

# Christian Thumbnails

**A Survey of the Core Beliefs of Christianity**



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## *CHRISTIAN THUMBNAILS*

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# Dedication

To my parents,  
who taught me the fear of the Lord  
from a very young age.

## **Abbreviations**

Col	Colossians
Cor	Corinthians
Dan	Daniel
Deut	Deuteronomy
Ecc	Ecclesiastes
Eph	Ephesians
Ex	Exodus
Ezek	Ezekiel
Gal	Galatians
Gen	Genesis
Heb	Hebrews
Isa	Isaiah
Jer	Jeremiah
Lev	Leviticus
Matt	Matthew
Num	Numbers
Pet	Peter
Phil	Philippians
Prov	Proverbs
Ps	Psalms
Rev	Revelation
Rom	Romans
Sam	Samuel
Thess	Thessalonians
Tim	Timothy

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# Preface

The Christian faith is God's life-giving message to his people. Over the centuries Christians have cherished the precious heritage of God's Word recorded in the Holy Scriptures. The same gospel is as powerful today as it ever was before to give us freedom and eternal life.

The aim of the Christian faith is the experiential and intimate fellowship with God. 'Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who trusts in Him!' (Ps 34:8). Without God, life is death, plenty is poverty, and happiness is but an illusion. Only when we walk with God can we truly enjoy life, endure trials patiently and look forward in confident hope of everlasting blessedness in his presence.

While the Christian faith includes an intellectual understanding of certain truths about God and human redemption, it goes well beyond academics. It brings us to a personal love relationship with God through the mediation of Jesus Christ. 'This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent' (John 17:3).

The study of biblical doctrine, rightly undertaken, should humble us and implant a deep sense of adoration. When Moses caught sight of the burning bush, he thought in himself: 'I will now turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush does not burn.' God stopped him short in his tracks. 'Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is

holy ground' (Ex 3:3, 5). God is not simply a curious vision. Wherever God's glory is manifested, it is holy ground.

Thus we cannot turn our thoughts towards God with a haughty attitude; he is not a phenomenon or a philosophical concept. Our approach must be guarded by reverence and awe. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. It would be a crippled theology if it doesn't drive us to our knees, confessing as John did, 'When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead' (Rev 1:17).

I pray that you will greatly benefit from this concise explanation of the main doctrines of the Christian faith - to strengthen your confidence in the Bible; to better know God and yourself; to experience God's salvation in Christ Jesus; and to glorify God and enjoy him more than you ever did before.

# 1

## God is Speaking

By ourselves we can never come to a true knowledge of God. Throughout history and in different cultures, people have fashioned a host of gods and diverse religions. Left to our own resources we are helpless and hopelessly lost; we cannot find the true and living God. 'The world through wisdom did not know God' (1 Cor 1:21). We can only know God because he was pleased to show himself to us.

God manifested himself in a general way by the works of his hand, that is, the created universe. Thus nobody has a valid excuse; nobody may rightly claim that he didn't know about God (Rom 1:19). Furthermore, it pleased God to reveal himself to us in a special and personal way. God has spoken and he still speaks to us today through his Word, the Holy Bible.

We will look at the three steps involved in the communication process: revelation, inspiration and illumination.

### **Revelation**

The activity of God by which he has made himself and his message known is called 'revelation'.

God intervened in the course of history to reveal himself and his will. He spoke directly to Adam, destroyed the ancient world by the flood in Noah's time, called Abraham and promised to bless the world through his descendant, redeemed the people of Israel



from Egypt, gave them the Law by Moses, established them as a nation, deported the Jews to Babylon for their idolatry, restored them to their land, and repeatedly promised to send the Messiah.

During this long period God spoke to Israel through his prophets. Moses, Isaiah and the others prophets addressed the people in God's name: 'Thus says the Lord!' The apostle Peter comments, 'Prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit' (2 Pet 1:21). The miracles they performed testified to the fact that the prophets really were God's mouthpieces in this world.

God's revelation reached its pinnacle in the incarnation of his Son, Jesus Christ. God 'has in these last days spoken to us by His Son' (Heb 1:2). Christ is the Word of God, God's perfect image, and the Truth! The apostles were appointed to explain and set down the significance of the person and work of Jesus Christ, especially his death and resurrection, and to lay down the doctrinal foundation of the Christian faith. God confirmed their authority by various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit.

God's revelation has reached its full extent; it is complete and perfect. Christians are exhorted to contend, that is, to strive and struggle for the Faith which has been given once for all (Jude 1:3). We are called to cherish and defend the original Faith and guard against the additions of so-called new 'revelations' and human traditions.

### **Inspiration**

We are living long centuries after the prophets, Jesus and his apostles. How then may we come to know what they taught so

long ago? It pleased God to record his Word for us in the Scripture (scripture means something written). Moses and Paul are gone, yet their doctrine is still accessible in their writings. Similarly, though Jesus ascended back into heaven, we can still learn what he said and did in the four gospel accounts.

The Bible is not merely a collection of human writings. The Bible has a dual authorship, human and divine. Holy people like Moses, Isaiah, Luke and Matthew wrote the books that make up the Bible. At the same time the Bible was written by God, because the Holy Spirit guided the human authors, without violating their personalities or literary styles, to write exactly what he wanted. This activity of God's Spirit upon the human authors that enabled them to write God's Word is called 'inspiration'.

'All Scripture is given by inspiration of God' (2 Tim 3:16). The phrase 'inspiration of God' is a translation of a single word which literally means 'God-breathed'. The written words of the Bible are 'God-breathed' – the words that came out of his mouth. The Bible is truly the Word of God!

Since the Bible is the Word of the all-knowing and faithful God, we can have full confidence in the Bible's inerrancy (it is free from any mistakes) and infallibility (it cannot lead us astray or deceive us). Moreover, since it is the Word of our Lord, it has absolute authority over the church, and we are obliged to believe and obey it from the heart. What Scripture says and what God says amount to the same thing. Consequently, there cannot be a higher authority than Scripture, as there cannot be a higher authority than God.

Jesus considered the Scriptures as God's living word to every generation. He said to his contemporaries, 'But concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God?' (Matt 22:31), and proceeded to quote a portion of Scripture, specifically from the book of Exodus. Though written many centuries before, that scripture was relevant to their situation and useful in their own time. Jesus didn't tell them, 'God said to Moses' (though the words were originally addressed to the prophet), but, 'God said to you!' Even so, what we read in Scripture is God speaking to us today.

Which are the inspired books that make up the Bible? The Bible is divided into two sections, the Old Testament (39 books, written mostly in Hebrew); and the New Testament (27 books, written in Greek).

The history of the formation of the canon (that is, the collection of writings acknowledged by the church as the authoritative Word of God) is intertwined with the history of the people of God. The church received the books of the Old Testament from the Jews to whom they were originally committed (Rom 3:2). Our 39 Old Testament books correspond exactly to the 24 books of the Jewish Scriptures, or Tanakh, as it is known. (There are less books in the Tanakh because some books in our canon, such as 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel, form one book in the Jewish Scripture.)

Already in the apostolic church, Christians were aware that God was adding new books to the Holy Scriptures (2 Pet 3:16). The gospels and epistles were copied and circulated among the churches. By the middle of the second century, the gospels and

most of the epistles were recognized, and by the fourth century all 27 New Testament books were universally accepted.

We do not possess the original writings, yet we can be confident that God's Word has been preserved. The scriptures were carefully copied by hand (the handwritten documents are called 'manuscripts'). Even so, there are variations between different manuscripts (caused mainly by copying errors), but in most part the variations are trivial. Moreover, the original text can be accurately determined by comparing the great number of manuscripts available.

God, who originally inspired the Scriptures, providentially guided his people to acknowledge the canonical books and to transmit them essentially intact to succeeding generations, even to our own time.

### **Illumination**

The Holy Spirit, the Author of the Bible, illuminates the mind of God's people to understand his Word. 'We have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God' (1 Cor 2:12).

The Bible can be understood. It is not addressed to philosophers and theologians, but to the whole people of God. The letters of Paul, Peter, James and John were addressed to ordinary Christians. 'I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren,' ordered the apostle Paul in concluding one of his epistles (1 Thess 5:27). What purpose would it serve to have

the epistle read out in the audience of all Christians if it was too difficult to be understood?

On the other hand, the Bible can also be misunderstood. The apostle Peter warns us that there are 'some things hard to understand'. He also points out that the 'untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction' (2 Pet 3:16). Peter is not discouraging us from studying Scripture; he only warns us against presumption and carelessness.

Like any other written document, the Bible must be interpreted (or explained) according to grammatical rules, the meaning of words, and consideration of context. Yet biblical interpretation is not merely an academic exercise; it is first and foremost a moral and spiritual endeavor. An attitude of reverence and honesty are essential to rightly understand God's Word. We cannot expect to hear God's voice if we approach the Bible with the intent of twisting its meaning to suit our lifestyle or to justify our belief system. The Bible becomes our spiritual guide if we are determined to believe it no matter how disagreeable it is to our tastes, and to obey its message even if it costs us our lives.

# 2

## The Rule of Faith

While God revealed the plan of salvation to Israel and the early church, the Holy Spirit moved holy men to write the message he wanted to give to future generations. Today we do not have apostles and prophets living among us, and Christ has ascended back to heaven. Yet we still have their teaching recorded in the God-breathed Scriptures. Therefore, the Holy Bible is the only infallible rule of faith for the Christian church.

This principle, known by the Latin phrase *Sola Scriptura* ('Scripture Alone'), is a landmark of fundamental importance because it determines the faith and character of the church of God.

### **Scripture Alone**

Scripture is the rule, or the guide, that teaches us what we should believe and how we are meant to live to please God. The Bible teaches us who God is, and who we are. It exposes sin as our basic problem, and shows us the way of salvation by faith in Christ. God's laws and commandments guide us on our earthly pilgrimage and his wonderful promises encourage us to persevere along the way until we meet our Lord. 'Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path' (Ps 119:105).

The Bible is the infallible rule because it cannot err or teach anything false, since it was given by inspiration from God; it is the Word which came forth from his mouth. The Bible is wholly

reliable because its Author, the faithful and all-wise God, can neither make mistakes nor lie.

The Bible is the only rule because it is sufficient to show us the way of salvation, and to teach us how to lead a godly and righteous life pleasing to God. The Bible itself teaches that in our time there is nothing but Scripture that is to be regarded as the inspired Word of God. Tradition is not inspired, and the church is not infallible. Christ considered Scripture as the inerrant and authoritative Word of God, but he refused to recognize tradition as a supplementary source of revelation; he also showed that religious teachers can err.

There is no other data necessary for salvation that is missing from Scripture or which we need to unearth from another source. The Holy Scriptures 'are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work' (2 Tim 3:15-17). The Scriptures give us the knowledge necessary to experience salvation – they are 'able to make you wise for salvation'. The Bible is also useful for doctrine and guidance in the Christian life. Whoever is led by the Scriptures is described as 'complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work'. The Bible is therefore enough to show God's children how to be saved and to live for his glory.

The Bible does not include all that Jesus did and taught. However the issue is not whether we have all possible information about Christ; after all tradition does not give us exhaustive knowledge

either – if it gives us any reliable information at all! The question at hand is whether what we have written in Scripture is sufficient to know God’s revealed truth. To quench my thirst I do not need all the water in the world; it is enough for me to drink a glass or two. God did not give us exhaustive knowledge in Scripture; he gave us enough to satisfy our souls. The apostle John illustrates this principle in the conclusion of his gospel. He freely acknowledges that he left many things unrecorded, yet he assures us that enough was written to reach his intended purpose (John 20:30, 31).

Also Sola Scriptura does not imply that the Bible will always be understood rightly, or that we should expect automatic and full doctrinal unity among Christians. Christ spoke clearly and yet he was still misunderstood even by his own disciples. Scripture, likewise, is intelligible enough, but because of our spiritual laziness, ignorance and prejudice (arising from our finite abilities and sinful disposition), we have to recognize the fact that even among genuine Christians many false ideas are held and propagated. The fault is ours, not the Bible’s.

### **The Teaching Church**

What is the relation between the Bible and church leaders? Is there a need for teachers since we have the Bible? Yes, definitely. The Lord commissions pastors and teachers, his special gifts to the church, to preach, teach and explain the Word (Eph 4:11ff). The Lord has invested them with authority. ‘These things speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority’ (Titus 2:15).



In the New Testament we do not find a 'church' made up of autonomous, self-sufficient and individualistic Christians who do not see the need of teachers because they have the Bible and the Holy Spirit. Whoever isolates himself from the rest of the church, past and present, or does not submit to the teaching elders of the local church, is acting in a foolish and unbiblical manner.

The teachers' authority is derived from and is inferior to the absolute authority of the Word of God. The Bible is infallible; they are not. Genuine Christian teachers are first to admit that they are liable to err. 'My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many things' (James 3:1, 2). Their task is to faithfully teach the Word, without taking away anything from its teaching, or adding any ideas of human origin. They step outside the limits of their authority as soon as they go beyond the teaching of the Word of God.

Christians are never called to blindly submit to any leader or group of leaders who claim to have absolute authority. The Bible tells ordinary Christians to test all things and to keep fast to that which is good (1 Thess 5:21). We do well to emulate the disciples at Berea. They received the word preached to them; they also searched the Scriptures daily to confirm what they heard (Acts 17:11). That is the proper balance: genuine respect for Christian teachers while holding the Scriptures as the highest authority by all, teachers and students alike.

## **Tradition**

Evangelical Christians look at tradition with suspicion, undoubtedly because they are aware of the disastrous effect of human tradition on the gospel message. Yet the concept of 'tradition' as such is perfectly acceptable. Tradition simply means teachings and practices transmitted by example, verbal and written means. The Bible uses the word 'tradition' to describe both false teachings (Mark 7:9; Col 2:8; 1 Pt 1:18) and divine truth (2 Thess 2:15; 3:6).

Tradition is indispensable for the church. It is the way we share our faith (through sermons, books, personal witness and other means) with one another and the rest of the world. The church cannot grow and pass its precious heritage without tradition. The Christian faith is defended and is kept alive from one generation to another by the teaching of faithful men, who adhere strictly to the apostolic message (2 Tim 2:2).

Now of course, traditions may be true or false; they may have their origin in God or in the human mind. Therefore we do not believe in all traditions, because not all teaching originates from the Word of God. Some traditions are merely human teaching, unessential at best, destructive at worst – as church history testifies!

God spoke to his people Israel by Moses and the prophets. The succeeding generations had the Law and the prophets in Scripture; no additional divine teachings were meant to be delivered to the people by tradition. We know this for a fact because Christ sharply rebuked the Jewish leaders who added the

teachings of tradition to the Written Word (Mark 7:1-13). When tradition is added to the Scriptures, God's Word is made of 'no effect' and the religion that springs from such admixture is vain!

This radical error of the Jews has been and is being repeated in the church. Tradition is a powerful force; let us use it legitimately. We should beware of changing the message of the Bible by the addition of human doctrines, irrespective of their antiquity or the sanction of respected teachers. Rather we should check and correct our traditions by the ultimate standard, the written and inspired Word of God, and be willing to reform ourselves accordingly.

For the Christian church, the way forward is back to the Bible.

# 3

## Names and Attributes of God

We cannot understand God fully because he is infinite and we are mere specks of dust. 'Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; and His greatness is unsearchable' (Ps 145:3). No man will ever plumb his wisdom. 'Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it' (Ps 139:6). A 'god' who is thoroughly understood is nothing but an idol of human imagination. The true and living God is exalted above the heavens, well beyond the reach of our mind.

All the same we must assert that God can be known. Though we can never delve completely into the depths of the Infinite, still we may truly know our Creator. Our knowledge of God must always be limited, yet it can be genuine and sufficient to satisfy the thirst of the human soul. Indeed we are invited to 'Seek the LORD while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near' (Isa 55:6).

