the Gnostic teachers who were even then closing in on Colossae was that they paid far too much respect to this angelic involvement – even going so far as to worship angelic beings. Which is why Paul invokes the imagery of the Roman triumph again, making a big point of God’s action at the cross being in Christ alone – which implied the subordination of angelic powers by their non-selection. They had once had the role mentioned in the giving of the Law; but they could never have any role in the giving of salvation through the Son.

They might have been involved in giving the Law; but the removing of its guilt was the work of Christ alone – removing its guilt in the sense that the Law which accused us, and which had become in effect a handwritten certificate showing our indebtedness to God – exactly like a criminal’s charge-sheet – that guilt was removed from us and nailed to the cross. And all without any contribution by any angel - it was solely the work of the Son. The message here is: we’re debtors purely to God’s grace, and with Christ none can compare. Like a mighty general, he fought and won the greatest campaign.

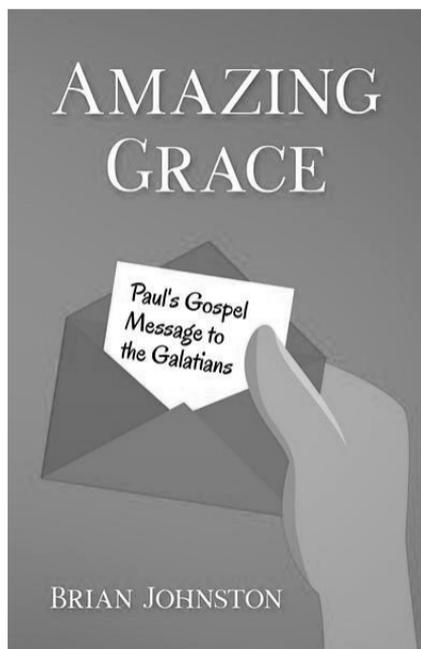
It’s recorded that Napoleon Bonaparte once said to one of his associates that he, Napoleon, had inspired multitudes with such an enthusiastic devotion that they’d have died for him. But he said

to do that it'd been necessary for him to be visibly present with the electric influence of his looks, words and voice. Napoleon went on to say that Christ alone had succeeded in so raising the mind of man toward the unseen that it became insensible to the barrier of time and space. Across a chasm of 1800 years, he said, Jesus Christ makes a demand which is beyond all others difficult to satisfy ... [Jesus] asks for the human heart. He demands it unconditionally and forthwith his demand is granted. Wonderful! In defiance of time and space, the spirit of man with all its powers and faculties becomes an annexation to the empire of Christ. All who sincerely believe, experience that supernatural love towards him. Napoleon said this was an unaccountable phenomenon – apart from seeing it as proof positive of the divinity of Christ.

Christ - and he alone - is the universal conqueror marching in triumph down through the corridors of time and over all of this vanquished world until all creation owns his sway.



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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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