

# **The Glorious Gospel of the Blessed God**

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## Preamble

### **Aim**

To study the character of God, his love and his justice, his goodness and his severity, as exhibited in the gospel.

### **Context**

Inevitably these studies will impinge on the notorious and age-old controversy regarding the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility.

Let us proceed therefore with due humility and mutual respect in the fear of God, remembering that God has richly blessed the evangelistic ministries of those who have held directly opposite views on this matter.

Please understand from the very beginning that these studies:

- (a) do not suppose that they will solve this problem;
- (b) will not attempt to construct a complete theological system.

### **Procedure**

These studies will proceed on the assumptions:

- (a) that God, who knows best how to communicate his truth to us, has not caused Scripture to be written in the form of systematic theology; and that the way he has chosen to reveal himself in his word is the best way.
- (b) that systems of theology are helpful, and perhaps necessary. But, unlike Scripture, they are not infallible. First and last our duty is constantly to turn to the Scriptures as written, and to study them patiently and in depth.
- (c) that many of us come to Scripture with semi-, or completely, formed systems of theology already in our heads. We must, therefore, try not to allow our systems to control what Scripture may, or may not, mean: but rather to allow Scripture to critique and modify our systems.

### **Motivation**

These studies are conducted in the hope that they will lead us to worship God for the riches of his love and grace, for the magnificence of his longsuffering and mercy, and for the truth and justice of his judgments. At the same time these studies could save us from holding views and preaching ideas that would derogate from the glory of God and misrepresent his character.

### **Questions and Answers**

I find it a real and genuine honour to be invited to lead your thinking in the course of these seminars. I'm encouraged by the fact that you are to be allowed questions, because not only will they contribute to my deeper understanding of these things and a more balanced view than I shall myself present, your questions will allow me, in the course of these seminars, to be a trifle more dogmatic in places than I perhaps ought to be, because you will have the opportunity to come back at me and to restrain my wilder enthusiasms. And together we shall work toward a better understanding of the truth.

## The Justice of God's Judgments

*Seminar One Handout at Appendix, p. 69*

Our major aim and motivation is to study the glorious gospel of the blessed God (1 Tim 1:11) so that we may come into deeper understanding of the character of God, his love and his justice, his goodness as well as his holiness and severity. We shall study the character of God as it is revealed in his glorious gospel so that in the first instance our hearts may well up, and our spirits likewise, in the more fervent and genuine adoration of the wonder that God is, in himself, and so that our worship may be deepened. With it there shall come the same divine compassion and attitude that God has shown to those who are as yet lost, so that we ourselves may be the more motivated to carry that gospel to them.

Our motivation therefore is that, as we ourselves study God's gospel, we shall come into a deeper understanding of his character and be saved from holding any views and preaching any ideas that would derogate from the glory of God and misrepresent his character. I know that is a very high aim and not necessarily easily accomplished, and before I have finished these seminars I suspect I could well be criticized for being myself guilty of holding various misunderstandings of his Word that would, if taken to their logical conclusion, undermine the glory of God—for which I ask God's pardon in advance.

We are all beginners in the school of Christ. We have so much more to learn of our infinite Lord and Saviour that, while our hearts wish nothing but his glory, sometimes our misunderstandings must vex and dishonour him. God give us that due sense of humility, about ourselves first, and towards those who disagree with us, lest the wonderful things of God's gospel become—as they have in some quarters—occasions of hot debate and not a little un-Christian acrimony and rejection of one's fellow Christians. That would be a sad outcome of our study if it were to foment such strife among genuine believers.

Our first topic is to consider the justice of God's judgments, not merely in general but in particular, as it is stated in the New Testament, chiefly by our blessed Lord Jesus himself, and as it comes to light in the description of the final judgment. So, without further ado, let us begin with the book of Revelation, and here we shall be looking for that ultimate criterion upon which God will consign some to eternal perdition and others to glory—the decisive point in God's summing up and in his verdict.

And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat upon it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne; and books were opened: and another book was opened,

which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of the things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death, even the lake of fire. And if any was not found written in the book of life, he was cast into the lake of fire. (Rev 20:11–15)

I want to make what seem to me two important observations. In verse 12 notice the very careful distinction between the two groups of books. ‘The books were opened’—notice the plural. And then, distinguishing it from this first group, ‘and another book was opened, which is the book of life.’ The book of life is not therefore to be confused with those other books. The importance of making this observation is shown when we come to the function of those two groups of books. We are told twice over (vv. 12–13) that the dead were judged by the things written in the books, ‘according to their works’. But then in verse 15 it becomes very clear that the thing that decides whether any particular person shall at last be banished to the lake of fire—the criterion that decides it—is not the person’s works. It does not read: ‘When each man or woman was judged out of the things written in the books according to their works, then if any person’s works were found to be insufferably and intolerably bad they were cast into the lake of fire.’ It is exceedingly clear that they were cast into the lake of fire if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life. It is impossible perhaps to exaggerate the importance of that distinction.

I am not aware of all the different technical terms in legal matters and processes in other countries. In England we distinguish between the *verdict* that is rendered by a jury—is the person guilty or not?—and the *sentence* which the judge then pronounces. Suppose a man is accused of murdering his wife and the evidence is clearly against him, the jury might certainly render a guilty verdict. In a second case, where a man is accused of murdering his wife and the evidence is clear, the jury may likewise return a verdict of guilty. But though the judge is the same in both cases he would not necessarily impose the same sentence on these two men. One man might have murdered his wife with evident months of deliberate preparation and in cold blood. The other might have pleaded: ‘Your Honour, if you had known my wife and how she made my life an absolute misery, it was in a moment of exasperation that I killed her. I didn’t intend to and I have repented of it ever since.’ The judge might be moved by such considerations to pronounce a sentence of life imprisonment on the one man, and a shorter sentence on the other one.

The verdict—‘according to their works’—must be that all of them come short. There can be no doubt of that: ‘We know that what things so ever the law says it says to them that are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped’ (Rom 3:19). The verdict can be nothing else but guilty. Those who are consigned to the lake of fire will not, however, find that their sentences are exactly the same; for here they shall be sentenced according to their works. Our blessed Lord, who is to be the judge, said that it would be more tolerable for some in the day of judgment than for others. The self-righteous woman full of good works, done alas in pride of spirit and constant refusal to humble herself and admit that she is a sinner who deserves to be damned and needs to be redeemed, such a woman if she is consigned at last to the lake of

fire for her refusal to repent and believe will not be punished the same as monsters like Hitler. For even in the sentencing, God is a God of justice.

While the sentences therefore will differ because they are according to people's works, we come back to the point that the passage makes. The thing that decides whether anyone will be cast into the lake of fire will be not their works but whether or not their name is found written in the book of life. That is an exceedingly basic principle of the gospel. As believers, when we stand before the judgment seat of Christ and he examines our works, he shall assess some works as being good, and if he passes criticism it shall abide. He shall have to describe other work as shoddy, and some valueless; so we are warned in the case of some that our works could be burned up. Scripture however hastens to add of the man whose works are burned up that 'he himself shall be saved; yet so as through fire' (1 Cor 3:15), because salvation never did depend upon works anyway. Scripture affirms that believers shall be judged according to their work for the reward or otherwise of what they have done in the body. Thank God, they shall not be cast into the lake of fire. I repeat, it doesn't say in Revelation 20:15, 'If any man's works were found substantially below standard then he was cast into the lake of fire.' Works have nothing to do with the verdict here. The verdict is based on the question: 'Is the name written in the book of life?'

We should notice how carefully the phrase is used: 'If any was not *found written* . . .' So the book will be examined, though God is omniscient and knowing all things. Notice the phrase: 'not found written'—meaning 'upon examination it was found not to be written'. It is as though almighty God, out of the tenderness and infinite compassion of his heart, would even then be glad to find that a name had been written. But, alas, it turns out not in fact to be there.