Who, then, is the true and living God? We can begin to answer this question by considering the divine names and attributes (personal characteristics) by which God is revealed.

### **Divine Names**

About 2500 times in the Old Testament, God is called by the titles El and Elohim (translated 'God'). The basic meaning of this title is the 'Mighty One' or 'Powerful One'. Elohim is the plural of El (emphasizing his majesty); however, Elohim is still used with verbs in the singular since God is one. God's power is shown in his work

of creation (Gen 1:1); his government over all the world (Isa 54:5); his mighty deeds among his people Israel (Deut 8:14; Ps 68:7), and in his judgment (Ps 50:6). El is also combined with other titles. El-Shaddai is mentioned mostly in the times of the patriarchs (Gen 17:1); it means 'God Almighty'. El-Elyon signifies 'God most high' (Gen 14:19).

Another title, Adonai means master, lord, ruler (Gen 19:2; 40:1; 1 Sam 1:15); it is translated 'Lord' and it expresses the ownership and authority that God exercises over mankind.

The name Yahweh (derived from the four consonants YHWH, sometimes known as the Tetragram) is found about 6000 times in the Hebrew scriptures. The significance of the name Yahweh, by which God revealed himself to his people Israel, was particularly spelled out to Moses (Ex 3:14; 6:3). The name means 'I am'; it testifies to God's eternal self-existence and perfection. God is what he ever was and what he ever will be; there was no time when he was not. He is the eternal 'I am'!

YHWH is rightly translated LORD in our English Bible, according to the pattern set by New Testament writers. For instance, the prophet Joel wrote, 'Whoever calls on the name of Yahweh shall be saved' (Joel 2:32). In Romans 10:13, the apostle Paul quoted this verse, applying it to Jesus. He translated Yahweh by the Greek word Kurios, meaning Lord.

Yahweh is linked with other titles: the Lord God (Gen 2:7); the Lord Provides (Gen 22:14); the Lord Heals (Ex 15:26); the Lord Sanctifies (Lev 20:8); the Lord of Peace (Judges 6:24), and the Lord of Hosts (Isa 1:24).

In the New Testament, the most common titles are God (in Greek, Theos, the equivalent of the Hebrew Elohim), used especially of God the Father; and Lord (in Greek, Kurios, the equivalent of Adonai and Yahweh), used especially of the Son.

To know the name of God means to know God as he revealed himself (and not simply the pronunciation of the word). Praising his name is virtually the same as praising him; when his name is dishonoured, he is dishonoured. God is provoked when his name is profaned: 'You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain' (Ex 20:7). But God's beloved children earnestly seek to praise and glorify him, as Jesus taught us to pray, 'Our Father in heaven, may your name be hallowed.'

### **Divine Attributes**

The divine attributes are the qualities and characteristics of God.

God is personal; he is not simply an impersonal force or energy, as imagined in Eastern pantheistic religions. God thinks, chooses according to his will, loves and hates. He speaks to us, and we to him; he enters into and maintains a personal relationship with people. He designates himself 'I am' (Ex 3:14), and we address him with familiar titles such as 'Father'.

God is spirit (John 4:24); consequently he is invisible (Heb 11:27), and does not have a physical body like us (Luke 24:39). Scripture speaks about 'the eyes' and 'the hands' of the Lord, but evidently such language is figurative.

God is independent; he is self-existent and does not need anything or anyone. We are dependent on God for every

moment of our existence, but God has life in himself (John 5:26). 'Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things' (Acts 17:25).

God is immutable, that is, he does not change. He is ever the same in all his perfections. He cannot become more, or less, wise, holy and good. He is infinite in power; he does not grow weary, and he cannot become more powerful than he is. 'For I am the LORD, I do not change' (Malachi 3:6).

God is eternal and is in no way limited by time which is itself part of his creation. God knows no beginning and will have no end. 'Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever You had formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God' (Ps 90:2).

God is omnipresent. Being present everywhere, he is not limited by space. 'Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there' (Ps 139:7, 8).

God is omniscient; he knows everything. He does not need to learn anything; he is never forgetful. He knows himself and all his creation perfectly. 'Known to God from eternity are all His works' (Acts 15:18). God knows us perfectly: 'O LORD, You have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways' (Ps 139:1-3).

God is good. 'For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in mercy to all those who call upon You' (Ps 86:5). 'God is love' (1 John 4:8). He is merciful, delivering sinners from their just condemnation; he is gracious, granting them blessings they do not deserve.

God is holy; he is distinct from all creatures and exalted above them in infinite majesty and purity. 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!' (Isa 6:3). God is morally perfect. 'God is light and in Him is no darkness at all' (1 John 1:5).

God is righteous. He is always perfectly just and never guilty of the slightest injustice. 'The LORD is righteous in all His ways' (Ps 145:17). His law is the expression of his righteousness, rewarding obedience and punishing disobedience.

God is faithful. 'God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good? (Num 23:19). His children can rest assured that he will perform all his promises and lead them to final glory. God 'will also confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord' (1 Cor 1:8, 9).

God is sovereign; he possesses absolute power and authority, and exercises total control over all his creation. He acts exactly as he desires; nobody can annul his will or frustrate his intentions. He 'works all things according to the counsel of His will' (Eph 1:11). 'His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom



is from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; He does according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done?' (Dan 4:34, 35).

God is omnipotent, that is, almighty, all-powerful. He is able to do whatever he wills. 'I know that You can do everything, and that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You' (Job 42:2). In him we enjoy absolute security. 'He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty' (Ps 91:1).

### **Adoration**

This is the true and living God -- infinite and perfect in all his attributes! Being proud and sinful, the natural man cannot and will not bow before his Maker in adoration and obedience. Though the first commandment warns against having other gods other than the true God, man has come up with other 'gods', less than the true God, fashioned according to his imagination.

May God give us grace to know him in his majesty, that we may know him in truth, trusting and loving him with all our hearts. God alone can open our eyes and reveal his glory to us.

'Give unto the LORD, O you mighty ones; give unto the LORD glory and strength. Give unto the LORD the glory due to His name; worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness' (Ps 29:1, 2).

# 4

## The Holy Trinity

'Trinity' is a theological term (derived from two Latin words, tres, three, and unitas, one); it is employed to express certain truths about God clearly taught in the Bible. The core truths that form this foundational Christian doctrine are these: (1) the unity of God; (2) the Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God; (3) the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are distinct Persons.

### **One God**

Our belief in one God is fundamental; Christianity is a monotheistic religion. The Old and New Testaments both assert the unity of God: 'Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!' (Deut 6:4); 'I am the First and I am the Last; besides Me there is no God' (Isa 44:6); 'There is one God, and there is no other but He' (Mark 12:32).

Non-Christians believe in many different gods but we do not acknowledge them as true. We take the first commandment seriously: 'You shall have no other gods before me' (Ex 20:3). Christians deny polytheism (belief in many gods) and all other gods beside our true and living God because 'all the gods of the peoples are idols' – false gods (Ps 96:5; 1 Cor 8:5, 6).

Father, Son and Holy Spirit

God is often called Father. 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Eph 1:3). God is not Father because of his created sons (the angels), or his adopted sons (his redeemed children); rather, he is Father because of the eternal relation with his only-begotten Son. God is Father from eternity, from before the creation of the world, because he was ever with the Son. The Lord Jesus prayed: 'And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was' (John 17:5). Since he cannot be Father without the Son, whoever denies that the Son is eternal, also denies the Father.

The Bible teaches explicitly that the Son is God and is equal with the Father. Every Christian looks to Jesus Christ and, just like the apostle Thomas, confesses: 'My Lord and my God!' (John 20:28). We will have the opportunity to see how Scripture affirms the full deity of Christ because he is called by divine names, and divine qualities are ascribed to him. Scripture also teaches that Christ performs such works as only God can perform. The worship given him and the trust expressed in him by his disciples are further indications of his deity.

We will also see how Scripture presents the Holy Spirit as fully God. He is given the names and attributes of God himself. He also performs works as only God can perform. Besides, Scripture also shows that he is a person, not a mere force: he speaks, grieves, loves, chooses, sends and teaches, such activities as only a person can perform.

## **Distinct Persons**

Scripture teaches that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are distinct persons. The Father is neither the Son nor the Holy Spirit.

The Father sent his Son; the Son came to do the Father's will. Evidently, then, they are not one and the same person. In the same way the Holy Spirit is not the Father. Jesus said: 'The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you' (John 14:26). Observe the three persons of the Trinity: the Father sends the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit teaches us about the Son. The distinction between the three persons is evident.

## **Heresies**

Though the truths that form the doctrine of the Trinity are not difficult to grasp separately, it is extremely difficult to understand how the three Persons are one God. During the early centuries of the Christian era, the church endeavoured to give a correct definition of the relationship between the three Persons while maintaining the unity of God. This was done amidst a proliferation of heretical ideas:

1. Arianism is the denial of the deity of Christ. Early in the fourth century, a presbyter named Arius taught that the Son was a created being. Arius was opposed by Athanasius who proved from Scripture that Jesus is eternal, uncreated and fully God. The Council of Nicea (325 AD) affirmed the deity of Christ, stating that the Son is 'of the same substance' (homoousious) with the Father.

2. Modalism is the idea that God is one person who revealed himself at different times as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Modalism 'confounds the persons', comparing God to an actor who assumes different roles at different times. However the Bible teaches that the three Persons co-exist at the same time. For instance, at his baptism, when Jesus came out of the water, the Holy Spirit descended upon him, and the voice of the Father was heard from heaven.

3. Tritheism is the idea that there are three separate gods who are united only insofar as they have a common purpose. Tritheism contradicts the monotheistic ('one God') doctrine of the Bible, which is expressed accurately in the Athanasian Creed: 'We worship one God in trinity, and trinity in unity. Neither confounding the persons (as modalism does), nor separating the substance (as tritheism does). For the person of the Father is one, of the Son another, and of the Holy Spirit another. But of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit there is one divinity, equal glory and co-eternal majesty.'

There is no correct analogy of the Trinity. 'To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare to Him?' (Isa 40:18). If we compare the Trinity to anything, we end up with a false picture of the true God. Christians do not believe in the Trinity because we are able to fully understand the being of God, but because we are convinced that the Bible teaches the unity of God, the deity of the three Persons, and their distinction from each other.

## **The Trinity and Salvation**

Knowing God as a trinity of persons is closely connected with our experience of salvation. As Christians we believe that we are 'elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ' (1 Pet 1:2). For that reason we are baptised 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matt 28:19). We are not baptised in three names, but in the singular name, for God is one. At the same time we acknowledge that this one God is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We worship one God, and experience blessings from each of the three persons: 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit' (2 Cor 13:14).

Those who deny the Trinity jeopardize their salvation. How can anyone invoke the name of Jesus for salvation if he does not believe that he is truly God? God declares that he alone is Saviour. 'I, even I, am the LORD, and besides Me there is no savior' (Isa 43:11). How can anyone who sees Jesus as a mere creature claim to know God since the Bible teaches that the glory of God is known only in the face of Christ? 'You know neither Me nor My Father,' Jesus told the Jews who had rejected him, 'If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also' (John 8:19). It is to be expected that the same people who deny the Son would also deny also the Holy Spirit because, as Jesus himself said, 'the world cannot receive [the Spirit], because it neither sees Him nor knows Him' (John 14:17).

We cannot conclude that everyone who has an intellectual knowledge of the Trinity is really a believer. On the other hand, a

true child of God is known by the worship and love he expresses towards God the Father, his trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, and the righteousness and holiness wrought in him by the Holy Spirit. Christians are Trinitarian to the very core of their being.

# 5

## Plan and Providence of God

History is not a haphazard and meaningless series of events. God, not blind chance, has authored the course and destiny of the universe. Indeed, he is active in his creation to ensure that his eternal plan will be accomplished to the letter. God 'works all things according to the purpose of his own will' (Eph 1:11).

### **God's Plan**

God's plan, sometimes referred to as the Decrees of God, is eternally fixed; it does not depend on the choices we make. Scripture calls it 'the eternal plan' (Eph 3:11) – therefore it cannot change; otherwise it would not be eternal. Scripture insists that God's purpose does not fluctuate: 'The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations' (Ps 33:11) 'But He is unique, and who can make Him change? And whatever His soul desires, that He does' (Job 23:13).

Human history is the story God wrote from eternity past. 'He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings' (Acts 17:26). David acknowledged: 'in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them' (Ps 139:16). Even man's rebellion, including the worst sin, does not surprise God: 'what has been determined shall be done' (Dan 11:36).



Christ's death took place according to 'the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God' and even the actions of those who condemned and crucified him were 'to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done' (Acts 2:23; 4:28).

The redeemed freely confess that God 'chose us in Him before the foundation of the world.' Even our good works 'God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them' (Eph 1:4; 2:10). People who remain obstinate in unbelief, 'they stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed.' Lost people are 'the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction' because 'the LORD has made all for Himself, yes, even the wicked for the day of doom.' On the other hand, the redeemed 'He had prepared beforehand for glory' (1 Pet 2:8; Rom 9:22; Prov 16:4; Rom 9:23).

### **Providence**

God begun to fulfill his eternal plan by creating the universe. Further than that, he has been and is still bringing his plan to fruition by his work called 'providence'. The work of creating the universe has long been finished; in providence, God continues to work in his creation. 'Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished. And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done' This same God, as the Lord Jesus informs us, 'has been working until now' (Gen 2:1, 2; John 5:6, 17).

Providence is God's work by which he preserves all creation; he is active in all that happens in the universe, and directs all things to their predetermined end. Though his hands are not seen, God exercises absolute control over all. 'For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen' (Rom 11:36).

God preserves his creation. The universe, while having a real and distinct existence from God, does not exist by its own power. The universe depends completely and continually on God. He upholds and maintains all things by his omnipotence. 'In Him we live and move and have our being.' 'In Him all things consist.' The Lord 'upholds all things by the word of His power' (Acts 17:28; Col 1:17; Heb 1:3).

God is operative in all things that take place in the universe; nothing is excluded from his rule and government. He controls the physical world (Job 37:6-13), the animals (Ps 104:21-27), human events (Isa 10:12-15), and the individual's circumstances (Prov 16:9; 1 Sam 2:6-8). He even controls what to us seem to be accidental happenings. 'The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD' (Prov 16:33). God also controls the free actions of men (Ex 12:36; Ps 33:14, 15; Prov 21:1; 19:21), whether they be morally good (Phil 2:13; 4:13; 2 Cor 12:9, 10; Eph 2:10; Ps 119:36; Gal 5:22-25), or sinful actions (Ps 76:10; Acts 4:27, 28; 2 Sam 16:10; Amos 3:6).

A tough question immediately arises in our minds. What does God, righteous and holy as he is, have to do with wickedness? What is the exact relationship between providence and sin?

Man is a created moral being; he makes decisions and choices according to his will. Man's actions are really his actions and therefore he is also responsible before God for his good and evil. Man is always and in every case held accountable. Nevertheless God is in a certain sense involved in the same human decisions and actions.

An illustration is in order. Joseph's jealous brothers were guilty for selling him to the Ishmaelites; no wonder they were terrified when they then met him many years later in Egypt. But Joseph reassured them: 'But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive' (Gen 50:20). Joseph recognized the hidden hand of providence. 'I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt' he accused them, but he continued, 'But now, do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life' (Gen 45:4, 5; Ps 105:17). God sent him! The brothers were definitely guilty; God overruled their wickedness and through it wrought a great deliverance.

Similarly, the Jews were not compelled against their will to crucify the Messiah; no, rather, they wanted to kill Jesus. Their 'lawless hands' were guilty of that heinous crime. However the crucifixion of our Lord had been determined by God. 'Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief' (Isa 53:10). It could not have happened any other way. Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Romans and the people of Israel gathered together against Jesus to do whatever God's hand and his purpose determined before to be done (see Acts 2:23; 4:27, 28).