This then is one criterion of judgment: 'Is the name found written?' That raises a question, of course. If a person's dismissal to the lake of fire, or not, depends on the name being found written in the book of life, how are we to explain this 'name written in the book'? And how does the name get written in the book? These very practical and necessary questions surge into our hearts, do they not?

Some people have called attention to phrases in passages such as Revelation 17:8.<sup>1</sup> In relation to the reign of the Beast and all his pseudo miracles, or apparently genuine miracles that he will do, we are told that masses of people shall wonder after him—'they whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world.' Notice that it says, *from* the foundation of the world, not, *before* the foundation of the world. Some, however, have taken this verse and others similar to imply that before the foundation of the world God chose some of his creatures—creating them so that thereafter he might redeem them. Upon so deciding he wrote their names in his book. The names therefore were there from all eternity, so to speak. Other people he decided to pass by. Their names were not written. They never were written for God had no intention of seeing them written in the book. It was a foregone conclusion and therefore, whatever they did, these people, being sinners like the rest of us, could never have their names written. They knew it not perhaps, but it was a foregone determination and decree from God that they should at last be cast into the lake of fire, and there was nothing they could do about it. In its more extreme form the

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<sup>1</sup> [Question 15](#) (p. 64) deals with Rev 17:8.

doctrine is held such that God created some people simply for the purpose of damning them eternally for his greater glory. We shall have to enquire whether that kind of interpretation is right.

Leaving that question in our hearts and stored for a while in our memories, let us turn to another statement of the criterion of the final judgment. 'He that believes on him [our Lord Jesus] is not judged; he that believes not has been judged already.' Why? Here the reason given is: 'because he has not believed on the name of the only begotten Son of God' (John 3:18). From this it appears that the charge against them is their own failure or refusal to believe. And if somebody is going to be condemned for not believing, ordinary everyday justice might suggest to us that the man ought to have been able to believe if he had chosen to. For to condemn someone for not doing what he couldn't possibly do would sound on the surface to be unjust, but there it stands.

The judgment is that he has not believed. There are some who will say that at the final judgment God will consign some people to the lake of fire simply because of their sins. But we have just seen from Revelation 20:15 that this is not true. God will consign people to the lake of fire not because their works are bad but because their names are not written in the book. Here in John 3:18 it is said that the final condemnation is not that their works in general were bad, but that they refused to believe: they believed not in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

Another reason is given in the next verse: 'And this is the judgment' [meaning that this will be the final criterion of someone being condemned—this will be the case against them], 'that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their works were evil.' So not only are they condemned for not believing; they are condemned on the ground of their own personal preference: they loved the darkness rather than the light. Of course they had their background reasons for this preference, as the verse goes on to explain. 'For every one that does ill hates the light'—and so he prefers the darkness rather than the light, for his deeds are evil. That's the reason for his preference; but it is the preference that is the basis for the final verdict. He is condemned for his personal preference.

Notice how fair and just the condemnation is. The judgment is that light has come into the world. Had the light not come, the man could not be accused of having preferred the darkness to the light. A man who has lived in a lightless prison cell all his days—who was born there, lived there, is about to die there, and has never seen the light—cannot justly be accused of having preferred the darkness to the light, for he never saw the light. The judgment is that the light came, and the man saw it but preferred the darkness to the light. Here is our blessed Lord, who is himself to be the judge, telling us what the grounds of the verdict will be. Man's refusal to believe. Man's own personal preference of darkness rather than light.

Someone may say, 'That's very bad moral taste. Is it not a flaw in their character to prefer darkness to light?' And then your heart of compassion moves you, doesn't it? Look at that little boy there—he's seven years old and he won't eat his cabbage. It would be so good for him, but he will insist on eating candyfloss and sweets for breakfast, lunch and dinner, so by this time his taste is utterly perverted, poor child. He thinks candyfloss is the very best taste

ever invented, and he abominates the greens that his mother wants to put before him. You say, 'You can't blame the poor child for that taste, can you? That's the way he was brought up.'

Could it be that men do prefer the darkness because they have developed a taste, and yet can hardly be blamed for that, given the world they live in? But such an excuse will not pass muster. I refer you to our Lord's long argument with the Pharisees recorded by Matthew in his gospel (Matt 12:22–37). You might say this conversation is a foreview of what proceedings may well be like at the final judgment. For our Lord, who will be the final judge, says to these men: 'And I say unto you, that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment' (v. 36).

The hostility between the Pharisees and our Lord had been simmering and coming to the boil. When our Lord did a miracle on a Sabbath day, the Pharisees decided they had had enough of this. They could not deny that it was a supernatural act; but they were determined not to admit that this supernatural power evident in our Lord Jesus was from God. If the power by which he did the miracle was from God, then Jesus was the Messiah and they must bow at his feet and crown him Lord of all. They were not prepared to do that. So, rather than admit that it was from God, they chose to say it was the power of the devil himself: 'And by the prince of demons does this Jesus of Nazareth cast out demons' (see v. 24).

Had I been Peter, with his normal predisposition to speak when he shouldn't, I would have said to the Lord, 'Don't bother with these men anymore! They are so deliberately perverse, turn on your heel and go. You are not going to convert them; they are determined to reject you. Leave them and go and preach to the prostitutes and sinners, who are more ready to listen to you.' But not our Lord! He stopped and faced these men and talked to them, as one day he may have to talk to them again. They had determined to reject him; they preferred the darkness to the light. So now what will he say to them? His argument is this: 'Gentlemen, you know in your heart of hearts that you are being absolutely perverse—morally perverse and intellectually perverse. In order to make out that my power is not of God, and that I am therefore not the Messiah, you are prepared to say I am in the grip and in the power of Satan. Do you honestly believe that Satan has turned, in these last thirty years, to defeating himself? Is it your considered opinion that Satan has arisen against Satan, and is busily demolishing the fortresses of his own empire? In your heart of hearts you don't think that! How would prisoners in a fortress castle ruled over by a merciless and powerful tyrant be delivered, unless their deliverer first put the old tyrant out of action? How could this demon-possessed man have been delivered from the power of Satan, unless I had been against Satan and overpowered him? In saying I am doing what I am doing by the power of Satan you are being knowingly perverse. Your sons cast out a few demons from time to time, don't they? By what power do they cast demons out' (v. 27)?

I expect the Pharisees stroked their beards and, if they had dared to reply, would have said: 'They do it by the Spirit of God!'

'Oh, and what's the difference between them and me? The result appears to be the same!'

What was the difference? Well everybody knew it. For when their sons cast out demons they did not claim to be the Messiah. When Jesus cast out demons he did claim to be the Messiah. And if God Almighty was using our blessed Lord to cast out demons, here was

God's authentication of Christ's claim to be the Messiah. And that's why they were driven to this absurdity, to say that Jesus was casting out demons by the prince of demons.

And I say: 'Lord, there are millions of unconverted people out there. Why are you starting with these foolish men?' Because our blessed Lord has his eye on the day of judgment. One day those men will stand before their judge. So he says to them: 'In the day of judgment you will be required to account for these foolish words that you have said.'

When men stand before the judge and are accused of preferring the darkness to the light, they will be made aware by the judge that as they made their choice they knew that they were being perverse. Why will the judge of all the earth stop to argue with his creatures? Because he is just. He will not send any man to the lake of fire on some arbitrary decision. Every knee in heaven, on earth and under the earth shall bow and recognise the moral right of our blessed Lord to execute judgment.

Once we have stated the issue in this way another question comes. At the final judgment a man will be condemned because he has not believed. But could he have believed? That is not an impractical, academic question. As you know, the view has been advanced for many centuries that mankind is divided into two groups. There are those who, by the decree of God before the foundation of the world, were decreed to obtain salvation. Their names are, then, written in the book, and at an appropriate time God gave them the gift of faith so that they could believe. Others, by a similar decree before the foundation of the world, were ordained to eternal punishment, and they couldn't escape it. Why not? To escape that punishment that all without exception deserve, they would have needed to repent and believe, but having been ruined through the fall of Adam, as unregenerate men and women they couldn't possibly believe. It was impossible for them to do it. Nevertheless, in spite of it being impossible for them to believe, they will be condemned for not believing.