God, the 'first cause' of all things, has ordained whatever comes to pass, including sin, and governs his creation to fulfill his eternal plan. Yet God is not the blameworthy cause of evil because his plan and providence do not violate the will of his creatures. God is never guilty of any evil; on the contrary, he always condemns sin. Man sins voluntarily, not by compulsion; therefore man, not God, is the culpable cause of sin.

### **In God's Hands**

God plans and directs all things towards their determined end. This sublime truth brings great solace to his children because it assures us that our life, with all its uncertainties, is safe in the hands of our heavenly Father, the all-powerful and sovereign God. We are painfully aware of our own weaknesses and failures, the opposition from the outside, and the guile of Satan and his demons. Yet nothing and nobody can annul God's good purpose towards us. 'We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son ... If God is for us, who can be against us?' (Rom 8:28-39).

# 6

## Our Creation

First and foremost the Christian faith affirms the existence of God: 'he who comes to God must believe that He is' (Heb 11:6). Moreover we believe in his eternal existence. 'From everlasting to everlasting, You are God' (Ps 90:2). He created everything ex nihilo ('from nothing'), that is, not from pre-existing material: 'The things which are seen were not made of things which are visible' (Heb 11:3). Though we now experience disorder, sufferings and death, we believe that the creation was originally perfect: 'Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good' (Gen 1:31).

For what purpose did God make the universe? God created all things for the manifestation of his own glory. 'You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created' (Rev 4:11).

The Bible's teaching on creation contradicts the false philosophies by which Satan deceives the world. Just consider the very first sentence of Genesis: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' This statement denies atheism (there is no God), because the universe was created by God. It also denies pantheism (nature and God are the same), because God is distinct from his creation. It denies polytheism (there are many gods), because one God created all things. It denies materialism (reality consists only of material things and forces), because God

is before creation. Finally it denies humanism (man is sovereign and human destiny depends upon himself), since God, not man, is the first and highest reality.

### **Evolution**

The theory of evolution attempts to give an alternative explanation to all existence. It is grounded upon a materialistic philosophy, presupposing that reality consists only of physical things and forces. The evolutionist cannot even consider the possibility of a supernatural Creator. Because of his philosophical prejudice, he has no alternative but to give an explanation of the universe and life in terms of physical forces, in spite of all evidence to the contrary.

The problems evolution faces are colossal. If the universe had a beginning, there was a point when it did not exist. How then can nothing become something? We cannot escape the problem by saying that the universe is eternal. Since its energy is being spent and becoming increasingly disorganized, if the universe had been in existence from eternity past, it cannot exist still in an organized form.

Besides, life shows unmistakable signs of intelligent design far more intricate than anything written or created by human intelligence. How can blind forces create the complicated mechanisms in plants and animals, and especially of the human body and mind? If I consider a painting, a house or a novel, is it not reasonable to infer the existence of a painter, a builder and a writer, even though I may have never met them? By the same

token, when I behold the creation around me, is it equally logical to infer the existence of an intelligent and powerful Creator.

Evolution is the philosophical foundation of today's secular society. Excluding the Creator from his thinking, man has usurped the place of God. Modern man reasons: 'Since everything happened by natural means, I am accountable to no one but myself.' If there is no Creator, there is no Lord. Man becomes autonomous, his own master. 'What feels good to me' takes the place of what God commands in his Law.

The evolutionary mindset degrades human dignity because man is considered as just another animal – more developed than others perhaps – but essentially an animal. Evolution destroys the significance and hope of human existence. It can offer nothing to the individual, except his return to the dust to be recycled! The Christian worldview is altogether different. It views human life as having dignity and everlasting value: man was created in the image of God in order to know, love and enjoy his Creator forever.

### **The Image of God**

We are God's special creation. God created the world for us and gave us dominion over it. Moreover God gave us the privilege to look upwards to him, our Creator, in whose image we are formed. 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness ... So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them' (Gen 1:26, 27).

Naturally 'God's image' does not mean a physical resemblance, since God is spirit. Man resembles God because he was created

wise, righteous and holy. Though sin has wrought havoc in the beauty of this similarity, every human being still retains something of God's image in him (James 3:9). The full glory of the likeness of God reappears in the restorative work that God performs in his children. 'Put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness ... put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him' (Eph 4:24; Col 3:10).

### **Body and Soul**

We are made up of a material aspect and a spiritual aspect. 'The LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, (the body, the material part), and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life (the spirit, the non-material part); and man became a living being' (Gen 2:7).

The Lord Jesus makes a distinction between the physical body and the spiritual soul: 'And I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him' (Luke 12:4, 5). If we consisted only of a material body, nobody could do anything more to us after death. But since after death God is able 'to cast into hell', it is evident that death is not the complete destruction of man. The part that cannot be destroyed by physical death is the soul, as Jesus informed us elsewhere: 'do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell' (Matt 10:28).



The theory of evolution considers man as a material animal and nothing else. Because of the fundamental error, modern man must always remain frustrated in his attempts to find fulfillment solely in material things. Admittedly, we need bread to live, but it is equally true that 'man does not live by bread alone'.

### **Moral Being**

God created us moral beings. We have the power of originating action and voluntary moral choice. This differentiates us from inanimate matter that is merely governed by the laws of nature, and from animals that are controlled by their instincts. God created us with innate sense of right and wrong. His moral law is written on our hearts. Our conscience bears witness whether our actions are right or wrong. Therefore we are accountable to God for all our decisions and actions.

Just as God commanded Adam (Gen 2:16) from the beginning of creation, we are all duty-bound to obey his law. We must reject any theory, whether religious or psychological, that views man as a mere puppet. We make our choices in the light of conscience and reason, and though our decisions may be wrong and sinful, we remain accountable for our choices.

### **Social Being**

We were not created to live in solitude. 'It is not good that man should be alone,' God said (Gen 2:18). The second greatest commandment -- 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself' (Matt 22:39) -- highlights our social dimension. Man was given a heart with which to love; a heart that yearns for love. Of all social relations, marriage is the most natural and intimate (Gen 2:24;

Matt 19:9); it is a reflection of the relationship between the Lord and his bride, the church (Eph 5).

### **Spiritual Being**

Fellowship with other people is important; of greater significance still is our relationship with our Creator. The first and great commandment reflects the essential purpose of our being: 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' We were created to know, glorify and enjoy God forever. 'As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God' (Ps 42:1, 2). Augustine expressed this truth beautifully: 'You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.'

# 7

## Our Fall

We have failed to give God, our Maker, the glory he deserves. We owe him our life – our very existence and every breath we take - and therefore we ought to obey him gladly and give him thanks for his goodness. His commandments inform us what is good and evil; conscience also bears witness to God’s moral standards. Our basic duty is to love God with all our heart, and to love our neighbour as ourselves. But ever since the beginning, humanity has rebelled against the Creator and Lord.

### **Original Sin**

In the beginning, when the Lord created our first parents, Adam and Eve, God placed them in the Garden of Eden and blessed them. Their happiness depended on their continuance in obedience. ‘And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die’’ (Gen 2:16, 17). Perfect obedience would lead to life and communion with God; disobedience would bring separation and death.

Adam chose to be disobedient and ate the forbidden fruit. He broke God’s command and became guilty. He had been created righteous; now he became a sinner. The consequences of Adam’s sin are far-reaching. Adam’s sin brought a curse upon creation over which he was appointed ruler.

Moreover Adam's sin is accounted as the sin of the human race of which he was the head and representative, as the Scripture teaches: 'Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned.' The reality of death in the entire world is the proof that all sinned in Adam. Whether young or old, we are all subject to death, proving that sin has infected the whole human race. 'By one man's disobedience many were made sinners' (Rom 5:12, 18, 19).

Even before we are old enough to choose sin, we were already sinners by nature. We do not become sinners when we commit our first sin. We are sinners from the very moment of conception because we inherit Adam's fallen sinful nature. 'Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me' (Psalm 51:5). It is only a matter of time before an infant grows up to express his sinful disposition (in disobedience to parents, selfishness, lying, etc). The tree is known by its fruit; our sinful choices show that we are sinners by nature.

There is enough beauty and joy in the world attesting to God's original perfect creation, and to his continual providential care, but there is also enough misery to remind us that all is not as it should be. The gravity of sin is painfully evident as we observe and experience the consequences of the fall: disorder, decay, discord, war, disease, misery, tears, suffering and death (Gen 3:16-19). By Adam's fall, humanity lost communion with God. Conscious of their sin and shame, Adam and Eve hid from the presence of the Lord because they were afraid (Gen 3:8-10, 24).

To this day, we, their children, still run away from God, and unless the grace of God draws us back to him, we will all perish.

### **Depravity and Inability**

The popular idea that we are all basically good is completely false. With the single exception of our Lord Jesus Christ (Heb 4:15), all the people of the world are naturally sinners. Whether Jews or Gentiles, 'they are all under sin' (Rom 3:9; cf. 1 Kings 8:46; Ps 143:2; Rom 3:9-12; 1 John 1:8). From Eden, sin has spread to the whole human race.

We are all sinners by nature, but we ask further, to what extent are we sinful? We cannot trust ourselves to come up with an honest and accurate diagnosis of our spiritual condition. The Bible says that left to ourselves our heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked (Jer 17:9). Pride will never admit how terribly sinful we really are. We would rather deceive ourselves and call 'good' what God declares to be wicked.

We tend to downplay our sins as mere 'mistakes' and 'weaknesses', while pointing to our good deeds as evidence of our goodness. However, the Lord knows us through and through and he is not impressed even by our so-called 'good' deeds. Once Jesus said, 'You being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children' (Matt 7:11). We are perfectly capable of performing things that are good in themselves, but we do so for our convenience and selfish motives, rather than the love of God. Such works do not clear us from Jesus' verdict; he still declares that we are evil.

Every aspect of our being is poisoned by sin. God's charge against us is threefold (Rom 3:10, 11):

1. There is none righteous, no, not one.
2. There is none who understands.
3. There is none who seeks after God.

First, there is none righteous. We do not obey his law as we should. 'The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God' (Rom 8:7, 8). As sinners, our minds are set against God. We do not gladly submit to his authority, and indeed, we cannot. It is impossible to obey God in our own strength. We do not have the natural ability to please God.

But, it may be argued, since God gave us his law, isn't that evidence enough that we can obey? No, definitely not! The commandment shows our duty and what is right in God's eyes. God's law does not imply man's ability to obey. The natural man is unable to do what he is duty-bound to do -- not because God created man evil but because man sinned and deprived himself of his original ability. God cannot lower his standards simply because we cannot reach up to the perfections of his Law. God's Law reflects his purity and holiness, not our spiritual paralysis.

Secondly, there is none who understands. That does not mean that we are totally devoid of all knowledge. We can be very intelligent and bright in many ways, but we are ignorant where it really matters. 'The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he

know them, because they are spiritually discerned' (1 Cor 2:14). The gospel makes no sense to the unbeliever. He dismisses the glorious message of salvation as 'foolishness'. 'The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing' (1 Cor 1:18).

Finally, the Bible says that there is none who seeks after God – that is, after the true and living God. We are religious by nature, and everyone seeks to worship something or someone. However, because of the pollution of sin, we are repelled by the majesty and glory of God. 'For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed' (John 3:20). There are no natural 'God-seekers'. Unless God takes the initiative, seeks the lost and draws them to his Son, no one will ever find him. Jesus said it plainly: 'No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him' (John 6:44). The problem is universal for 'no one' can come; we are all paralysed by sin. We do not have the ability in us to repent and believe in Christ.

All that can be summed up by two words, depravity and inability. We are depraved – morally corrupt and evil -- and therefore we lack the natural ability or power to convert ourselves or please God.

The biblical analysis of our spiritual condition is deeply humiliating; it deflates our inflated ego, and exposes our utter helplessness. We are left to the mercy of God. We cannot help ourselves. God alone can give us a new heart so that we can understand the gospel, willingly come to Christ for salvation and live in obedience to him.

# 8

## Our Redemption

The devil won the day in Eden; he succeeded in drawing man away from his Creator. Paradise was lost – but not forever! God was not surprised by man’s rebellion. According to his eternal plan, God had purposed to redeem and call a people for himself from among the fallen human race. Soon after the fall, God begun to reveal his plan to send ‘the woman’s seed’ to fight against the serpent and crush his head (Gen 3:15). At Golgotha the woman’s seed, Christ Jesus, won the decisive battle – he triumphed over his enemies, purchased freedom and merited eternal life for his own.

### **Covenant of Grace**

God bound himself by a solemn pact, or covenant, with his people, promising to bring about reconciliation (Heb 10:16, 17) and restore our fellowship (Jer 31:33, 32:38-40; Ezek 34:23-25, 30, 31; 36:25-8; Heb 8:10; 2 Cor 6:16-18).

The gracious covenant of God with his people is made possible by the mediatorial work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He is the mediator of the covenant (Heb 9:5), bridging the infinite gap between us and our Creator. He is our representative before the Father (Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:22), and our surety (Heb 7:22). A surety, or guarantor, is someone who is legally responsible for the debt of another. Jesus satisfied our legal obligations.



The covenant is founded in eternity past. Even before the creation of the world, God's people were chosen 'in Christ' (Eph 1:5); we had been given to Christ by the Father (Jn 6:39).

The covenant was gradually revealed in history. God called Abraham, justified him by faith, and promised to bless all the nations through him. Centuries later, God gave the Law by Moses to Abraham's descendants, the people of Israel. But the Law did not annul the promise to Abraham, for it was unable to give life. The law served as a tutor to lead the people to Christ; by means of types and shadows, it pointed forwards to the promised Saviour (Gal 3). At the appointed time, Abraham's seed, Jesus Christ, came to the world to establish 'the new covenant in his blood'. It is new not because it is entirely different, but because it is a new revelation of God's covenant, and because it is the fulfillment of the symbolism and promises of the Old Testament.

We still wait for the consummation of the covenant. God's oft repeated promise -- 'I will be their God, and they shall be My people' -- will be finally and gloriously fulfilled in heaven (Rev 21:3).

### **Facets of Redemption**

Like a precious diamond, there are many facets to God's marvellous work of redemption. The Bible uses several terms to describe them.

1. Predestination and election: From eternity past, God had determined the destiny of the people he loved, and chose (elected) them unto salvation.

2. Propitiation: Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was offered to appease God's righteous anger against sin.
3. Reconciliation: Sinners are enemies of God. Jesus removed the cause of this hostility, sin, and brought friendship and peace.
4. Redemption: Jesus Christ redeems his people; he sets them free from the slavery of sin. Jesus shed his blood on the cross to pay the price, or ransom, for our freedom.
5. Regeneration, the new birth: marks the beginning of the Christian life. The Holy Spirit calls, renews the heart, and gives eternal life to those who were spiritually dead in sin.
6. Justification: God declares the believer righteous on account of Jesus Christ. Justification is received by faith alone and not on account of our personal merit.
7. Adoption: Jesus gives the right to those who believe in his name to become children of God. They are received into God's family, call him 'our Father', and are made heirs of his blessings.
8. Sanctification: God calls his children to sanctification, or holiness, that is, to be set apart or consecrated to his service. Sanctification is a life-long process by which the Holy Spirit gradually transforms us to be like Jesus Christ.
9. Glorification: God's saving work reaches its ultimate end at the second coming of Christ, when believers are given an immortal body, made morally perfect, and are forever welcomed into the immediate presence of God.

It is also helpful to distinguish three temporal aspects of salvation: past, present and future. The believer can say, 'I am

saved, I am being saved, and I will be saved.’ The Christian is already saved from the guilt and dominion of sin (Rom 4:5-7; 6:18). From the moment of faith, we are forever counted as righteous before God (Rom 5:1). Yet, as long as we remain in this world we must engage in a continual struggle with the flesh – the principle of sin that stills clings to us (Rom 7:22, 23). The Spirit enables us to overcome sin and live a godly and righteous life, albeit our many failures. Ultimately our salvation will be fulfilled at the second coming of Christ, when he delivers us from the very presence of sin and grants us a glorified body (Rom 8:23, 24). In this sense, we are saved in hope.

### **Sovereign Grace**

From eternity past God chose a definite number of persons to be saved. The Bible calls them ‘God’s elect’. Jesus said that ‘many are called, but few are chosen’ (Matt 22:14); the apostle Paul teaches that ‘there is a remnant according to the election of grace’ (Rom 11:5). He reminds the disciples that God ‘chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will’ (Eph 1:4, 5).

God did not choose us because we were better than the rest of mankind, just as God chose Jacob rather than his twin brother, Esau, even before they were born or had done any good or evil (Rom 9:10-13). In fact, as Christians we readily admit that formerly we were dead in their trespasses and sins, and we were children of disobedience just like the others (Eph 2:1-3). The only reason why we were chosen is God’s sovereign grace; we

certainly didn't merit his love. God loved us simply because he wanted to, as he declares, 'I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion' (Rom 9:14).

Justification is not a joint-venture between God and man, as if God performs his part and man is expected to contribute his part too. Many people wrongly assume that we must contribute our good works to merit salvation, but this is contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture: 'For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast' (Eph 2:8, 9). Salvation is a gracious gift that we cannot earn by our works.

Others think that, although we cannot merit grace, salvation ultimately depends on the consent of the human will. The critical factor is our choice! This is another serious error. Being sinful by nature, we were not willing to come to God. God must choose us before we are made willing to choose him. That is why Scripture says that 'it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy' (Rom 9:16).

From beginning to end, from God's election in eternity past to our glorification at the last day, salvation is found in God's initiative and work alone. 'Even when we were dead in trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ -- by grace you have been saved' (Eph 2:5).

### **The Purpose of Salvation**

Why did God save us? Why did he save us by grace? One good answer is simply this: we were unable to save ourselves or

contribute the least merit to our salvation. If it weren't for God's initiative and unmerited favour, we would have been forever doomed.

A more fundamental reason relates to the purpose of salvation. Evidently, we enjoy innumerable blessings that convey God's goodness to us. But the ultimate purpose is not man-centred -- God saves his elect for his own glory. God saved us 'that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus' (Eph 2:7); and again, his purpose is to 'to make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory' (Rom 9:23).

In heaven, we will not be bragging about our merits and our good decisions; we will forever praise the glory of his grace, by which God made us accepted in the Beloved (Eph 1:6). The redeemed are the trophies of God's grace; he will be forever glorified in us!

# 9

## Jesus, Our Redeemer

The Lord Jesus, the mediator of the covenant, is both God and man. It is necessary that the Redeemer should be human because we need a man like us to act as our representative before the Father, and who was able to suffer and die as a sacrifice for our sins. It is necessary that our Saviour should be God because no one else could save us from sin: 'I, even I, am the LORD, and besides Me there is no savior' (Isa 43:11).

### **Christ is Man**

Christ is truly a man since he has human qualities as we do. He was born in Bethlehem around two thousand years ago. His mother was a Jewish woman called Mary. Like other children, Jesus grew up mentally and physically. He was brought up with Joseph and Mary in Nazareth, and was obedient to them. He learned Joseph's skill and worked as a carpenter. When he was around thirty years of age he engaged in public teaching. Once, being exhausted with travelling, he sat down by a well to have some rest; on another occasion he fell asleep in a boat. He admitted that nobody except the Father knew the day of his return. He experienced hunger and thirst; he had to travel from one place to another in order to preach in different towns. When he was by his friend's grave, he wept. In the garden of Gethsemane, he confessed to his friends, 'My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death.' He felt the sufferings of his passion,

and, as the climax of his mission, Jesus died on a Roman cross. Jesus 'in all things He had to be made like His brethren' (Heb 2:17); in brief, he is even now, 'the man Christ Jesus' (1 Tim 2:5).

### **Christ Is God**

The Bible also teaches that Christ is God since he has the attributes of God, is called by divine titles, and does things that only God is able to do.

#### *Divine Attributes*

The Son is eternal; he was with the Father before the creation (John 17:5). As a man, Jesus had a beginning when he was conceived in Mary's womb; but he existed as God before he came into this world. The prophet proclaimed that he is 'from everlasting' (Micah 5:2) and the apostle says that he is 'eternal life' (1 John 1:2). Jesus is omnipotent, 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End ... who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty' (Rev 1:8). He openly said he had the same power as the Father: 'whatever [the Father] does, the Son also does in like manner' (John 5:15-19). Since he can accomplish all things as the Father does, he must be omnipotent like him. He is omniscient. The apostles prayed: 'You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all' (Who except God knows the human heart?); and earlier they simply confessed: 'Now we are sure that You know all things' (see Acts 1:24; 1 Kings 8:39; John 16:30). The Lord Jesus is omnipresent and thus could promise his disciples that he will be with them even though physically he ascended back into heaven: 'And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age' (Matt 28:20). The existence of so many Christian

assemblies all around the world are a witness of his omnipresence: 'For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them' (Matt 18:20). The Lord Jesus is also immutable, that is, he doesn't change. 'You are the same ... Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever' (Heb 1:12; 13:8).

### *Divine Titles*

In the New Testament, Jesus is repeatedly called the Lord. Now we know that there are many masters, many lords; but we also know that there is only one Lord over all lords, only one Lord of the Sabbath, only one Lord of all people (Rev 19:16; Matt 12:8; Acts 10:36). The same title, Lord (Kurios), identifies Jesus with Yahweh, the name by which God was known among the children of Israel (compare Isa 40:3 with Matt 3:3; and Joel 2:32 with Rom 10:13). Furthermore, the Bible specifically calls him God. The angel announced that the son of Mary was to be called Emmanuel, which means 'God with us'. John opens his Gospel with a simple yet profound declaration: 'The Word was God.' The apostle Thomas addressed him: 'My Lord and my God.' The apostle Paul writes that Christ is 'the eternally blessed God' and, 'our great God and Savior'. The apostle Peter calls him, 'our God and Savior'. Finally, God the Father himself addressed the Son: 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever' (Matt 1:21-23; John 1:1; 20:28; Rom 9:5; Titus 2:13; 2 Pet 1:1; Heb 1:8; cf. Ps 10:16; 45:6, 7).

### *Divine Work*

The Lord Jesus performs such work as only God can perform. The Bible teaches that the universe was created by Christ, the Word of



God: 'All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.' 'You, LORD, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands' (John 1:1, 3; Heb 1:8-10). Jesus is presently caring for his own creation: 'upholding all things by the word of His power (Heb 1:3). Even greater than the work of creation is the salvation of man. Scripture declares that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world; he is the Savior of the body (the church); he is our Lord and Savior (see John 4:42; Eph 5:23; 2 Pet 1:11). Who but God can be the Saviour? At the consummation of the world, the Lord Jesus will judge all people since he 'was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead' (Acts 10:42), and 'we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ' (2 Cor 5:10). Who except God is competent to judge all mankind infallibly?

### *Divine Glory*

Christ affirmed his Deity by claiming to be equal with God (Jn 5:18; 10:33) and calling himself 'I am' just as Yahweh did in the Old Testament (Jn 8:58; cf. Isa 41:4; 43:10; 46:4). Christ's enemies did not believe in him, of course, but they certainly understood his claims and wanted to kill him for blasphemy. Whereas his disciples, believing that Jesus is truly God, trust their salvation in his hands and worship him (Lk 24:52). It is the Father's will that that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father; he commands all the angels to worship him, and indeed, everyone in the universe will bow the knee at the name of Jesus.

Blessing and honor and glory and power  
Be to Him who sits on the throne,  
And to the Lamb, forever and ever!  
(Rev 5:12-15).

Every creature will ascribe eternal glory to God, and the same exact glory to Jesus Christ.

So, Scripture teaches that the Lord Jesus is eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and immutable. His name is Yahweh, God and Lord. Creation is his work; he is the Saviour and Judge of the world. The biblical evidence points to one irrefutable conclusion: Jesus Christ is God in the same sense as the Father is God, 'the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person' (Heb 1:3). Perceiving his divine glory, it is our joyful duty to worship Christ as God.

### **The Incarnation**

The Son is eternally God; in time he also became man when he was conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary by the power of the Spirit. Since then he continues to be both God and man forever. The child who is born is also the Mighty God (Isa 9:6, 7); the branch of David is Yahweh our Righteousness (Jer 33:14-16). In the beginning of the gospel, John describes Christ as 'the Word' and declares that the Word was God. He proceeds by announcing that 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1:1, 14). Jesus is fully God and fully human, or, in the words of the apostle Paul, 'In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily' (Col 2:9). Theologically this truth is expressed by saying

that Christ has two natures – divine and human – and yet he is one person.

Before coming into the world, the Son was eternally with the Father in glory. In order to fulfill the plan of redemption, the Son humbled himself, became man, lived under the law, died and was buried. 'The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45). After going through this state of humiliation, God the Father glorified him by raising him from the dead and exalting him above the heavens.

Meekness and majesty, manhood and Deity,  
In perfect harmony, the Man who is God.  
Lord of eternity dwells in humanity;  
Kneels in humility and washes our feet.

# 10

## Jesus' Work of Redemption

Two men, Adam and Christ, stand head and shoulders above all people because of their influence on the rest of humanity. In Adam, who is the head of the entire human race, there is sin, condemnation and death. But God appointed the second man, the Lord from heaven, to redeem and gather a people for himself from among the fallen human race. Christ, who is called the 'last Adam' (1 Cor 15:45), is the head of a new people. He reversed the ill-effects of Adam's fall, and brought righteousness, justification, and eternal life.

### **The Anointed**

The title 'Christ' (or in Hebrew, 'Messiah') means 'the Anointed One'; it indicates his consecration by the Father for his redemptive mission. In the Old Testament, prophets, priests and kings were anointed with oil as a sign of their appointment (1 Kings 19:16; Ex 29:7; 1 Sam 10:1). In fulfillment of these symbols, the Lord Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit to perform the work of a prophet, priest and king, and thus to bring to his people the blessings of the covenant of grace.

### *Prophet*

The prophet is God's messenger to his people. Christ is the definitive Prophet because he perfectly reveals the Father. No one can know the Father apart from Christ's prophetic ministry (Matt 11:27).

The Old Testament spoke in advance about the coming of Christ as a prophet greater than Moses (Deut 18:15; Acts 3:23). He referred to himself as a prophet (Luke 13:33), taught with authority (Matt 7:29) and delivered the message of God. 'For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak' (John 12:49). Today, though he has ascended into heaven, he still fulfils his prophetic ministry through the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 16:12-14).

### *Priest*

Jesus is our great high priest (Heb 3:1; 4:14; 5:5; 6:20; 7:26). The prophet represents God before the people; the priest represents the people before God – offering sacrifices on their behalf and interceding for them. The Old Testament predicted Christ's work as a priest: 'The LORD has sworn and will not relent, 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek'' (Ps 110:4). The animal sacrifices foreshadowed the one true sacrifice of Jesus on the cross (Heb 9:23, 24).

The New Testament often speaks about the priestly work of Christ (John 1:29; 1 Cor 5:7; Heb 9:11-15; 10:11-14). Apart from offering the sacrifice of himself to God, once for all, for our reconciliation, Christ continues to intercede for his people before the throne of God. He does this on account of the infinite merit of his sacrifice (Heb 7:25; 9:24; 1 John 2:1, 2). Christ intercedes only for God's elect, not for every individual indiscriminately (John 17:9, 20).

## *King*

Jesus is the King of kings. The Bible foretold that 'the government will be upon His shoulder ... of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever' (Isa 9:6, 7). Seven centuries later the angel announced to Mary that her son 'will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end' (Luke 1:32, 33).

From the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus proclaimed the arrival of the Kingdom of God. His own people, the Jews, did not receive him because Jesus was not the kind of king they expected. They even brought about his execution on a cross, for they said, 'We will not have this man to reign over us' (Luke 19:14). But God the Father raised him from the dead and gave him all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt 28:18; Eph 1:20-22). Jesus Christ is now reigning in heaven and from heaven (1 Cor 15:25).

Some Christians are of the opinion that Jesus is not reigning at present; he will reign in the future, they say, when he returns to earth. Our brethren should remember that at the present time, we are already in his kingdom. God the Father 'has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love' (Col 1:13). Of all people, Christians ought to recognize the sovereignty of our King.

Thus Christ is our Prophet, Priest and King – he reveals God to us, reconciles us together, and leads us safely in the way everlasting.

## **The Cross**

We should take a closer look at the death and resurrection of Christ because this momentous event is the very heart of the gospel.

Christ died according to God's eternal plan. He certainly didn't die by accident or because he couldn't avoid the conspiracy of his enemies. Christ died voluntarily, giving his life as a ransom for many (John 10:17, 18; Mark 10:45). His death was frequently the subject of prophecy (see, for instance, Isa 53:7, 8). It was exhibited beforehand in the sacrifices of animals that took place during the old Mosaic period. Christ died because it was so determined by God the Father (Acts 2:23; 4:28).

Christ died to satisfy the divine law which we had broken. God set him forth to be the propitiation – Christ's sacrifice turned away God's wrath against sinners. 'Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins' (1 John 4:10).

Moreover, in Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins (Eph 1:7). He gave his life as a ransom to purchase our freedom from the slavery of sin. God's broken law brings a curse upon the sinner. Christ freed, or redeemed, us from that curse by taking it upon himself when he hung upon the cross (Gal 3:13).

Christ's death was substitutionary; he died instead of his people. God placed upon him the sins of his people (Isa 53:6); on the

cross, Jesus bore our sins (Heb 9:28; 1 Pet 3:18). The Righteous did not deserve to die; he wasn't guilty of any sin – we were the guilty sinners; we deserved the punishment. But he took our place; he took our sins and our punishment.

For whom did Christ die? In a certain sense Christ died for the whole world -- 'he takes away the sin of the world!' (John 1:29). But we cannot understand 'world' to mean each and every person, for the following reasons: (1) elsewhere in the Bible 'world' obviously does not mean every single person in the world (Luke 2:1 and Rom 1:8); (2) if we take 'world' in the absolute sense, we are led to the heresy of universalism, namely, that all people will be saved (if their sin is 'taken away' they cannot be condemned and punished in hell); (3) if we say that Christ merely made salvation possible for everyone, we distort the clear meaning of Scriptures (since Jesus actually 'takes away' sin and not merely 'possibly').

In what sense, then, did Christ die for the world? The New Testament authors emphasize that God's salvation was not intended for the Jews only, but for the Gentiles also – Christ is the Saviour of the world, of people from all nations (Rev 5:9).

Some Christians maintain that Christ died for every person individually, whether they are eventually saved or lost. But if Christ died for them to cancel their sins, why should they be lost? It cannot be said that they are lost because they do not believe – their unbelief is in itself sinful. But since they are lost, it is evident that Christ did not pay for their sin of unbelief.



The Bible limits the scope of Christ death; he came to save his people from their sins (Matt 1:21); he gave his life for his sheep (John 10:11, 15), for his church (Acts 20:28; Eph 5:25-27), for God's elect (Rom 8:32, 33). Christ perfectly fulfills the purpose of his sacrifice: all for whom he died will certainly be eternally saved.

### **The Crown**

The grave where Christ's body was laid is now empty; he arose from the dead on the third day, on the first day of the week. The Father raised him up; the apostles and other disciples were witnesses of the risen Christ (Acts 2:24, 32; 3:15; 26, etc). His resurrection marks the beginning of his exaltation, followed by his ascension to heaven, his present reign over the universe, and his Second Coming in glory.