If you should enquire how it could possibly be just of God to condemn a person for not doing what that person couldn't do anyway, the reply may well come back to you in the form of an analogy. I quote the analogy to you, but please understand it is not my analogy; it is from those who hold this other view, and it goes like this. There are times when a judge may rightly condemn the man in the dock for not doing something he couldn't do. Take for instance the man who appears before the local magistrate who fines him £2, 000 and a day or two in prison.

'What for?' says the man in the dock.

'Well,' says the judge, 'when the police stopped your car and they asked you to get out and walk down the white line in the middle of the road you didn't do it, did you? You didn't walk straight!'

But the man says, 'You're not condemning me for that, are you?'

'I am,' says the judge.

'But I couldn't walk straight! And you're condemning me for doing what I couldn't do?'

'Yes, I know that,' says the judge. 'You had too much to drink, and I am going to condemn you because it was your fault that you couldn't walk straight.'

So sometimes it would be just to condemn a man for not doing what he couldn't do.

When it comes to this great matter of eternal judgment, and the criterion being that a person is condemned already because he or she has not believed, the question becomes exceedingly urgent. Could that person believe if he or she chose to? We are not talking abstract theology, are we? We may be talking of your next door neighbour for all I know, or of your dear eldest son.

Here for our comfort we have the words of our blessed Lord Jesus. I turn now to two statements that he made, recorded in John's gospel, that give us the definitive answer to our question.

### 1. *The subjective side of the problem*

And Jesus said, 'For judgment came I into this world, that they which see not may see; and that they which see may become blind.' Those of the Pharisees which were with him heard these things, and said unto him, 'Are we also blind?' Jesus said unto them, 'If you were blind, you would have no sin: but now you say, "We see." Therefore your sin remains.' (John 9:39-41)

First we must make sure that we understand the phrase our Lord Jesus uses in verse 41: 'If you were blind, you would have no sin.' That does not mean that they would be sinlessly perfect. To 'have sin' means to be guilty; to be blameworthy, that something is your fault. What our Lord is saying to the Pharisees is: 'If you were blind, you could not be blamed for not seeing—if you were blind you would not have sin.'

In the context our Lord has given a man who was born physically blind the faculty of sight. Physically blind, the man could not have seen anything, and when our Lord was asked whose fault it was that this man was born blind, our Lord replied: 'It's neither his nor his parents'. God would never think, would he, of condemning a man for not seeing physically something he couldn't see because he didn't possess the faculty of sight? Suppose a man stands at last before the great judgment throne of God and the judge solemnly consigns him to the lake of fire.

The man says, 'But may I ask a question?'

'Yes.'

'Why am I being condemned?'

And the judge replies, 'For not seeing this book in my hand.'

And the man says, 'But I can't see any book.'

And the judge says, 'Of course you can't, you're blind aren't you! Of course you can't see the book; you don't have the faculty of sight.'

Says the man, 'And I'm going to be consigned to the lake of fire, am I, for not seeing what I couldn't see?'

And the judge says, 'Yes.'

Oh, my friend, heaven would go dark at such a perversion of justice. It will not be! We can say this on the authority of the judge himself. Now our Lord is talking in spiritual terms: 'If it is true that you are blind—if you do not possess the faculty of sight—you would have no sin, you could not be blamed for not seeing.' This is the judge speaking.

‘Of course,’ said our Lord as he added this remark to the Pharisees: ‘You claim to be able to see, don’t you? Now you say you see, and take upon yourselves the responsibility. You can see all there is, can’t you, gentlemen, so you say? You can see so much that you can see that I am an imposter and a liar, and you take upon yourselves the responsibility. Now then, in that case, your sin remains’ (see v. 41). But if a man is genuinely blind he will never be condemned for not seeing what he could not possibly see. Thus says our Lord.

Now that is the subjective side of a problem, the inner thing—a man’s ability to see. In John 15 we have the objective side of the problem.

## 2. *The objective side of the problem*

If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no excuse for their sin. He that hates me hates my Father also. If I had not done among them the works which none other did, they had not had sin: but now have they both seen and hated both me and my Father. But this cometh to pass, that the word may be fulfilled that is written in their law, ‘They hated me without a cause.’ (John 15:22–25)

As you now perceive, this passage puts the objective side of the problem, whereas ch. 9 gave the subjective side. Let me illustrate what I mean by those philosophical terms. I have a pen in my hand: if you are going to see it three conditions have to be fulfilled. First, the pen has got to be there. You won’t see it if isn’t there, will you? Objectively, the pen has got to be there. It wouldn’t be your fault for not seeing it if the pen wasn’t there. How could you see it if it wasn’t there? Second, the pen could be there, but to see it you would have to have the faculty of sight. For even though the pen were there, if you don’t have the faculty of sight you still won’t see it. That’s the subjective side, isn’t it? But there is still another condition to be fulfilled. If you are going to see this pen, not only must the pen be there, and you must have the faculty of sight, there must be a light source that will shed the light on the pen. If the room is in complete pitch darkness, the pen may be there and you may have the sight to see it, but if the room is absolutely dark you won’t see it.

The same is true of the blessed gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. If men and women are going to see it, they will need light to see it with. Is it true that God lightens every man? It is indeed true, because Scripture declares it: ‘The true light, . . . lightens every man’ (John 1:9).<sup>2</sup> If the gospel weren’t there men and women could not be blamed for not believing it. Second, as we have pointed out, if men are blind and do not have the spiritual faculty of sight they will not be blamed for not seeing what they couldn’t see. Now we are to have the third side. If the gospel were not there, men and women could not be blamed for not believing it.

Listen to our Lord as he enunciates the principle: ‘If I had not come and spoken to them, they had not had sin’ (John 15:22). Here comes the phrase again: ‘they would not be blameworthy. If I hadn’t come and spoken, they could not be blamed for not believing what I had said.’ You can’t blame a man for not believing what he was never told. ‘I have come; I have spoken; and they have heard. Therefore they are without excuse for their sin—because

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<sup>2</sup> [Question 8](#) (p. 59) deals with John 1:9.

I have come. I have told them.’ The gospel was there, right in front of their noses and it personally spoke to them. Now if they refuse to believe they can rightly be judged guilty for not believing. ‘But if I had not come, and if I hadn’t spoken to them, they would have had excuse for their sin.’ Our Lord then repeats the principle: ‘If I had not done among them the works which none other did, they had not had sin: but now have they both seen and hated both me and my Father’ (v. 24).

Let us notice carefully who these people are of whom our Lord talks. They are obviously unregenerate men and women, aren’t they? They hate the Lord Jesus though they have no real cause to hate him. They have seen him, and they hate him. In seeing him they have seen the Father, for the blessed Lord Jesus is the expression of the Father; and they have hated both him and his Father. ‘They have hated me without a cause’ (v. 25). Therefore they have no excuse for their sin. ‘If I had not done among them unprecedented miracles, such as none other had done, if the evidence had not been given to them, they could not have been blamed for not believing what they never saw or never heard.’

Let’s use our little analogy again. Suppose a man stands at last before the throne of almighty God and is condemned to eternal perdition.

‘May I ask you a question,’ he says.

And the judge says, Yes.’

‘Why am I being condemned?’

‘For not believing in Jesus.’

And the man says, ‘But I don’t know who you are talking about. I’ve never heard of Jesus.’

And the judge says, ‘Well of course you haven’t—you lived two thousand years before Jesus was born. Of course you haven’t heard of him!’

‘And I’m being condemned for not believing something I’d never heard?’