Jesus' resurrection is the sure pledge of our own resurrection at the last day (Rom 8:11; 1 Cor 15:12-23; Phil 3:20, 21). Adam's sin brought death upon all his posterity; Christ's obedience gained righteousness and life for all his people. Now that he is alive forevermore, Christ sees to it that all the redeemed will be brought to final glory. 'For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life' (Rom 5:10).

# 11

## The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, was sent by the Son, from the Father, as the Comforter to help and empower the church throughout her pilgrimage on earth.

### **The Spirit is a Person**

The Holy Spirit is a person. This does not imply that he has a physical body like ours. In this context, a 'person' is equivalent to 'someone' (rather than 'something') who is self-conscious -- who thinks, speaks, loves, feels and makes willing choices. Thus human beings and angels are persons because they are endowed with these personal qualities, whereas a mere 'force' or 'energy' is not personal. Angels are persons, even though they are spirit beings without a material body. They are persons because they think, speak and so forth. Similarly God is spirit; he does not have flesh and bones as we have. Nevertheless God is a person because he thinks, speaks, plans and loves. The same applies to the Holy Spirit. He does not have a physical form, but it is evident from Scripture that he is not simply a force since he manifests all the personal attributes.

The Spirit is powerful, but he is not simply 'a power'. Just as the Bible mentions the power of God (Matt 22:29), it also speaks of the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom 15:13). Power is one of his qualities.

The Spirit is intelligent: he knows and seeks the things of God (1 Cor 2:10, 11); he has a mind (Rom 8:27); he is able to teach men (1 Cor 2:13). He also has a will, and gives different gifts to the redeemed according to his good pleasure (1 Cor 12:11). He guides Christians in their activities (Acts 16:6-11). Like any other person, the Holy Spirit has emotions (he feels). The Bible therefore warns us not to grieve the Spirit of God (Eph 4:30).

The Holy Spirit performs personal actions. He leads us into the truth. He speaks (John 16:13), convicts (John 16:8), performs miracles (Acts 8:39), and intercedes for believers (Rom 8:26). A mere force cannot hear, speak or pray. Human beings also relate personally to the Holy Spirit. Christians hear and obey him (as did Peter, Acts 10:19-21), but sometimes they lie to him (Acts 5:3). Others insult and even blaspheme the Spirit (Heb 10:29; Matt 12:31).

The Lord Jesus shows us that the Spirit is a person because he calls him 'another counsellor' like himself. 'And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever' (John 14:16). Just as Jesus is a person, even so is the Spirit whom he has sent to take residence in the church.

### **The Spirit is God**

Once the Spirit is recognized as a person, it is relatively easy to recognize that he is a divine person. The Holy Spirit is God. He is called the Spirit of God and the Spirit of the Lord, and God calls him 'my Spirit'. The Scripture also calls him 'the Lord' (2 Cor 3:17).

The Spirit has all the divine attributes: he knows all things (1 Cor 2:12); he is omnipresent (Ps 139:7); he is eternal (Heb 9:14). He

performs such work as only God is able to do. For instance, he creates (Gen 1:2; Job 33:4) and gives life (John 6:63).

The apostles were convinced that the Holy Spirit is God. In a particular instance, the Apostle Peter warned one of the disciples: 'Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit ... You have not lied to men but to God' (Acts 5:3, 4). What is done to the Spirit is done to God.

The words of the Lord in the Old Testament are quoted in the New Testament as the words of the Spirit. For example, in the book of Isaiah, the Lord commands: 'Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; Keep on seeing, but do not perceive.'" The apostle Paul quotes that sentence and attributes it to the Spirit, 'The Holy Spirit spoke rightly through Isaiah the prophet to our fathers' (Isa 6:9; Acts 28:25). So the words of the Lord God are the words of the Holy Spirit. Similarly, what 'says the LORD' is actually the Holy Spirit speaking (compare Jer 31:31-34 with Heb 10:15).

If the Spirit is not God, than God does not truly dwell in our hearts. But we, Christians, are the temple of God because the Holy Spirit dwells in us. 'Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you ... do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you?' (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19). Thus we confess that the Spirit is God, the Lord and Giver of life. Unbelievers deny the deity of the Holy Spirit, indeed they do not know him (John 14:17);

## **The Spirit's Work**

The work of the Holy Spirit permeates redemption history as recorded in the pages of Scripture. In creation the Spirit of God hovered over the surface of the waters, and at the very end, the Spirit is seen assisting the bride of Christ before she meets her Beloved.

The Spirit is frequently mentioned in the Old Testament, particularly when he strengthens leaders and prophets, and endows them with heavenly wisdom. The prophet Isaiah foretold that the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon the Messiah (see Joel 2:28, 29; Isa 11:2). The Old Testament also predicted a day when the Spirit would be poured upon all God's people.

Jesus was conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. During Christ's baptism, the Spirit was made manifest in the form of a dove, to mark out publicly Jesus of Nazareth as the promised Messiah. From the very beginning of his ministry Jesus was led by the Spirit (Mark 1:12) until finally 'through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God' (Heb 9:14). Through mighty works and miracles the Spirit testified that Jesus is truly the Son of God (Matt 12:28).

The Holy Spirit is the author of Scripture. 'Prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit' (2 Pet 1:21). The same may be said of the apostles' doctrine, which 'God has revealed ... to us through His Spirit' (1 Cor 2:10). Furthermore, the Spirit confirmed the gospel and all the teachings of the apostles by various wonders, such as speaking in other languages and miraculous healing (Heb

2:3, 4). Besides giving us the Word, the Holy Spirit also teaches God's children (1 Cor 2:12). Otherwise the message of the Bible will fall on deaf ears (1 Cor 2:14).

The Holy Spirit is the author of the Christian life, which has its beginning in regeneration, the new birth (John 3:5, 6). The Holy Spirit resides in all believers – indeed one cannot be a Christian if he does not have the Spirit (Rom 8:9).

As Christ had promised, the Holy Spirit was given to the first members of the New Testament church at Pentecost; they were all baptised in the Holy Spirit. From then onwards, every convert is baptised in the Spirit from the first moment of genuine faith in Christ. In the words of Paul, 'For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit' (1 Cor 12:13). It is inconceivable that someone could be a member of the body of Christ without being baptized by the Spirit. There are no Christians who are not baptized with the Spirit.

The Spirit grants us a diversity of gifts so that we may edify and help one another as members of the church. He empowers us to be Christ's witnesses (Acts 1:8), and to live in holiness and righteousness (Rom 8:14). As we walk day by day in the Spirit, he transforms our lives. 'The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control' (Gal 5:22, 23). Finally, the Holy Spirit is our guarantee that we will persevere to the very end (Eph 1:13, 14).

The central ministry of the Holy Spirit is to exalt the Lord Jesus Christ, and make him known. Jesus said, 'He will glorify Me, for

He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you' (John 16:14). Where the Lord Jesus Christ is exalted, worshipped and obeyed from the heart, there the Holy Spirit is present with his manifold blessings.

# 12

## Law and Gospel

The law and the gospel are two parts of the Word of God; both are useful for our salvation and spiritual life. The two aspects of Scripture should be clearly distinguished from each other, otherwise much confusion will result. Yet the law and gospel are so intimately related that an accurate knowledge of one cannot be obtained without the other. The gospel will be rendered meaningless if we do not understand the justice and wrath of God revealed in his law. The cross is as much a manifestation of God's justice as it is of his mercy.

The law comprises everything in scripture in the form of divine command and prohibition, whereas the gospel is the accomplishment and application of redemption. The distinction between law and gospel is not the same as that between the Old and New Testaments. There is law and gospel in both Testaments, albeit the law is more prominent in the Old while the gospel is more fully revealed in the New.

### **The Law of Moses**

God gave the law to his people Israel by Moses. The Ten Commandments, or the Decalogue, are the summary of the Mosaic Law, but we should keep in mind that there were hundreds of other rules and precepts that regulated the moral, religious and civil life of Israel.



The moral commandments (prohibiting idolatry, blasphemy, disobedience, stealing, lying, murder, coveting, etc) are applicable in all ages, including our own. The writers of the New Testament reiterate the moral laws for Christians.

The ceremonial laws, such as various feasts and Sabbaths, and the priestly sacrifices of animals, have been abrogated because they were fulfilled in Christ (see Col 2:16,17; Heb 10). As Christians we do not observe the Jewish Sabbath and its ceremonies. However the New Testament commands Christians to gather together, and following the apostolic example (Act 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2), the churches meet on the first day of the week, the day of the resurrection, to worship the Lord. This is called the Lord's Day or the Christian Sabbath.

### **Right Use of the Law**

It is customary to distinguish a three-fold use of the law.

#### *To Maintain Civil Order*

The law serves the purpose of restraining disorder and injustice, and promoting fairness. Human society cannot survive without law and its enforcement. The civil laws of Israel are not applicable to the church since the people of God are no longer organized as a single nation. Nonetheless Christians are admonished to obey the civil authorities of their individual countries (see Rom 13).

#### *A Tutor to Lead Sinners to Christ*

The law cannot save, yet it is indispensable in evangelism. It convicts us of sin, our inability to meet its strict demands, and our dire need of a Saviour.

All are aware of God's moral law, even those who never heard the Ten Commandments, since our conscience tells us what is right and wrong (Rom 2:14, 15). No one can be excused on the basis of ignorance. Some are more responsible than others because they have more light, but all are accountable for the light they have.

Moreover the entire human race is guilty of transgressing the law. 'Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God' (Rom 3:19). Even a cursory look at the Ten Commandments suffices to convict us that we have missed the mark. Did I always speak the truth and obey my parents? Was I always pure and honest (Jesus says that lust is adultery in the heart)? Was I ever unjustly angry (Jesus says that anger is the seed of murder)? Did I always give God the honour and praise he deserves? Indeed, we are all 'guilty before God'.

When a sinner looks at himself in the law as in a mirror, he sees the darkness and filth of his heart, but that is as far as the law can take him. It cannot cleanse nor excuse the sinner. The law compels the convicted sinner to seek forgiveness elsewhere. 'Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith' (Gal 3:24). Thus the law works alongside the gospel in the conversion and salvation of sinners.

### *The Christian's Moral Rule of Life*

The law of God is the ethical norm for believers. The law does not save, but it is our guide to live as children of God, as he had promised, 'I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in

My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them' (Ez 36:27).

The first Psalm describes the blessed man who does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly but finds joy and meditates in the law of God. The apostle Paul gives his personal testimony, saying, 'I delight in the law of God according to the inward man' (Rom 7:22). Elsewhere he summarizes our Christian duty by a single word, love, and goes on to explain that love is the fulfillment of the law (Romans 13:8-10).

We need the law to discern God's will, our remaining sins and weaknesses, and our continual need for grace, pardon and the power of the Spirit for our sanctification.

### **Wrong Use of the Law**

There are two great enemies of the law and the gospel, antinomianism and legalism. Both are deadly errors and we must be careful not to fall into any one of them.

1. Antinomianism (literally 'against the law') refers to the false idea that the gospel frees Christians from required obedience to any law. Sadly antinomianism is not uncommon among evangelicals. The Bible warns against this deception, 'He who says, I know Him, and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him' (1 John 2:4). Jesus did not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it. Not the smallest letter will by any means disappear from the law, he said, and solemnly warned those who break the least of the commandments and teach others to do so (see Matt 5:17-19).

As Christians we rejoice that we are not under the law, in the sense that God has been gracious to us and we are no longer under its condemnation. However Christian freedom is not lawlessness! Paul continues to say that we become willing slaves of righteousness (Rom 6:14-23). We remain under obligation, indeed we are now motivated by love, to obey Christ's commandments (John 14:21). For the first time we have been set free from the bondage of sin to serve and obey the living God. Our obedience, though imperfect, is a powerful witness of God's saving work in us. 'I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them' (Hebrews 10: 16, 17). God forgives; he also gives his children an obedient heart.

2. Legalism is the false doctrine that salvation can be gained by our obedience to the law. This attitude is common among Roman Catholics. Legalism is an impossible task. We are all law-breakers; therefore the law cannot justify anyone. 'Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin' (Rom 3:20). In fact, all those who hope to attain life through obedience of the law are condemned. 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them' (Gal 3:10). God's law makes no concessions but demands perfect and unbroken obedience. It is foolish for sinners to hope in that very thing that condemns them.

What then is the biblical balance between law and gospel? We should not attempt to be saved by our obedience to the law – we should rather admit our failure and guilt. For salvation, we should place our faith in Jesus Christ as proclaimed in the gospel. Well

then, we ask, 'Do we then make void the law through faith?' The Bible answers, 'Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law' (Rom 3:31). The gospel does not nullify but rather fulfills the law by Christ meeting the demands of the law in his obedience to its precepts and in his suffering its penalties, even death on the cross, for our justification. Having been set free from sin, we gladly became servants of God.

# 13

## Regeneration

What is the new birth, or regeneration, as it is also called? We may define regeneration as a creative act of God, imparting new life to spiritually dead sinners. Physical birth results in physical life; regeneration by the Spirit gives us spiritual life, for 'that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit' (John 3:6).

The Bible uses different terms to describe regeneration: (1) to beget, procreate, give birth (John 1:13; James 1:18; 1 John 2:29); (2) to regenerate, create anew (Titus 3:5; 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15; Eph 2:10; 4:24); (3) to make alive (Eph 2:5; Col 2:13).

### **Spiritually Dead**

The new birth is indispensable for salvation. During a conversation with Nicodemus, a respected Jewish leader, Jesus underlines the absolute necessity of the new birth. Nicodemus was a Jew – a member of God's covenant people; he was circumcised (the Old Testament rite which distinguished Jews from Gentiles and was a picture of their covenantal consecration to God); studied and taught the Scriptures; prayed regularly and endeavored to keep the commandments.

Yet Jesus insisted that unless Nicodemus was born again (or literally, born from above), he would not see or enter the kingdom of God (John 3:3, 7). We should apply Jesus' words to ourselves. It is not enough to come from a good Christian family,

to be baptized, and to be a religious and moral person. All those things will not give us an entrance into heaven. To see and enter God's kingdom, we too must be born again!

But why is regeneration necessary? The Bible's diagnosis of our spiritual health is dismal. We are not merely weak or sick; much worse than that, we are spiritually 'dead in trespasses and sin' (Eph 2:1). Thus we need to be born 'from above' – by the power of God – because we come into this world as spiritual stillbirths. We who are 'dead' need to be 'made alive' (Eph 2:3).

### **Calling**

The gospel is proclaimed to everyone; many are invited, many are called. Yet God's marvellous invitation is often met with indifference, antipathy and even open hostility. That is not unexpected, given man's sinful nature and the state of spiritual death. On the contrary what is surprising is that some do in fact respond and believe.

We come to believe only because God's call is powerful and effective. As in the beginning, when God spoke and the worlds were formed, even now, God's word creates new spiritual life. The Bible states that 'whom [God] predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified' (Rom 8:30). In this verse, 'called' cannot be referring to the general gospel invitation, for not everyone who hears the gospel is predestined. The same people who are here 'called' had also been predestined, and are also justified. Their call was effective unto salvation. This act of God is termed 'the effectual call' and must be distinguished from the general call or gospel invitation. The apostle Paul uses the

word 'called' to mean the converted, all Christians. In distinction from the rest of the world, the called 'belong to Jesus Christ', they are 'loved of God' (Rom 1:6, 7) and 'in fellowship with his Son' (1 Cor 1:9 NIV).

Jesus' miracle of raising Lazarus from death illustrates the power of God's call. Lazarus had been dead and buried for four days. Yet Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth!' Could Lazarus come out of the grave? Could a cadaver hear anything or walk? How then did he hear Jesus' voice and walk out of the grave? Was it not by the power of Jesus' word? Jesus had breathed in him new life so that he could respond to his call. The same is true of every person who ever responds to the gospel.

### **Born of God**

Can we do something to be born again? No, the new birth is not something we can do, or even help to achieve. Regeneration is the work of someone else, the Holy Spirit. Again and again the apostle John emphasizes that we are 'born of God' (1 John 3:9; 4:7; 5:1,4,18). God is the author of the new birth.

The new birth is an act of God alone, without human help, consent or cooperation. 'As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God' (John 1:12, 13). Who are they who receive and believe in the Lord Jesus? Certainly not those who are spiritually dead; they have no attraction to Christ but rather walk according to the course of this world, under the tyranny of Satan, and enslaved to their sinful passions (Eph 2:1-3).



Who then believes in Christ? The Bible answers, those who were born of God. Regeneration comes first and enables us to believe.

Can we say that we were born of God because we made a decision to receive Christ, or because we said a special prayer? No, many who made 'a decision for Christ' and said the 'Sinner's Prayer' show no evidence of spiritual life. The new birth is not by the will of the flesh or the will of man, but of the will of God. It is not something that you decide to do, but an act that God performs in us if and when he pleases. Nor can we presume to be born again simply because we have been baptized. Suffice it to say that many who have been baptized show no signs of spiritual life.

### **The Fruit of Regeneration**

How then can we tell if we have been born again, if we're spiritually alive? Though the new birth is God's work exclusively, the results of the new birth are clearly evident in us. The first cry and breathing of a newborn baby reassures the mother that her child is alive and healthy. What then are the signs of spiritual life? The Bible underlines three qualities that characterise the children of God: faith, holiness and love.

1. Faith: 'Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God' (1 John 5:1); and again, 'He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him' (John 3:36).

2. Holiness: 'Whoever has been born of God does not sin ... you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him' (1 John 3:9; 2:29).

3. Love: 'Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God ... we know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren' (1 John 4:7; 3:14).

The Bible does not teach that we are born again by faith, or on account of our holiness or love. On the contrary, these virtues follow after regeneration. Faith in Christ, personal holiness and a loving attitude are the concrete evidence that a person is born from above into God's family.

# 14

## Conversion

The gospel calls sinners to repentance and faith in Christ for salvation. The invitation is given far and wide to all kinds of people, whoever they may be, and wherever they may be found. That is the message of the faithful minister of the gospel: 'I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ' (Acts 20:20, 21).

The responsibility to respond to the gospel rests squarely on our shoulders. God commands all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30). The Lord does not repent for us nor does he believe on our behalf. The sinner must repent; the sinner must believe!

Yet we, being fallen and sinners by nature, cannot do what we ought to do. Jesus declared that 'no one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him' (John 6:44). Our conversion does not spring from our natural ability but solely from the grace of God. He gives us the ability to repent and believe; indeed, he grants us repentance and faith! 'It has been granted on behalf of Christ ... to believe in Him'; God also grants 'repentance to life' (Phil 1:29; Acts 11:18).

### **Repentance**

Saving faith cannot exist in an impenitent heart. The Bible consistently sets forth repentance as the way to forgiveness and

life. Repentance was the constant message of the prophets (Jer 23:22). John the Baptist preached a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins (Mark 1:4). Jesus emphasized the necessity of repentance from the very beginning of his ministry: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.' He solemnly warned that we will perish unless we repent (Mark 1:15; Luke 13:3); he included repentance in the gospel message that is to be preached in the entire world (Luke 24:47). Following Christ's commission, the apostles preached repentance everywhere they went (Acts 2:38; Acts 3:19; 17:30; 26:20).

But what exactly is repentance? The words used in the Bible simply mean 'to turn' and 'to change one's mind'. The prodigal son repented: he came to his senses, admitted his sin, and returned to his father.

Repentance includes sorrow, but it is more than mere grief. 'Godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death' (2 Cor 7:15). After betraying Jesus, Judas was remorseful, but his remorse produced despair rather than repentance, and he committed suicide.

True repentance leads to a radical moral and spiritual change – from idolatry to the worship of the true God (1 Thess 1:9); from sin to righteousness (Luke 3:11-14), from unbelief to trust in Christ. (In his sermon recorded in Acts 2, the apostle Peter convinced the Jews that the man whom they crucified as a blasphemer was declared by God to be the Lord, the Messiah. Their repentance meant a 'change of mind' regarding Jesus.)

The inner change in the heart does show itself outwardly in a transformed life and good works. These 'fruits of repentance' (Luke 3:7-14) are the result and proof of true conversion. We should be careful not to confuse biblical repentance with 'penance' – a form of punishment or religious works intended to make satisfaction for sin.

The fruits of repentance are not reckoned as a punishment or a payment of the legal debt owed to God's justice. God forgives gratuitously, freely; God forgives on account of Christ's sacrifice. Remission is found in the name of Christ and not on account of anything we do. Our tears do not appease God's wrath but only the blood of Jesus. The repentant does not live a good life to merit forgiveness; he lives a clean and godly life because he is forever grateful for God's forgiving grace.

### **Faith**

Faith is the instrument, or means, of salvation. Faith is an empty hand that receives God's gift of salvation. We are saved 'through faith'; we are justified 'by faith' (Eph 2:8: Rom 3:28). Faith marks the beginning and characterizes the whole of the Christian life. 'I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me' (Gal 2:20).

It is helpful to distinguish three aspects of saving faith: knowledge, agreement (or assent) and trust. It is impossible to believe in Christ unless you are acquainted with the truths of the gospel message. 'How shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard?' (Rom 10:14).

Knowledge is basic, but it is not sufficient. Many are familiar with the contents of the Christian creed and yet remain unconvinced that it is true. It is necessary to be convinced that the gospel message is true, and especially that the Scripture's testimony about the Son of God is true.

The third and crucial element of saving faith is trust, resting on Christ and committing oneself to his care. 'In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation' (Eph 1:13). Like the woman with the bleeding disorder, by faith the sinner touches the Lord Jesus and is healed. The believer does not merely believe some facts about Jesus; the Christian believes in Christ, he has faith in him! (John 11:25; Rom 3:26).

Moreover saving faith looks to Jesus Christ alone for salvation. For our justification, we have no confidence in the flesh or the merits of our works (Phil 3:3; Rom 4:5); neither do we entrust our souls in the hands of any creature, for the apostle Peter warns us that 'there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12).

Finally, we must distinguish genuine faith in Christ from its satanic counterfeit. James (2:14-26) argues that good works are the proof of living faith. He puts forward this challenge: 'Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.' True faith is made manifest by good works; otherwise, if it is alone, it is exposed as a dead and useless imitation. Three times he repeats: 'Faith without works is dead.'

Abraham believed God; his faith was counted to him as righteousness (Gen 15). He was not justified because of his faith plus the merits of some works he had done or would do in the future (Rom 4). Yet the reality of his faith was not manifested until some 30 years later when God put him to the test. Abraham offered his son Isaac, proving without a shadow of a doubt that he really believed God's promise. His faith was genuine (Gen 22; Heb 11:17-19). In this sense Abraham was justified by works, i.e. his faith was shown to be right because it was accompanied by obedience (James 2:21-24). The same is true for each one of us.

Conversion, the moment a sinner repents and believes in Christ, is a once for all act – it marks the dividing line between death and life. Yet, throughout our earthly pilgrimage we continue to believe in Christ. The Lord works in us to test, strengthen and preserve our faith. We also need to repent again and again from specific sins whenever we deviate from our course.

# 15

## Justification

The Bible's teaching on justification is the very core of the gospel message because it answers the all-important question of how a sinner can become right with God.

What is justification? Though the meaning of the word 'justification' may not be very familiar because we do not often use it in everyday speech, the concept is quite simple to understand. Justification is a legal term. It is the sentence pronounced by the judge in favour of the accused. To justify means to declare righteous, to pronounce not guilty. The justified person is freed from all punishment of the law. The opposite of justification, as one may suppose, is condemnation: the sentence meted against the accused when the judge declares him to be guilty, a law-breaker, and deserving punishment. The judge's role, then, is to condemn the unrighteous and to justify the righteous (Deut 25:1; Prov 17:15).

God would have justified us if we had been righteous. In that case we would not have needed a Saviour because Christ did not come to call the righteous, but sinners. In reality we have all sinned, having broken the law of God. We are born sinners and throughout our lives we continued to pile up guilt upon guilt. 'Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God' (Rom 3:19). God's just



sentence is our condemnation because we are all guilty; we are all worthy of the punishment of hell.

Since the Lord abhors him 'who justifies the wicked' how then can we ever escape divine judgment? It is precisely here that the gospel of God's grace shines forth in all its splendour: God has revealed a way – the only way – whereby he himself may still be just and at the same time justify the wicked!

There are two aspects to justification: negatively, God cancels out the sin record of the believer. 'Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin.' God does not impute sin, that is, he does not count the believer's sins against him any longer. Positively, 'God imputes righteousness apart from works' (Romans 4:6-8). In other words, God counts and considers the believer as righteous! God imputes, or credits, righteousness to his account.

At this point we must ask two important questions: (1) How is the blessing of justification received? (2) How can God justify a sinner without violating his own justice and holiness?

### **Faith Alone**

How is a sinner justified? A person is justified by faith, by trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ. Faith is the hand that receives God's gift of righteousness.

God does not justify the believer because of any personal righteousness that he has attained by obedience to God's law. Scripture speaks unequivocally: 'Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law' (Rom

3:28). 'Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified' (Gal 2:16). 'But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for 'the just shall live by faith'' (Gal 3:11).

Man is justified by faith alone, that is, without any merit accruing from what he does during his lifetime. This does not imply that faith is alone or barren in the justified person. A true and living faith is always shown by the good works it produces, but the Christian does not perform good works in order to be justified before God, neither is he justified on account of his good deeds.

'But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness' (Rom 4:5). God justifies the ungodly! He does not say, 'God justifies the righteous.' That would have been perfectly understandable and just - and it would have spelled despair to all of us sinners. He does not even say, 'God justifies the ungodly when he converts and starts doing good works.' Paul insists that it is him 'who does not work' but 'believes' that God accounts as righteous. God justifies the ungodly by faith alone.

### **Christ Alone**

We now come to the second question. How can God justify a sinner without violating his own justice and holiness? How is it possible for God, who is holy and just, not to reckon sin? Can God be lax about it, or simply ignore it? How can he 'credit righteousness' to the believer if the believer does not work to

gain it? What righteousness is this on account of which God accepts sinners? In a word, the answer is Jesus!

The Bible explains how those who believe in Jesus are 'justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith ... to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus' (Rom 3:24-26).

God can be gracious towards sinners because of 'the redemption that is in Christ Jesus'. Jesus bought our freedom by shedding his blood on the cross. In Christ 'we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins' (Eph 1:7). We were indebted to God's justice; Jesus paid our debt in full. Our debt was cancelled.

God presented Jesus as a propitiation. The word 'propitiation' means to placate, to pacify, and to appease. God is offended and angered by sin. 'The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men' (Rom 1:18). Jesus turned aside God's wrath against us who believe because he shed his blood on the cross as a sacrifice for sin. God is appeased because Christ fulfilled the demands of the Law.

Moreover, in justification God does not only take away our sin and guilt; he also credits righteousness to our account. We are not only declared 'not guilty' – we are also declared 'righteous'! Not guilty because our sins were taken away by Christ; righteous because we are clothed in Jesus' righteousness. 'Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the

free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous' (Rom 5:17, 19). Adam's sin brought down the human race with him to condemnation; Jesus' perfect obedience to the Father merited righteousness and life for all who believe in him.

In brief, God 'made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him' (2 Cor 5:21). Christ, the Lamb without spot or blemish, was made 'sin for us' – and suffered and died to satisfy divine justice. Furthermore, we have been made righteous 'in him'. Believers are hid in Christ; when God looks at us, he sees us perfectly righteous – indeed, as righteous as his beloved Son himself.

So, God is 'just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus' (Rom 3:26). God graciously declares believers righteous, and in so doing he remains perfectly just -- all because of Jesus' obedience and sacrifice on the cross. Grace and justice are gloriously displayed at the cross of Calvary.

### **Grace Alone**

Why is it that the merits of Christ for our justification are applied to us by faith alone? Why doesn't God allow us to contribute our merits too?

The Bible answers: 'Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace' (Rom 4:16). God wants to exhibit the beauty of his grace – his unmerited favour, his goodness and kindness towards undeserving sinners. 'Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not

work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness' (Rom 4:4, 5).

A worker deserves his salary because he has earned it by his labour, but a servant who hates his master and steals his property doesn't deserve anything but chastisement. What if, instead of punishment, his master forgives him and enriches him with goods? That is grace! And that is exactly what God does to sinners who believe in His Son.

Justification is not the wage, or payment, for our works. It was earned for us by an infinite price – the blood of the Son of God (Rom 5:9). God justifies us freely because the price was paid by his own Son! It is God's gift to unworthy sinners. God justifies 'freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus' (Rom 3:24). Freely! Without any payment! Without human merit! Whoever attempts to be reconciled to God by doing good works thereby denies and refuses grace (see Rom 11:6; Gal 5:4).

This evangelical truth of justification is vital for the Christian church. If we are in error here, we lose the true and only gospel of God. With all our heart, we must embrace, uphold and defend the scriptural gospel of justification by faith alone, in Christ alone, and by the pure grace of God alone.

# 16

## Holiness

After discussing justification, we must turn our attention to yet another aspect of salvation: sanctification (or holiness). The Lord Jesus saves in every respect. He does not only liberate us from guilt and the punishment of sin. Marvellous as that is, his purpose is also to set us free from the dominion and pollution of sin. 'Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word' (Eph 5:25, 26).

### **A Holy Calling**

Scripture calls all believers 'saints' or 'holy ones' (see Rom 1:7; 8:27; 15:25, 26, 31; 16:2, 15, etc.). The term 'holy' means separated, set apart, consecrated. Christians are 'saints' because we are cleansed by the blood of Christ and consecrated to God by the Holy Spirit. All members of the church, whoever we may be, are saints. We are saints now, today, during our lifetime on earth. All of us who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ are 'sanctified by faith' in him (Acts 26:18).

Now since we are saints, we have a special vocation to walk in holiness and righteousness. We do not attempt to be godly in order to become saints, but because we are saints already. Thus the Bible commands us, 'Fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints' (Eph 5:3). It is appropriate for saints to live saintly, or

holy, lives, since we were set apart from the world and consecrated to God.

As Christians we have a sacred duty to seek an ever-increasing measure of holiness. This appears from various scriptures: 'Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God' (2 Cor 7:1). 'For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality' (1 Thess 4:3). 'Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord' (Heb 12:14). 'As He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, Be holy, for I am holy' (1 Pet 1:15, 16).

Sometimes Evangelical Christians say, 'We are sinners just like the others.' That is false humility; it is but a lame excuse for a mediocre lifestyle. It is much better to acknowledge the reality of God's transforming grace in our hearts and lives. Scripture never places Christians in the same category as lost people. We are not sinners just like the others. On the contrary, as we have seen, the regular descriptive term used for Christians is 'saints'. We are in urgent need of changing our mentality. We ought to strive to live as saints, to the glory and praise of God who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light.

### **A Holy Walk**

Sanctification is God's work in us (2 Thess 5:23), through the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:11; 15:16; 1 Pet 1:2). However this does not imply that we remain passive and inactive. God renews our will and gives us the strength to do what is right.

God's work in us becomes evident in our new desires, choices and actions – we get baptised, pray, praise and thank God, fast, hear and meditate on the Word, participate in the Lord's Supper, work with our hands, flee temptation, confess our sins, repent, meet together to encourage and edify one another, forgive, seek and accept good counsel, learn patience, kindness and self-control. By God's empowering, Christians are very active!

The basic means of our sanctification, which God has provided us with, is his holy Word. 'Sanctify them by Your truth,' Jesus prayed for us, and continued by saying, 'Your word is truth' (John 17:17). God's Word progressively changes the way we think, which in turn changes our values, choices, mentality and character.