How could it be just? It will not happen, of course. Christ the judge tells us: ‘If I had not done the works before them, they would have had an excuse; but now that I have come they have no excuse,’ says Christ. That is not to say there is no other evidence. Romans 1 emphasizes this topic. All men have some evidence of God. Through the creation God has given enough evidence of his Godhood, so that they may be without excuse (Rom 1:20). It was done on purpose—the evidence was deliberately given and men can see it if they will. If they reject that evidence they have no excuse. God has placed a law, written on Gentiles’ hearts. You can see its presence by the way they accuse people of wrongdoing. But then you’ll find that the very people do the same thing themselves. ‘You are without excuse,’ says holy Scripture. ‘You know you do wrong because you condemn it when other people do it and you’ve done it yourself. You despise God’s longsuffering which was meant to lead you to repentance. You could have repented if you’d liked, and God gave you space to repent, and you knew that you had done wrong. Therefore you are without excuse if you continue impenitent and refuse to cast yourself on the mercies of God. This matter of excuse, as you see, is an exceedingly important thing when it comes to the question of the final judgment.

If men are going to be condemned for not believing, my claim today is that it must have been possible for them to believe. Whatever the evidence given, however much or little, it must have been possible for them to believe if they had chosen to believe.

But there are many of a contrary view; and there are some who take Romans 5:12 and following to argue on its basis that an unregenerate man cannot believe. And, what is more, it is his fault that he cannot believe. Why is it his fault? Well, because he was in Adam when Adam sinned. Therefore he is guilty of the sin of Adam and the guilt of Adam's sin is to be imputed to him. He was in Adam when Adam disobeyed and therefore God counts it as if he himself had disobeyed—he is guilty of Adam's sin of disobedience. The consequence of that sin is that he was born unregenerate and unable to believe; but it is his fault because he brought it on himself when he was in Adam and sinned when Adam sinned. That is a very strong argument in the minds of many able and honoured interpreters of God's holy Word. As you see, it is not a view that I share. I have raised all kinds of questions in the second page of the notes for the next session, where we will take up the topic, and no doubt in the question time at the end of these sessions.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> [Question 6](#) (p. 56) deals with Romans 5.

**Christ: the Revealer of God,**  
**the Light of the World,**  
**the Creator of Faith,**  
**the Giver of Sight**

*Seminar Two Handout at Appendix, p. 72*

At the end of our last study we mentioned the point of view of those who say that, whereas people will be condemned for not believing, that will be just, because it was their fault that they couldn't believe.

The argument bases itself in part upon the famous second paragraph of Romans 5, where it is said that 'through one man's disobedience sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for all have sinned' (see v. 12). But here is a question of translation over which we must pause. The Greek has its verb in the aorist tense (i.e., the past definite, or, past historic). And so, if you wish, it is quite right to translate it by the English past definite and read: 'death passed upon all men, for that all sinned'. On the other hand, the aorist past definite tense in Greek does not represent completely the same field of meaning as the English past definite. So much so that there are many times in classical Greek, as well as New Testament Greek, when a Greek past definite tense carries a meaning that can only rightly be expressed in English by a perfect tense.

An example of that is to be found in Romans 3:23 where in the King James Version and in a good many other versions as well we find the translation 'for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.' The King James Version uses a present perfect, 'all have sinned', whereas in Greek it is an aorist in the past definite sense. The translators of the King James Version, of course, were well within their rights to translate it by a present perfect, because they judged that here is an example where the Greek aorist carries the meaning that only an English present perfect can rightly express. If on this occasion they had used an English simple past and translated it 'for all sinned', it wouldn't make sense in English. To get the intended sense of the Greek you have to use a present perfect in English.

So therefore the argument rages over the translation of Romans 5:12 where the word for sin occurs in Greek in an aorist tense, just as it did in 3:23. And there once more the King James Version translated it, 'death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned'. But the revisers and some other modern translations, observing that it was an aorist, translated it

here not by a perfect but by an English simple past: 'death passed unto all men, for that all sinned.'<sup>4</sup>

It was not only grammar that led them to this, but theology, of course; and theology is a different thing from grammar. Theology often dictates to a translator which of two possibilities he should choose. And here these newer translations chose a Greek aorist because they felt that what Paul was saying is this: 'death passed unto all men—not because all have individually sinned in the course of their lives, but death passed upon all men, for that all sinned when Adam sinned.' To support this argument they will point to little babies. It could not rightly be said that little babies who die at one day old have personally sinned, could it? And yet they die. Why do they die? 'They die,' says this other view, 'because they sinned—even as little babies they sinned in Adam. When Adam sinned, they sinned. It is therefore their fault that they die.' We shall consider the relevance of that in our question time, I suspect, and the argument that rages about it.<sup>5</sup> I leave the question therefore, not to run away from this famous and formative passage but because we shall have opportunity subsequently to discuss it. I look forward to hearing the answers that you shall put forward against me. We need to seek God's help to determine what his Word means at this point.

We now come to another related topic. Our main aim in this session, as in all, is to study the character of God. We are discussing and enjoying together our thinking about the glorious gospel of the blessed (one might almost say, the happy) God. In Jesus Christ our Lord we have the perfect expression of God. In days gone by, when the church was discussing the person of our blessed Lord Jesus and gave long and sometimes painful thought as to how we are to understand that our blessed Lord could be both human and divine at the same time—how he could be both man and God—the great church fathers spent hours and years of careful and devoted thought to try to think this thing through, and to establish correct statements about the person of our Lord Jesus and his relation to God. It seems to me a pity that in so doing they seem to have forgotten to Christianise their view of God. They were very careful to establish that Jesus is the Son of God, as well as being truly human. But it seems to me that at times their view of God remained somewhat compromised, somewhat stained with their old pagan concepts of God derived from the Greek philosophers.<sup>6</sup> And they did it without knowing: they thought they were truly representing God. We therefore need to be humble enough to realise that we do not know everything as we should about God. We can adhere to this principle: that in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord we do see God as God really is. Jesus is, in that sense, God.

In this second study, therefore, we are to think together of Christ as the revealer of God, the light of the world, the creator of faith and the giver of sight. We are to study for a while the wonderful wisdom seen in the way in which our Lord went about approaching men and women. How and by what methods he sought to fulfil his divine commission, being the Word of God now incarnate, come to make God known to men and women. As he went

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<sup>4</sup> ESV reads 'and so death spread to all men because all sinned'.

<sup>5</sup> Some of the reasons for my thinking are on the second page of the notes that accompany this talk (p. 73).

<sup>6</sup> [Question 16](#) (p. 65) deals with the influence of Greek philosophy on Christian thinking about God.

about his task, what were his presuppositions about the people that he talked to? For his presuppositions were God's presuppositions, of course. In this too he makes manifest the Father. These things might be familiar to us, but I trust they may come with renewed power, stirring our hearts at the wonder, the grace, the loyalty, the holiness, the insight, the compassion and the longsuffering of our blessed Lord, as he went around to make God known to men and women.

Why the matter of faith becomes relevant to this is as follows. Ephesians 2:1 says that the unregenerate are dead through their trespasses and sins. But from that Scripture some theologians infer that unregenerate people cannot *hear* God in a meaningful sense of that term. They may hear the sound of the words our Lord Jesus spoke, they may understand its grammar and its syntax; but, in the profound sense that is vital to salvation, these theologians hold that the unregenerate cannot hear. Why can't they hear? They are dead in trespasses and sins, they are ruined by the fall, they are totally depraved and unable even so much as to hear God in the way that really matters. The more extreme version of that view will say: 'To preach the gospel to unregenerate and unelect people, you might as well go to the cemetery and preach to the physically dead in their graves. They can't hear you, and the unregenerate who are not elect can't hear you either when you preach to them the living word of God. They are dead, and therefore they cannot hear.'