There are degrees or different levels of holiness: there is always the possibility to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. I cannot be more justified today than I was on the day I first believed, but more holy, I certainly can be. The apostle Paul expresses a realistic attitude: 'Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead' (Phil 3:13).

No Christian reaches a state of absolute moral perfection in this life. 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us' (1 John 1:8). As long as he lived in the flesh, the apostle John could not say, 'I have no sin', -- and neither can we. The Bible is intensely realistic, warning us that 'the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another' (Gal 5:17). The battle rages on for a lifetime. The Christian fights, struggles and overcomes evil; when



he falls, he repents and confesses his sin to the Lord. Daily he asks God for bread as well as for his fatherly forgiveness. The Christian anticipates the glorious day when he will be freed from all conflict; yet he also knows that as long as he is in the body, he must engage in spiritual warfare up to the very end.

### **Good Works**

Good works are an essential part of the Christian experience. Speaking by the mouth of Zachariah, the Holy Spirit announced the purpose of God's redemption before the birth of the Saviour. God delivers his people that we 'might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life' (Luke 1:75). Believers are saved to serve God.

The apostle Paul says, 'For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age' (Titus 2:11-14). Those who are saved by grace are also taught to say 'No' to ungodliness and 'Yes' to righteousness. Why? Because Christ died for that very reason: He 'gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.'

But someone might object, 'Does not Paul say in Ephesians 2:8, 9 that we are saved by grace through faith and not of works?' Yes indeed he does exclude personal works as the meritorious cause of our salvation, but in the very next verse, Paul presents works as the goal of our salvation. The saved are 'created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should

walk in them.' They who are not saved 'by works' are saved 'for good works'. God has eternally determined that his children will do good works.

### **Justification and Holiness**

Justification and sanctification are two inseparable but distinct aspects of salvation -- two sides of the same coin. It would be a serious error if they were mixed together as if they are one and the same thing. In justification, God declares believers righteous for Christ sake; in sanctification, God makes believers righteous by the Holy Spirit. Justification is a once-for-all judicial act of God about the believer; sanctification is the continual work of God's Spirit in the believer. Justification gives a perfect legal standing forever; sanctification is a progressive work in the moral and spiritual life of the believer. A sinner is justified by faith alone apart from any merits of his works; the believer is sanctified by his faith working through love.

We are joined to Christ by faith. In this way we are forgiven and justified. But since we are united to our Saviour, this relationship must inevitably produce good fruit. 'I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned' (John 15:5, 6). A barren 'faith' is dead. It resembles the faith of demons: they too believe in one God, and yet they are damned. Saving faith, on the contrary, works by love and is rich in good works. In other words, where holiness is lacking there is no spiritual life, no true faith and no justification.

# 17

## Perseverance

Do the saints persevere in grace to the end, or do some of them fall and become lost forever? Is the believer eternally secure? Can a child of God lose his salvation?

The Bible answers that Christians 'are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time' (1 Pet 1:3-5). We should therefore keep these two truths in mind: (1) God keeps us; and (2) Christians continue in the faith (for they are kept 'through faith').

### **Kept by God**

We would quickly lose our salvation if we were left to our own resources. Thank God, our salvation is in the hands of a mighty and faithful Saviour. He assures us: 'My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. I and My Father are one' (John 10:27-30; please read; Rom 8:38, 39; 1 Pet 1:3-5; Jude 1:24, 25).

Our salvation is secured by the Triune God: the Father ('no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand'); the Son ('neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand') and the Holy Spirit ('you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance' - Eph 1:13, 14).

Our security is grounded on the purpose of God ('This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing' - John 6:39, 40); the omnipotence of God (we are 'kept by the power of God') and the promise of God ('I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish'). God's eternal purpose is immutable; his power is greater than all opposing forces; and his promises are sure because God is faithful.

God's plan for his elect cannot fail: 'Whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified' (Rom 8:30). Can it be said that some of whom God predestined will eventually be damned? Is God unable to fulfill what he has determined beforehand? The chain of divine saving works, extending from eternity past to our glorification, is not broken and cannot be broken.

Nothing can separate God's elect from his eternal love. 'I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom 8:38, 39).

### **Kept through Faith**

The Bible's teaching on our security in Christ is a great comfort to God's children, yet others abuse this doctrine. They foolishly argue, 'Since it is once saved, always saved, then sin doesn't matter. I can live it up and still go to heaven at the end.' The thought is as absurd as it is disgusting. Their mentality is proof

positive that they are strangers to God's grace. 'He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him' (1 John 2:4). They fool themselves with empty slogans, presuming to be 'always saved' when in fact they weren't ever even 'once saved'.

Just as the Bible teaches God's protection and preservation of His people, it is equally emphatic that only those will be saved who endure to the end, abide in Christ and his Word, and continue in the faith (please read Matt 24:13; John 8:31; John 15:6; 1 Cor 15:1, 2; Col 1:22, 23).

Ignoring these and similar scriptures, some say that it doesn't matter whether you continue to believe or not, for God will keep you saved forever. That is not true. We cannot accept half the Bible and ignore the rest. The total picture is this: God protects his children and therefore they remain faithful to the end. As Peter says, they are 'kept by the power of God (that's God's protection) through faith (and not, as some say, with or without faith).'

As Christians we are painfully aware that our faith is often weak and faltering. We can only persevere in faith because of the intercession of Christ. Peter was overwhelmed by grief when he denied the Lord three times. Yet even then, Peter's faith could not fail because his Saviour would never deny one of his own. 'But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail' (Luke 22:32). It is the same with every other child of God; Jesus 'is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them' (Heb 7:25).

## **Hypocrites Unmasked**

What about those who leave the church and deny the faith? They had heard the gospel, believed in Jesus, received baptism, became active members of the church, participated in the Lord's Table, witnessed to others about Christ, and for some time lived a decent moral and exemplary life, but now they deny Christ and want nothing to do with him or the church anymore. What does the Bible say about them?

They are hypocrites unmasked. They had played their part quite impressively - deceiving others, and perhaps even themselves, that they were genuine Christians. Their apostasy uncovers their counterfeit faith. The apostle John writes: 'They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us' (1 John 2:19).

These people were once considered true believers, but at one point they left the church. The apostle does not thereby conclude that genuine Christians can lose their salvation. On the contrary he judges that they were 'not of us'. If they were true believers, he reasons, they would have continued; their departure is proof that in fact they were merely 'professed' believers – they claimed to be so, and even acknowledged by the church, but in fact they were never true believers at all.

There are serious warnings in the Bible to professed Christians who, after an initial response to the gospel, turn away from Christ back to the world, sin and error. Their defection reveals that their hearts were never changed. Peter compares them to a washed

pig returning to the mud, and the author of Hebrews, to a cursed field that produces thorns and thistles after it receives the rain (See Heb 6:4-8 and 2 Pet 2:20-22).

It may be objected that the Bible speaks about being 'fallen from grace'. Unfortunately this phrase is often taken out of context and given a different meaning from what the apostle Paul meant. 'Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace' (Gal 5:4 KJV). Paul is not speaking about a Christian who commits a grave sin and loses his state of justification. Paul is contrasting two ways of justification – by law and by grace. Justification is either by personal works or by grace (a free and unmerited gift of God). Those who seek to be justified by works, if it were possible, will not be justified by grace. In this sense they are 'fallen from grace'. They have renounced the grace of God who attempt the impossible task of justification by works. They did not lose salvation; they were never justified at all for 'by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified' (Gal 2:16).

### **Eternally Secure**

We can summarize the Bible's teaching on eternal security by saying that, firstly, many people who profess to believe are not really saved (they have a counterfeit, temporary faith); they will be exposed in the Day of Judgment and sometimes even during their lifetime. Secondly, God's people are kept secure by the almighty power of their faithful Saviour, and thus they continue to believe and persevere to the end—indeed, for all eternity.

# 18

## The Church

The church is the assembly of God's people. The Greek word for church, *ekklesia*, is derived from the verb 'to call out' – it means a congregation, a community. In the New Testament it refers to all God's people (Eph 1:22; 3:10; 5:23), but more frequently, to local communities of believers (Acts 5:11; Rom 16:4).

The church is the work of the three Persons of the Trinity: 'In whom [the Lord Jesus] you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit' (Eph 2:22). The church is the family of God (Eph 2:18; 3:15; 4:6), the body and bride of Christ (Eph 1:22, 23; 5:23-32; Rev 19:7), and the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16; Eph 2:19-22).

### **One Holy Catholic Apostolic**

In the Nicene Creed (325 AD) we confess that the church is 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic'.

#### *One*

Christ has one body, the church, made up of many members. 'For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ' (1 Cor 12:12). The church's unity is not the result of centralized and world-wide organization. The unity is spiritual, as the Scripture insists, 'for by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body' (1 Cor 12:13). The church of Christ is manifest on earth in many



different local communities of believers. Through having distinctive slants and characteristics, the local churches find their unity in their faith in Christ, their Head and Saviour, and in their love for one another.

### *Holy*

The church is holy because it is set apart from the rest of the world and consecrated to God; it is not sinless, but it is cleansed and forgiven, 'sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all' (Heb 10:10). All Christians are saints (holy ones), 'sanctified by faith' in Christ (Acts 26:18). The Lord is building us together into a holy temple, the dwelling place of God by the Spirit (Eph 2:19-22).

### *Catholic*

The church is catholic (meaning 'universal') because it is made up of people of all languages and countries, Jews and Gentiles. With one mind and one voice we praise the Lamb: 'You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation' (Rev 5:9).

### *Apostolic*

The church is built on the teaching of the apostles and prophets (Eph 2:20). Their doctrine is recorded in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. A particular church is truly apostolic as long as it faithfully embraces the teachings of the Bible. A church is not necessarily apostolic because its leaders claim to be historical successors of the apostles. The Bible warns us that false leaders (the apostle Paul calls them savage wolves) arise even from

among the bishops of the apostolic churches (Acts 20:29). Doctrine, and not historical lineage, is the acid test for the church.

### **Local Church**

Every disciple of Christ has the privilege and duty to join other believers in a local church for mutual edification. 'Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching' (Heb 10:24, 25). The lone Christian is a contradiction of God's saving work. Can there be a family if the brothers and sisters never meet? Can the members of the body, the eyes, the hands, the ears, live independently of one another? Can there be a temple if the stones are scattered?

There is no such thing as a perfect local Christian church. The church is made up of disciples, or pupils, who are still learning. We know the truth, but not entirely; we live godly lives, but not perfectly. Ignorance, error and sin are found in every believer, and hence, in every congregation made up of imperfect members. Moreover, some of the members may be false brethren, as Jesus said, the wheat and the tares will grow together until the harvest. At the very extreme, apostate churches and the cults cannot be considered legitimate Christian churches because of their damnable heresies (such as the denial of the Trinity or the deity of Christ).

Even so, it is still God's will for his children to meet together in local churches. The solitary Christian, puffed up with spiritual pride, cannot find a suitable church: none is good enough for

him! It would be much better for him to learn a little humility, pull up his sleeves and start contributing to the edification of the church rather than criticize and whine about the poor state of the church.

True Christians are the only legitimate members of the church. The Lord adds to the church those who are saved (Acts 2:47). New believers are welcomed into the fellowship when they submit to baptism, the sign of their union with Christ, as was the practice of the apostolic church. 'Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them' (Acts 2:41).

### **Leadership**

The Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of the church (Col 1:18), sustains his people by the Holy Spirit (John 16:7). The Lord calls men from among the brethren to serve as bishops and deacons (Phil 1:1). The bishops (overseers) are also called pastors (shepherds) and elders (or presbyters). These terms refer to the same kind of leader. Thus, for instance, Paul addresses the elders (presbyters, v17) in the church of Ephesus, who are overseers (bishops, v28), and whose ministry was to shepherd (pastor, v28) the flock (Acts 20:17, 28).

Historically there was a departure from this pattern of leadership. At first the local church was led by a number of presbyters, who were also known as bishops. Later on, a distinction was made between the bishop and the presbyters (or priests, as they were then called). Further on, the bishops of important cities came to be considered higher than other bishops, and were called

metropolitans. By the fifth century the bishops of five important cities, Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem, exercised great authority, each one in his own territory. They were known as Patriarchs. The final step -- the elevation of one bishop above all bishops, invested with authority over the entire church – has never been reached.

The elders are appointed to shepherd the flock of God, serving as overseers, and being examples to the flock (1 Pet 5:2, 3). They are fully equipped for their ministry by the Scriptures for teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness (2 Tim 3:15, 16). The members of the church should obey their elders and submit to them (Heb 13:17).

### **Church Life**

The principal activities of the church are teaching (bible reading, bible study, teaching and preaching), prayer, the Lord's Supper and singing to the Lord. 'And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers... speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord' (Acts 2:41, 42; Eph 5:19).

All members, not only the leaders, have an active role to fulfill; all should contribute to the health and function of the body. The Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts to every member to serve and build up the church. 'As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone

ministers (serves), let him do it as with the ability which God supplies' (1 Pet 4:10, 11).

Together we learn the graces of life – humility, kindness, patience, forgiveness and love. We learn to help and care for one another. We should endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace so that with one voice and one heart we praise and worship God our Father. 'To Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen' (Eph 3:21).

A healthy church has an evangelistic outlook. The church is the light of world. The members are trained and equipped to reach out to a lost world (especially by their love, holy life and sharing the gospel). They invite and warmly welcome non-Christians to the church service to hear the message of the gospel. The unity and peace among Christians is powerful evidence that Jesus is indeed the Son of God, the Saviour of the world.

Christ Jesus loves his bride, the church; he gave himself for her to sanctify and cleanse her. One day the bride will be gloriously presented to him, and they will be united as a man and his wife in marriage. The church is blessed in Christ; he finds his fulfillment in her just as a husband in entirely happy with his wife.

# 19

## The Ordinances

The Lord Jesus gave his people two sacred ceremonies, Baptism and the Lord's Supper or Communion. These rites are called 'ordinances' because they have been ordained, or commanded, by the Lord; some Christians also call them sacraments.

Baptism and Communion are not human traditions. The Lord himself instituted Communion during the last supper, and commanded us to do the same until he returns (1 Cor 11:23-26). Also, before he ascended to heaven, Jesus commanded the apostles to preach the gospel everywhere and to baptise all who believe; he promised his presence until the church's mission is fulfilled at 'the end of the age' (Matt 28:18-20; Mark 16:15, 16).

### **Baptism**

Who should be baptized? The proper candidates for baptism are believers, as the Lord himself instructed: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them...' (that is, the disciples); and again, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized...'

The biblical sequence of events is as follows: (1) the proclamation of the gospel message, (2) personal faith in the Lord Jesus, and (3) baptism. This is the consistent pattern in every case of baptism recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. For instance, we read that 'Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household. And many of the Corinthians,

hearing, believed and were baptized' (Acts 18:8). We would be wise to follow the biblical model.

What about the infants of believing parents? Should they be baptized just as the Jews circumcised their children? Infant baptism was introduced early in the history of the church and it is now practiced in several Christian denominations. However there is no biblical warrant for this tradition. We would expect the Lord to give instructions on the baptism of infants if he so intended, just as he commanded the Jews to circumcise their children in the Old Testament. He did not, and we would be prudent not to go beyond what is written.

It is argued that when whole 'households' received baptism, infants may have been baptized with the rest of the family (Acts 16:15, 33; 18:8; 1 Cor 1:16). This argument cannot be conclusive because it is based on silence -- infants are not explicitly mentioned. Moreover, we are given the reason why the whole family was baptised. 'And immediately he and all his family were baptized...and he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household' (Acts 16:33, 34). All were baptised because all believed!

What is the meaning of baptism? Baptism is God's sign to the new disciple of his fellowship with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection (Rom 6:3, 4, 5; Col 2:12), and of remission of sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16). It is a sign (symbol, picture) because it shows spiritual realities by means of physical elements and actions (immersion in water).