And then this view holds that, because Scripture says the unregenerate are dead in trespasses and sins, they cannot see in a spiritual sense. They don't have the faculty of sight about which we were talking in our first session. And then the third thing: because they are dead in trespasses and in sins they cannot repent and they cannot believe. You might as well ask a physically dead corpse to believe you, or to look at you or to repent of its misdoings. It would all be in vain, for the physically dead can't hear, see, repent or believe. 'And so,' says this view, 'the unregenerate are dead in trespasses and sins, totally depraved, completely unable to hear, to see, to repent and believe. How then could they be saved?'

According to this view, they cannot be saved unless somehow they can be brought to repent and believe. How is that to be done then? It is done by their regeneration. Or, to use the phrase of Ephesians 2:1, if God 'quickens them.' And how does he do that? In ways that surpass our description, somehow at some point in their lives God inserts new life into these people by his Spirit. They may not know God has done it—they haven't yet repented, they haven't yet believed. They may not even have sought after God. But by divine decree and decision for his own reasons, quite apart from these people God decides to regenerate, to quicken, this particular person. And so he puts new life into them. Now being spiritually alive, even though they may still be desperate sinners, when subsequently they hear the gospel they will eventually repent and they will believe. They cannot do either until first God gives them life. So, first they need life and God gives it to them; and then, because they have spiritual life they are able to repent and believe.

That is the theory and their interpretation of holy Scripture. It crystallizes in the idea, taken again from Ephesians 2, that the faith by which we believe in the Saviour, or believe in God, is the gift of God. You will remember the context: 'For by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works lest any man should boast' (2:8–9). They tell us that this verse is saying that faith is the gift of God. The unregenerate

man couldn't believe even if he wanted to, and he doesn't want to. He cannot believe until God first gives him the faith to believe with. And if God doesn't give him the faith he will never believe—because he can't believe. Nonetheless, he will be condemned to perdition for not believing.

It is against that particular background of understanding holy Scripture that I wish us now to study a number of passages to see if these things are so. We will study not only what Scripture says, but how our Lord Jesus went about the evangelization of the world and on what presuppositions he conducted his ministry.

These Scriptures will begin to answer the question: Which way round is it—how does a man get spiritual life, how does a woman become regenerate? Do you first have to repent and believe, and upon your believing you receive regeneration and spiritual life? Is it that way? Or is it that all are dead in trespasses and in sins and couldn't repent and couldn't believe, and therefore God first has to give you spiritual life? First he has to regenerate you and then, when you are now regenerate with new spiritual life, then you are able to repent and believe? Which way round is it?

If you think that I am saying some very strange things, allow me to assure you that these things have been seriously said, and still are said, by highly famous servants of God—men of renown, men whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose. But they hold that God first has to quicken the sinner, give him life, regenerate him. Then, because he is regenerate he can repent, then he believes. If he is already regenerate and has spiritual life he's saved already, I suppose. Perhaps that's when he wakes up to the fact that he's saved?

Are these things so?

So let's come to the first passage of Scripture on our handout to begin to answer that question.

**1st Scripture:**

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth may in him have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life. (John 3:14–16)

When speaking to Nicodemus our Lord used an analogy: 'As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.' Knowing his Bible well, Nicodemus would have remembered the details of that Old Testament story.

The people had sinned against God. The serpents came and bit them and through their poison many were dying. God told Moses to make a serpent of bronze and put it on a pole. Then did Moses command the people: 'Whoever among you has received new life, let him look to the serpent?' No, I think not. It is true that they were poisoned; they were dying and some as good as dead. But they were still exhorted to look to the serpent. They could look to the serpent, and many of them did. The Scripture says, 'as many as looked, lived'. It doesn't say, 'as many as lived, looked', does it? And then our Lord applied the analogy, though he had the wisdom not to stress too many of the details of the Old Testament story to

Nicodemus. Nicodemus knew it, and it would have insulted his intelligence to spell it out in greater detail. 'Even so must the Son of Man be lifted up'—what follows next? 'That whosoever has been regenerate may now believe on him. And, whoever has received spiritual life may now repent and believe'? No, of course not! It is the other way round, isn't it? Even a child in Sunday School knows it is: 'Even so must the Son of Man be lifted up—that whosoever believes [first] in him may, in him, have eternal life.' In the analogy, it was looking to the serpent. In the reality, it is believing on Christ. Both the looking and the believing preceded the receiving of new life. That is the gospel from the lips of our blessed Lord Jesus.

We could take another Scripture.

**2nd Scripture:**

Verily, verily, I say unto you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and they that hear shall live. (John 5:25)

We notice the order is consistent. 'The hour is coming, when the dead [i.e., the spiritually dead] shall hear the voice of the Son of God'—and it does not say, 'they that live shall hear', but 'they that hear shall live'. What happened to Lazarus when he was physically dead in the grave and our Lord called, 'Lazarus, come forth'? Lazarus came forth and, as he was coming out, said: 'What's that noise I hear?' And then he heard Christ speaking? Indeed not, surely! Dead though he was he heard, and then he lived. I do not need to stress these Scriptures because you know them so well. The spiritually dead must and can hear the voice of the Son of God before they receive new life.

**3rd Scripture:**

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. (John 5:39–40 ESV)

Now we are beginning to pile up the verbs! Doubtless they are in some sense metaphorical. There is a question of seeing: they 'looked to the serpent and they lived'. There is the question of believing: 'whosoever believes in him has eternal life'. There is the question of hearing: 'the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and they that hear shall live'. And now it is a question of coming: 'you will not come to me that you may have life'. Our Lord asked the Pharisees, 'If you want life what have you to do? To get life you have to come.' Looking, believing, hearing, coming—according to our blessed Lord Jesus they all precede life, not follow it. I take comfort in this. If I preach these verses that our Lord says here, no one could accuse me of misrepresenting the Bible.

As Paul was going up the Damascus road in all his fury and hate, persecuting the living Son of God, was he already a regenerate man? And that's why, when the Lord Jesus appeared to him, he was able to repent and believe. Was Saul of Tarsus already regenerate? If he was already regenerate then he didn't need to be saved, did he? We come to the very heart of our Christian message. These are not merely idle academic speculations.

You could conclude a similar thing from the way the Scriptures talk here and there, almost incidentally. ‘You have many instructors in Christ,’ says Paul, talking to the Corinthians; ‘but you have only one spiritual father. For I have begotten you’ (1 Cor 4:15)—that is regeneration, isn’t it? Explicitly so! How? Through the preaching of the gospel! The preaching of the Word is the thing that God uses to produce new life. And so a person is regenerate. Peter, talking to his fellow believers, says: ‘God has begotten us’ (1 Pet 1:3). And once more it is a question of regeneration.

Let me explain what I mean. Sometimes the people of the opposite theory will make the distinction that begetting is a different thing from birth. In the physical realm it is the father who begets the child, the child is conceived and the foetus has life. Months later the mother gives birth and the child is born. So we don’t confuse generation with birth at the human level, and some have said that we should follow that analogy in the spiritual world. God first regenerates a person, he generates them, if you like, he begets them, putting life into them, and they don’t even know it has happened. Subsequently the life is brought to birth when they openly repent and believe.

Whether that analogy is helpful or not, I am appealing now to Scriptures that talk of people being regenerated. ‘He has begotten us again’—that’s regeneration, isn’t it? ‘He has begotten us again unto a living hope’ (1:3). How? ‘By the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead’—that’s how! And how did they come to know about the resurrection of Christ from the dead? Peter explains it at the end of chapter 1: ‘Love one another with a pure heart fervently: Having been begotten again [born again] . . . by the word of God that lives and abides forever. All flesh is as grass, and the flower thereof as the grass of the field: But the word of the Lord endures forever.’ This is ‘the word of the gospel’, of course, by which God has regenerated us (vv. 22–25). As far as I can perceive, that is the normal order of events when it comes to the salvation of a life.