Being the initiation rite, baptism is mentioned in the context of salvation, as we would expect (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16). However we will be mistaken to think of baptism, rather than repentance and faith, as the 'means' of salvation. The Bible teaches clearly that people are saved through faith without or before water baptism.

Abraham was justified by faith. 'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.' He was justified before he ever received the sign of circumcision. Abraham 'received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe' (Rom 4:3, 11). All are justified like Abraham – by faith, not by an external rite, whether circumcision in the Old Testament or baptism in the New.

Cornelius was saved by faith. The apostle Peter did not baptize Cornelius and his family to save them; he knew that God had already accepted them and purified their heart by faith. 'So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith' (Acts 15:8). Therefore he argued, 'Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' (Acts 10:47).

Their experience was by no means an exceptional case; rather, according to the apostle Peter, it is the norm and pattern for everyone: 'We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they' (Acts 15:11).



Baptism shows forth, but does not achieve, what is already accomplished by faith.

What is the proper mode of baptism? Baptism should be administered by the immersion of the believer in water, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Greek word for baptism simply means to immerse, to plunge. Thus, the rite symbolizes the believer's death and burial with Christ, and his rising up to a new life. Immersion in water also pictures the complete spiritual cleansing of the believer.

### **Communion**

In the Lord's Supper, the disciples share the holy bread and wine in commemoration of Christ, to proclaim his death, and as a sign of their communion with the Lord and with one another. It is called: (1) Eucharist, or thanksgiving (Matt 26:26, 27); (2) the Lord's Supper or the Lord's Table (1 Cor 11:20; 10:21); (3) Communion (1 Cor 10:16, 17); and (4) the Breaking of Bread (Matt 26:26, 27; Acts 2:42).

Communion is essentially a memorial, or a remembrance, of Christ our Lord. Twice he told us, 'Do this in remembrance of Me' (1 Cor 11:24, 25). Having completed his mission on earth, the Lord ascended bodily in heaven, and we are now waiting for his glorious return. Until then, he gave the Lord's Table to his church on earth as a perpetual reminder of our Redeemer and his love for us.

How should we understand Jesus' words: 'This is My body...this is My blood'? The bread is not a body nor is the wine blood; the sacred elements represent Jesus' body and blood. If I show you a

picture, saying, 'This is my father' -- the natural meaning is simply, 'This represents my father.' Similarly, the bread and wine are sacred symbols of the body and blood of Jesus, or, in his own words, 'a remembrance' of him.

The bread and wine do not change after consecration; the bread remains bread, and the wine remains wine (1 Cor 11:26-28; Matt 26:26). However since they are sacred symbols of the body and blood of Jesus, we ought to participate in the Supper with reverence. If we partake in an unworthy manner, we will dishonour the body and blood of Jesus represented in the elements (see 1 Cor 11:27-29).

Communion is also a proclamation of the Lord's death. 'For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes' (1 Cor 11:26). The sacrifice of Christ is announced in the church by the Word (in preaching, Bible reading, song and prayer), and especially during Communion. When we share and eat the bread, and drink the wine, we show how 'the Word was made flesh', gave himself for us, and shed his blood for our redemption. 'Take, eat this is My body which is broken for you...This cup is the new covenant in My blood.'

Jesus completed the sacrifice by which he accomplished our redemption. 'But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God' (Heb 10:12). We should not conceive of the Lord's Supper as a sacrifice for sin. Rather it is a showing forth of the finished, perfect and once-for-all sacrifice of the cross. Today 'there is no longer an offering for sin' (Heb 10:18).

Finally, the Lord's Table is a family meal, a fellowship or communion. We express our unity in Christ by sharing the same bread. 'For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread' (1 Cor 10:17). We are united together because we are united to Christ.

### **Means of Grace**

The ordinances are means of grace because through them the Lord blesses his people. We should not think that the blessings come automatically simply by taking part in the rite. Just like the Word of God, the ordinances communicates God's redeeming love to his people. The Word is not profitable unless it is mixed with faith in those who hear it (Heb 4:2); even so, the ordinances are only profitable to those who participate with a believing and obedient attitude.

How is God's grace received in baptism and how does it change the believers' lives? The application of water has no virtue to change a person. Rather baptism transforms their lives by their faithful obedience, as they learn to count themselves dead to sin and alive in Christ, rejecting sin, pursuing righteousness in the service of God. Similarly, the Lord's Supper gives us the opportunity to examine ourselves before God, and to renew our gratitude, love and commitment to Christ who gave himself for us.

# 20

## The King is Coming

The drama of the universe is approaching its grand finale. The Lord Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords, is coming again! His advent will mark the beginning of a series of momentous events: the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, the restoration of the universe, the banishment of the wicked in hell, and the gathering together of the saints with their Saviour in heaven.

God, the author of history, knows the end from the beginning. Unlike our plans, God's purpose cannot fail and the final events will certainly take place as planned. 'Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass' (Isa 46:11). God did not disclose every detail about the future; he has given us enough information for our spiritual welfare. Prophecy was not given to satisfy our curiosity but to encourage us to persevere in godliness and to give us hope, knowing that our Father's good plan for us will certainly come to pass. Prophecy is also a stern warning to unbelievers that their doom and destruction is hanging over their heads.

### **Death**

Death is a constant reminder that all is not well in this world. As soon as he disobeyed his Maker, God told Adam: 'In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return' (Gen 3:19). Death is our last enemy. Yet, though our body

dies and decays, Scripture gives us hope that reaches beyond the grave.

At death the spirit is separated from the body. The Bible teaches us that 'the body without the spirit is dead' (James 2:26). It describes death as follows: 'the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it' (Ecc 12:7). The body returns to the dust from which it was fashioned; the spirit goes to its Creator.

The apostle Paul reasons thus: 'For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain' (Phil 1:21-23). He considered death as the threshold of something better; he certainly did not think of it as the end of everything. Why? Because he desired 'to depart and be with Christ, which is far better.' Paul's body was buried when he was martyred, but his soul was transferred into the immediate presence of Christ. That is gain; that is much better than anything on earth! The same is true for all Christians: 'So we are always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord ...We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord' (2 Cor 5:6, 8).

Christians are 'with the Lord' immediately after death. Scripture knows nothing about an intermediary place of cleansing after death, known as purgatory. Admittedly, nobody can enter heaven in the glorious presence of God tainted with sin and burdened with debt. Nevertheless Scripture teaches that Jesus Christ took upon himself the sins of his people and made full legal satisfaction for them by his death on the cross. Since Christ 'purged our sins' (Heb 1:3), and his blood 'cleanses us from all

sin' (1 John 1:7), there is no scope for further purification after death.

Glorious as our expectation to be with the Lord after death, our complete victory will only take place when the Lord Jesus Christ resurrects our bodies. We were originally created spirit and body; our redemption would be complete when our body is raised to a glorified and immortal existence. 'The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body' (1 Cor 15:42-44). When He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is (1 John 3:2).

### **The Present Age**

Forty days after his resurrection the Lord Jesus ascended into heaven where he is now reigning over the universe and interceding for his people. One day Christ the King will return to earth. Two angels stood by the disciples and informed them: 'This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven' (Acts 1:11). The Lord Jesus himself said that 'they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory' (Matt 24:30).

We who are now living in the 'present age' wait for the 'age to come' inaugurated by the return of Christ (Eph 1:21; Luke 20:34-36). This present time is also called 'the last days' because this is the last period of the world's history (Heb 1:2; 1 John 2:18; Acts 2:17; 1 Pet 1:20).

Between Christ's first and second advent much that is prophesied in Scripture is taking place. Jesus predicted the destruction of the temple and the fall of Jerusalem, which occurred in A.D. 70 (Luke 21:20, 24). The Lord forewarned his disciples that they would be persecuted. Many Christians suffered martyrdom for his name's sake. Jesus also foretold that there would be wars, earthquakes, famines and plagues (Matt 24). Christ will return once the gospel is preached to all nations. 'This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come' (Matt 24:14).

The Lord also points out that many 'false christs' will arise and deceive many people. We are also warned about signs and wonders for these are fabricated by the arch-deceiver, Satan (2 Thess 2:8-14). We shouldn't be impressed by counterfeit miracles. It is very disturbing to realize that today multitudes crave ecstatic experiences and miraculous healing, in preference to the truth of the gospel, brotherly love and holiness of life.

There have always been fanatics who predicted the date of Christ's return even though Jesus said that no one knows of that day and hour. Elsewhere the Bible says that the day of the Lord shall come like a thief in the night (1 Thess 5:2). Now, of course, no thief will notify when he intends to visit you! The Lord compares his coming to the time of Noah's flood. In that generation virtually nobody believed that a day of reckoning was drawing close, so they continued in their usual occupations, pleasures and businesses. Then suddenly judgment overtook them. They were not prepared for the catastrophe. 'Watch

therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming' (Matt 25:13).

Unlike the godless, we who believe in Jesus Christ will not be surprised. Indeed we are 'looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ' (Titus 2:13). His promise motivates us to live in his service, for we know with absolute certainty that he will come and reward us, even though we do not know when that will happen.

### **The Lord's Coming**

On his first advent Jesus came in humility, as a poor baby in an obscure Judean village. In his second advent Christ will come in glory and great power with his holy angels. Every human being will see him, as Scripture says: 'Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him. Even so, Amen' (Rev 1:7).

By his divine power the Lord Jesus will give life to the dead, whether good or evil. 'Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation' (John 5:28, 29). The Bible describes departed Christians 'asleep in death' because they will be awakened to eternal life by the Lord. He will then give us an incorruptible body that can die no longer. Only then will we experience the fullness of salvation. 'We ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly



waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body' (Rom 8:23).

The dead in Christ will be raised up in a glorified body, while believers who happen to be alive on earth at his coming will be instantaneously transformed (1 Cor 15:51). The great company of the redeemed will be caught up ('raptured') to meet the Lord in the air. From that day on we will be with the Lord forever (1 Thess 4:14-17).

What will happen to this present universe? The apostle Peter tells us: 'the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up.' God will create a new heavens and a new earth out of this sin-cursed universe; he will cleanse it from sin and its effects forever. 'We, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells' (2 Pet 3: 9, 10, 13).

The Lord Jesus promises his bride, the church: 'Surely I am coming quickly.' We heartily respond: 'Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!' (Rev 22:20).

# 21

## Judgment, Heaven and Hell

God has appointed a day when all humanity will be decisively and forever divided into two groups -- the saved and the lost, the blessed and the damned. Heaven is the eternal home of God's people and his holy angels. The everlasting darkness of hell is reserved for the wicked people and demons.

### **The Day of Judgment**

God 'has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained' (Acts 17:31). When will that day be? No one knows, but we know that the final judgment will take place when the Lord Jesus returns in glory at the end of the age. Jesus said: 'When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats' (Matt 25:31, 32).

Who will be the Judge? God the Father appointed his Son to execute judgment (John 5:22). Scripture says that the Lord Jesus Christ 'will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom' (2 Tim 4:1). The apostle Paul reminds Christians that 'we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad' (2 Cor 5:10).

God renders to each man according to his deeds. To those who patiently persevere in well-doing, he gives eternal life, but indignation and anguish will come upon every soul of man who does evil (see Rom 2:6-10).

By the records of their wicked works, the lost will be convicted and condemned. For them, the coming of the Lord will bring terror and sorrow. 'The Lord Jesus [will be] revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ' (2 Thess 1:7, 8). Among the damned will be nominal and worldly Christians. They call Jesus 'Lord' but their hypocrisy will be exposed on that day and Christ will publicly disown them: 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!' (Matt 7:21-23).

There will be different degrees of punishment; the more heinous the sin, the greater will be the penalty. Jesus said that for some it will be 'more tolerable' but others will receive a 'greater condemnation' (Matt 11:22; Luke 20:47).

The children of God -- whose life was characterized by 'patient continuance in doing good' -- will be welcomed to eternal life and rewarded for their deeds. 'And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work' (Rev 22:12). There will be degrees of reward, each 'according to his work'. Therefore, as long as we have breath, we make it our aim to please God and serve him with all our heart, knowing that our labour is not in vain.

As Christians we seek to live in humility and holiness before God. Yet we still sin. We humbly admit our weakness and daily confess our sins to our Father. How then can we escape the punishment we deserve? In this way: the purpose of the final judgment for us who believe in Christ is not to determine whether we will be 'justified' (declared just) or 'condemned' (declared guilty). The Bible assures believers that we are already justified: 'Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom 5:1). 'Having been justified' – the sentence is already decided in our favour. God has already declared every believer 'justified' on the basis of what Christ has done for us, and not on account of our works. This is a wonderful truth. Jesus assures us that we 'shall not come into judgment' (John 5:24). He will certainly keep his word.

## **Hell**

The wicked are punished and cast into hell, far from the comfortable presence of God. The King will mete out the terrible sentence: 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.' These will go away, the Bible says, into everlasting punishment (Matt 25:41, 46).

Some people say there is nothing beyond death. Others say that hell is experienced in this world, referring to the numerous sufferings and heartaches of mankind in general. Against these ideas the Bible teaches that hell is the final destiny of demons and evil people. The Lord Jesus described it as 'the furnace of fire'. He solemnly warned us, 'There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth' (Matt 13:42). It is also called 'the lake of fire' (Rev 20:15).

Jesus narrates a story about a rich man and one Lazarus, a poor and sickly man. The latter died and was carried by angels to Abraham's bosom. Later, the rich man also died and was buried - - but death wasn't the end of his existence. Jesus informs us that after his death this evil man was 'in torments' and in conscious suffering (Luke 16:23). Indeed, the Lord spoke more about hell than he spoke about heaven. He who knows the terrible reality of hell solemnly warns us of the danger of unquenchable fire.

How long will hell last? The very thought of people spending eternity in a place of suffering is undoubtedly terrible. It is somewhat understandable that many disparage or disbelieve this fearful truth. Some claim that the punishment of the lost will eventually come to an end, but this is contrary to the explicit teaching of the New Testament. The Lord Jesus declares that the wicked 'will go away into everlasting punishment' (Matt 25:46). The fire of hell 'shall never be quenched' (Mark 9:43).

What is the worst aspect of hell? The Bible mentions fire, darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth -- all indicating the hideous lot and suffering of the lost -- but evidently the worst thing about hell is the eternal separation of the creature from the Creator and the infliction of his terrible wrath. The King will pronounce the sentence: 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels' (Matt 25:41). 'Can your heart endure, or can your hands remain strong, in the days when I shall deal with you?' (Ezek 22:14). 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (Heb 10:31). Can we imagine anything worse?

## Heaven

We are pilgrims on earth; we are on a journey in a foreign land (Heb 11:13; 1 Pet 2:11). This world is not our permanent home. We are on the way to our heavenly country where God our Father is manifest in his glory, splendor and majesty.

The Bible uses different terms to describe this wonderful place: (1) paradise (2 Cor 12:4); (2) heaven (2 Cor 12:2; Heb 9:24); (3) a city (Heb 11:10, 16; 12:22); and (3) our Father's house (John 14:2). During our earthly pilgrimage we experience much suffering and pain, and eventually, if the Lord tarries, our body will succumb to death. In heaven all these miseries will come to an end forever. 'Behold, the tabernacle (dwelling) of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away' (Rev 21:3, 4).

Heaven is a place of unimaginable beauty. Above all, our hearts are drawn heavenward because there we will meet our beloved Saviour, the Lord Jesus. 'Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You' (Ps 73:25).

The Lord Jesus prays for us: 'Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me' (John 17:24). Jesus went to heaven beforehand to prepare a place for us, and promised to come again and take us with him (John 14:2, 3). Then our communion with the Lord will be intimate and unbreakable. 'In

Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore' (Ps 16:11). That is heaven!