#### **4th Scripture: John 7:14–24**

But now let us take the matter somewhat further. John 7–10 forms a cluster of chapters that hang together with all the cohesion, and more, of the seven sisters of the Pleiades in the stars! They are related, and I wish I had the time to point out the features that mark them out as a literary cluster. They comprise the third of our Lord’s journeys to Jerusalem and away again—the third of the four journeys that are recorded in John’s Gospel. Let me content myself by pointing out the circumstances and the situation that confront us at the beginning of these four chapters.

John tells us in chapter 7 that the feast of the Jews, the Feast of the Tabernacles was at hand and Christ’s brothers said to him:

‘Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples also may see the works you are doing. For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.’ For not even his brothers believed in him. (John 7:3–5 ESV)

I suspect that you must agree there was a certain amount of worldly sense in the advice that our Lord’s brothers gave to him on that occasion. At this stage they weren’t believers but

even unbelievers can be good publicity agents, and these brothers had some advice to give to the Lord Jesus. They didn't altogether approve of him, but they thought he had some ability. He could really draw the crowds, particularly when he did a few miracles like feeding the five thousand. They saw how successful he was up in remote Galilee, but they got impatient with him. 'Look here, dear brother! If you really want to start a new religion it's no good staying around Nazareth. You want to get down to where all the publicity is, and there is a superb opportunity coming up for you at the Feast of Tabernacles at Jerusalem. People from Judea, Galilee and Samaria will be going down, and thousands of pilgrims from different parts of the world. If you go down to Jerusalem and stage some of your miraculous spectacles you'll have them eating out of your hand! It's no use staying up here.'

And you can see it from their point of view. They thought they were right. They had not reckoned with the problem that faced our Lord Jesus. He said: 'For the time being I do not go up to Jerusalem, for my time is not yet come. Your time is always ready; the world doesn't hate you. But it hates me because I testify of it that its works are evil' (vv. 6-7).

Major problem No. 1: the world hated him. He had only to speak and people sensed they were sinners and resented him. All their psychological barriers went up against him. How would he approach them? Well, these four chapters tell us four different sides of his approach to men and women. They were sinners and hated him because of what he said.

Halfway through the feast he went up secretly into the temple and taught. Why secretly? Why didn't he go for the publicity? For this reason: if he had gone down with all the pilgrims from Nazareth who had seen the miracles he had done in Tiberias and Cana of Galilee, as soon as he got to Jerusalem the Jerusalemites would have known and recognized him and said, 'Oh, this is that Jesus.' He didn't want their publicity so he went up in private, slipping into the city so that no one would recognize him. Thousands of people there wouldn't have known who he was. There would have been many rabbis holding forth here and there in the temple, leading bar mitzvahs and things like that. He went up halfway through and began to teach. And the people, not recognizing who he was, marvelled at his teaching. They said, 'How does this fellow know letters, never having been to the rabbinical schools?' They were astonished at his teaching. Many of them did not yet know who he was, and that was deliberate on the part of our Lord. They would find it difficult to accept that he was Messiah, even more difficult to accept that he was Son of God. So what does Christ do? He veils his identity, withholds for the moment his claim to be the Messiah and starts to teach.

What he taught we are not told. He could well have taught the kind of sermon we have in the Sermon on the Mount. But whatever he taught, he was appealing (please note) to their moral conscience: 'If anyone is willing to do God's will when he knows it, he shall know of my teaching whether it be of God or not' (v. 17).

'What you have to decide first,' said he, 'is whether my teaching is of God. I'll give you reasons for thinking that my teaching is of God. For I am not seeking to make myself prominent and parade my own glory; I seek the glory of him that sent me. I have no ulterior motive, and he who works solely for the glory of him that sent him is true.'

Then, in the discussion that followed, our Lord began to exercise their moral conscience a bit further. He said, 'The last time I was in Jerusalem I did one work and you all marvelled, and they sought to kill me for it.'

‘What do you mean?’ the crowd asked. ‘No one around here is going to kill you! What are you talking about?’

‘Well, there was the last time, when I made a man whole on the Sabbath.’

Then they began to realize who he was. ‘So, you’re Jesus, are you? We heard that you cured a man on the Sabbath day, and the authorities didn’t like you! Do the authorities know that you are here? They are seeking to kill you.’

‘That’s what I am saying!’ said Jesus. ‘But I appeal to you to bring your moral judgment to bear upon my teaching and upon my work. Please do it! As Jews, we circumcise a boy when he is eight days old. Now if the eighth day of his life falls on a Sabbath day—and the Sabbath day says you mustn’t do any work, and circumcision is counted by the rabbis to be work—what is to be done? One command says you must do no work on the Sabbath; the other command says that you must circumcise the boy on the eighth day. If the eighth day is a Sabbath what do you do?’

Well, everybody knew what they did. The law of circumcision took precedence over the law of the Sabbath.

‘In order that Moses’ law of circumcision should not be broken you circumcise a man on the eighth day, don’t you, even if that day is a Sabbath?’

And they had to agree. ‘But so what?’ they said.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘if a man is circumcised on the Sabbath day so that the law is not broken, will you say that I, who made not just a little bit of one man but a complete man completely whole on the Sabbath day, have broken God’s Law? Judge righteous judgments (see vv. 17–24)!

Had I been there, should I just have had a word in the ear of the Lord Jesus? ‘These are unregenerate people you are talking to, Lord. How can they possibly judge righteous judgments? They are dead in trespasses and sins so you might as well ask the corpses in a cemetery to judge your teaching! How could they do it?’ But the Lord does it, doesn’t he? He speaks to unregenerate men and women. He calls upon unregenerate men and women to use their moral judgments on his teaching and on the moral quality of his miracles. That is where he began.

Incidentally, we often do well to begin that way too. That’s why some of us have provided forty-two articles for the Russian teachers’ newspaper on *The Bible and Ethical Education for Schools*.<sup>7</sup> Ethics isn’t salvation, but it is a good place to start to get unregenerate people thinking about the ethical demands and teachings both of the Old and New Testaments. Inevitably it raises the question, not only about what you think of the teachings of Christ but, ‘Who is he who teaches this?’ For it is the ethics that proclaim him to be head and shoulders above all the teachers of ethics that ever were, and it is that same Jesus who then claims to be the Messiah. It would seem, therefore, to be false to say that unregenerate men and women, because they are dead in trespasses and sins, cannot use their moral judgment. Our Lord asked them to do it.

How would they prove that he was true? He says: ‘If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink’ (v. 37). Can anybody say that an unregenerate person never thirsts? Ah, what

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<sup>7</sup> Originally published in *Uchitelskaya Gazeta*; now published by Myrtlefield House as *The Bible and Ethics*.

about the woman in John 4? How parched was her soul, how shrivelled her emotions, and how disappointed and jaded her palate. Poor, thirsty woman! Long before she understood what the water of life was, she said: 'Sir, if you have water that lasts, give me that water so that I don't have to come here and draw.' And he who reads the human heart—being its Maker—knew that unregenerate men and women have a thirst, and gave his lovely invitation: 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to me, and drink.' The first step, therefore, if I might abbreviate it, in our Lord's evangelism of men and women was to get them to use their moral judgments on his teaching.

**5th Scripture:** John 8:1-11

And then in John 8 he asks them to use their moral judgment on themselves. Here our Lord proclaims himself to be the light of the world (v. 12). Now, watch the light at work shining on unregenerate men. There never were more unregenerate men than those who dragged that unfortunate woman, the adulteress, before Christ. These horrible men wanted to tempt him, thinking they would get him in a dilemma. Whichever thing he chose, they would have grounds to accuse him before the people or, what was worse, before the authorities. They were hard, cruel men, bent on destroying the Saviour and using this poor woman as the trap they had so cleverly baited.

'Moses in the law commanded that such should be stoned,' they said. 'What do you say?' (v. 5)

He stooped down and wrote on the ground, and when he rose up he said, 'Let him that is without sin among you be the first to cast a stone at her' (v. 7).

They thought about it, hesitated, turned round and slunk out, from the eldest to the youngest. As I see them slinking out, I want to shout in their ears, 'Come back! Going away like that, you're admitting that you are sinners. Come back!' But they knew better than to stay put and to cast the stones. They knew in their hearts that if they dared do any such thing he would have exposed them.

'That's impossible!' someone says. 'They were unregenerate men—dead in trespasses and in sins! They couldn't see the light!'

They saw enough of the light to run off, didn't they? Herein is that Scripture true, 'that Light came into the world; men saw it and they preferred darkness rather than light' (John 3:19). Eventually the local Jews took up stones to stone him and put the light out (v. 59). Unregenerate men and women are dead in trespasses and sins in the sense that Scripture describes it. It does not mean that they are morally dead.

If you think that an unregenerate man is morally dead, wait until you see a wealthy banker in his new Ferrari. He gets out of it, leaves the door open and goes into a shop, and you get into it and start driving away. Now see whether the unregenerate owner has any moral sense in his head, and whether he can see an offence when one is done right under his nose. Of course he can! And when the light of the world shines on men and women they see themselves as they never have before. They can see all right! That's why they run away, because seeing the light hurts doesn't it?

I remember how painful it used to be when I was a child sound asleep in bed and my parents would switch the light on. Seeing the light hurts, doesn't it, when you have been

used to the dark? When men saw the light and it exposed them, they ran off or took up stones to stone him so that they might put the light out.

What then did our Lord do? Well, in his mercy, he withdrew, lest at that stage he would flood them with the full glow of the light of deity. And seeing it when they were not yet ready for it, they might reject it and perish forever. So he withdrew with this remark upon his lips: 'But when you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you shall know that the Father is in me and I do none of these things of myself' (v. 28). What great mercy! The God who knew that the light hurts the eyes of us who are sinful arranged for us that we might see God in the dark so that it would not hurt our eyes. Oh blessed Calvary, and the darkening of the sun—so that in the all too familiar setting of this world's sin and cruelty, they could look upon Jesus Christ crucified, bearing the sin of the world. As they looked at him they were looking at God—looking at God in the dark, so to speak—so that there they might see into the deepest depths of his heart that otherwise would have been hidden from them by the excess of the light of his glory. What a magnificent God this is, who will have all men and women to be saved—if they will be saved! And if making God known involves our blessed Lord in going to Calvary so that unregenerate, fallen men and women might see God's heart as it really is, then to Calvary will Christ go.

So therefore, men can see morally, even though they are unregenerate. As we reminded ourselves in our first session, our Lord's final comment was to be: 'They have both seen and hated both me and my Father' (15:24). Oh yes, unregenerate men can see. If then they reject what they see, their hatred is beyond excuse.

**6th Scripture:** John 9:1-41

Of course there are certain things that the natural man cannot possibly see. John 9 starts therefore with a very interesting physical miracle that Christ did in giving a man physical sight—a man who had been blind from birth, who had never enjoyed the faculty of sight and could do nothing about it. He couldn't see, he never did see, he didn't have the faculty of sight. Our Lord did a miracle and gave him physical sight.

But like all the miracles in the Gospel of John this miracle of physical sight was a sign of something bigger: the gift of spiritual sight. Before the story is over you see in the narrative how the gift of the faculty of physical sight led on until the man received the gift of spiritual sight. When he went and bathed in the Pool of Siloam and came back seeing, the neighbours first and then the Pharisees began to ask him how it had happened. He said, 'A man named Jesus made clay and put it on my eyes', and he went through the story. They argued with him and said, 'This Jesus is not from God'. He wasn't completely polite in the terms he used as he rebuked their absurdity. And as they argued and he replied, you can see in the narrative how his understanding was growing: this Jesus—he must be a prophet. He is unique—since the creation it has never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. He must be of God—if he were not from God he couldn't do anything.

At last he was excommunicated from the synagogue. The Lord Jesus comes and finds him and says to him, 'Do you believe in the Son of God?' The man replies, 'Who is he that I might believe?' With great tact our Lord replied: 'You have both seen him, and he it is that is

speaking with you.’ And he said, ‘Lord, I believe.’ He gave the tribute due to deity, and worshipped at the feet of the Son of God.

The miracle becomes a parable. If we are to see that Jesus is the Son of God it will take more than human wisdom, won’t it? It will take more than our faculty of moral judgment. It will take nothing short of revelation from the Father. You will remember when our Lord asked his disciples, ‘Who do men say that I am?’ Peter replied, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ Our Lord Jesus replied: ‘You are blessed Simon Bar-Jonah: for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven’ (Matt 16:13–17). There is therefore a faculty of spiritual sight, that certainly Christ has to give us; or, if you like, the Father gives us.

But now we have to ask a deep question or two. Someone may be saying: ‘You have proved our point at last. You have cut the ground from beneath your feet! You have just admitted that there is nothing we can do—nothing the unregenerate person can do until God gives him the gift of spiritual sight.’

No, I didn’t say that at all! I’m going to say there’s a lot you can do. There’s a tremendous lot that people can do in order for God to give them the gift of spiritual sight, and I base my claim on the story of this miracle.

*At the level of the physical miracle.* Here was a man born blind and our Lord came by and decided to heal him. It was in the plan of God that he should be healed. His blindness was not his fault, nor his parents’ fault, which we know because the Lord said it wasn’t (v. 3). Our Lord then went through an extraordinarily detailed series of operations. He spat on the ground; made clay with the spittle; put the clay on the man’s eyes, which made him worse than he was before; then sent him to the pool of Siloam and said, ‘Go, wash.’ What a funny thing to tell a blind man to do! What was the need for it anyway? In John 5 our Lord found a paralysed man sitting beside a pool. The man thought the Lord had come to help him get into the pool, but the Lord refused to use the pool. So why this time did he make the man go to a pool? It was for this reason, among others. When the Lord said, ‘I can heal you, I can give you sight; let me put this mud on your eyes and then go and wash’, the man had to decide—would he obey Christ, or not obey him?

On the face of it, it might have been an absurd thing to do, to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. Just imagine the man, feeling his way down the streets of Jerusalem, bumping into every donkey that happened to be there—how would he get to the pool? He had to decide, and to decide ultimately about this Jesus Christ. Was he a lunatic or something, or was he reliable enough so that it was sensible to trust him and see whether it came to anything? He might have said: ‘What is this thing they call sight? They say that they’ve got sight and when they try to tell me what sight is, they can’t. They say, “Sight is, well—sight is something that helps you to see the red flowers.”’

‘What use is that to me?’ says the man. ‘I can’t see any red flowers. I think it’s all imagination. If I go to the pool and wash, I shall imagine I have got sight when I haven’t. It’s all psychological self-deception, this stuff.’

He had to make up his mind, hadn't he? He had to make up his mind about the person of Christ. Was Christ sensible enough? Was Christ serious enough to make it a sensible thing to trust him and go to the pool and see what happened?

God hasn't had his word written for nothing! If you want spiritual sight, soak yourself in his Word. 'These things are written that you might come to believe' (John 20:31). When you've made up your mind morally about who Jesus Christ is you may then be ready to decide: 'Well, he says this, and if I do it I shall get my sight.' You may well be disposed to try it!

*At the spiritual level.* As the man worked through the evidence and argued with the Pharisees, you watch him step by step by step coming to see who Jesus is until eventually God is able to reveal to him that Jesus is the Son of God.

Now, it's true that God had to reveal to Peter that Jesus was the Son of God. Consider how it happened, and I say it reverently. It wasn't that one day Peter was lying in bed and when he woke up in the morning God said to him, 'Peter, Jesus is my Son.' And Peter said, 'Yes Lord, if you say so I believe it. But, tell me, who is this Jesus you are talking about? I've never met him.' Of course not! First, Peter was introduced to the Saviour. He listened to him, travelled with him and heard him preach; and when the evidence was collected and impressed itself on Peter's mind then God could intervene and open the man's eyes to see the full significance of the evidence to which he had been subjected. It is still like that.

#### **7th Scripture:** John 10:1–42

Finally, there is the story in John 10. It is the parable in which our Lord spoke about sheep and the shepherd. All sheep have a faculty for getting to know shepherds. If you go down a country lane and see a flock of sheep and start calling them they may run away from you rather than running to you. But if the shepherd comes they run to him—because they know the shepherd. They could get to know you, but it would take them some time.

Some of the Jews came along and said to our Lord Jesus, 'Are you the Messiah or aren't you? Tell us plainly.'

Our Lord said, 'I have told you, and you did not believe. And for this reason you don't believe—because you are not of my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and they follow me and I know them, and they know me. And I give them eternal life; and they shall never perish. But you don't believe because you are not of my sheep' (John 10:24–28).

And here we tread the theological boards of the doctrine of election, don't we? Some people say, 'But there you see, that is the fact: they were not elect—these Jews. From all eternity past God had decided to pass them by. He had not elected them; he had decided to pass them by. Therefore they were dead in their trespasses and in sins and they couldn't possibly believe in the Lord Jesus unless God gave them the faith to believe with. And he wasn't intending to give them the faith to believe with.' Why not? 'Because they were not his elect; they were not of Christ's sheep.' And at that point some close the argument. Those who are not Christ's sheep cannot believe and will never believe. You have to be elect as one of Christ's sheep before you can even believe.

I humbly suggest that if we cut the argument short there we shall be failing to see the climax to which that particular argument comes. For when our Lord said, 'I and my Father are one' (v. 30), the Jews took up stones to stone him for blasphemy.

Our Lord said, 'For which of my many good works do you stone me?'

They said, 'No, we are not stoning you for your good works, but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself equal with God' (vv. 31–33).

'Oh,' said our Lord, 'You have a theological difficulty with that, do you?' said our Lord. 'Well, let me tell you that your theological difficulty isn't quite so big as you think it is. Because there is a Psalm where God says to certain people who had received the word of God: "I said, You are gods" (Ps 82:6). And if God can address human beings who have listened to God's word and can say, in some sense, "You are gods," it cannot be an absolute difficulty, can it, if the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world says, "I am the Son of God." Gentlemen, your theological difficulty is not the difficulty you think it is.'

Now here comes the past master at his work: 'For which of my good works do you stone me?' (John 10:32).

'Oh, not for any good works,' they said.

At last he'd got through to them that his works were good works! 'You are not of my sheep,' said he. 'Would you like to become my sheep? I'll tell you how to go about it. If you can't believe me, then you can start somewhere. Believe my works! You've just said they are good works, so believe my works. That will be a beginning, won't it? And believing my works you will come to know and understand that I am in the Father and the Father is in me' (see vv. 37–38).

It is not true to say that because they were not of his sheep they could never become his sheep. They could become his sheep. They weren't at the moment, and therefore they didn't believe. But if they followed his directions and started considering his works, and came to believe they were good works, and followed that line of direction, according to our Lord's own words they would eventually come to know and understand and believe, and become one of Christ's sheep.

In saying that, I realize that I'm saying something that some may regard as highly controversial. Our question time at the end of these sessions will allow me to address some of these concerns in greater detail.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> [Question 2](#) (p. 53) deals with the interpretation of John 10:26.

## Vessels of Wrath and Vessels of Mercy

*Seminar Three Handout at Appendix, p. 74*

In this series of four studies our major aim has been to consider the character of God, whom the Bible describes as the blessed God; and the character of God as revealed to us particularly in the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord. In our third study we shall be particularly interested in its relevance to God's ancient people of Israel, and we shall deal with some of the problems that have arisen regarding that nation in relation to the Christian gospel, put before us in Romans 9–11.

In these chapters that many people find very difficult we shall find marvellously rich treasures of the glorious character of God. Certainly we shall learn about his sovereignty. As the potter has the right and authority over the clay to make a vessel this way or that as it may please him, so these passages will assert that God has that right: 'On whom he will, he has mercy, . . . and whom he will he hardens' (9:15–18). So, in what follows, nothing shall be intended to reduce that sovereignty of God.

I hasten to add, however, that when Scripture teaches us the sovereignty of God, that in all things he does according to his own will, we should remember that God's being sovereign and acting sovereignly never means that he acts contrary to his own character. God is not simply some infinite, sovereign tyrant. He surely does what he wills to do, but then, just as surely, he only wills to do things that are consistent with the totality of his character.

So we shall be thinking together of his sovereignty. We shall find tremendous treasure in God's mercy—in his preparation of what he calls vessels of mercy that he has fore-prepared for glory. We shall not have time here to fully use our imagination on the basis of holy Scripture to try to anticipate the wonder of the glory that God's mercy has designed for those vessels of mercy. Yet our Christian instinct and background will tell us that that mercy is indescribably wonderful and abundant, and exceeds all that we could ever ask or think.

My dear Christian friend, if God had saved us—miserable sinners who deserved nothing but his wrath—that would have been mercy, wouldn't it? If in saving us he had appointed us to shine the boots of the lesser angels in glory—who could have said that it was anything other than a marvellously glorious occupation to spend eternity polishing the boots of an angel? But God has designed a mercy that not only forgives arrogant sinners and tiny, nasty little sinners, but designed it so that they should be made heirs of God and fellow-heirs of God's dear Son! Who could conceive it? And to that it is added that not only does he make us heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ, and promised that Christ will never leave us,

but—mystery of mysteries—we are joined to Christ in a body, and through every member of that body flows the life principle which is the Holy Spirit of God.

We shall find not only a God who is sovereign and does what he chooses to do; we shall find that what he chooses to do is according to his mercy. Even when it comes to the solemn matter of the wrath of God, please let us remember that the wrath of God is something beautiful. You wouldn't want God to be on the side of sin, would you? Doesn't your very heaven depend on God being absolutely, uncompromisingly and eternally against sin? His wrath is the expression of his character and his settled hatred of sin—we thank God for that too.

When, at last, vessels of clay refuse to repent and accept the mercy of God—and persist, like Pharaoh did, in their evil and obstinate and irrational antagonism to God—then, when God hardens them, he hardens them in their own choice. He makes them vessels of wrath according to his wisdom and his grace. For vessels of wrath like Pharaoh are not simply people on whom God pours out his wrath. They are people who deserved God's wrath by their sinning. God must punish them, and he makes them advertisements to the rest of the world so that, by this means, if possible, he might bring people to repentance and salvation. In the case of Pharaoh it is evident that God's punishment of him was appropriate and deserved in the end. When he hardened Pharaoh in Pharaoh's own choice and brought down his wrath on Pharaoh's impenitent head, it was reported in the distant country of Canaan. Rahab heard of it, and it was one of the means that brought her to repentance and salvation, and to being an ancestress of Christ, God's Son of glory. So God will turn the very sin of man, and his wrath against sin, to be the means of saving other people.

The wisdom of God is one of the pre-eminent themes of these three chapters of Romans. At the end of chapter 11, Paul was overburdened with sorrow for his unconverted fellow Jews. He contemplates the wisdom of God, not only in what God has done but in what he perceives God is intent on doing, and what in his wisdom he will do. In using Israel's disobedience and rejection of the gospel, he will bring salvation first to the Gentiles, and so provoke Israel to jealousy that in the end all Israel will be saved. God's wisdom will bring glory out of that sad disaster, and Paul is moved to raise his heart in worshipful praise of the wisdom of God (11:33–36). Why has God shut up all in unbelief? Is it that he might banish as many as he possibly can to hell, or stand by unfeelingly and watch millions going to hell without any effort to save them? And all for his glory? No, God has shut up all in their unbelief and rejection of his gospel so that he might have mercy upon all! I tell you again, my dear friend in Christ, the God who gave his Son to die at Calvary will save as many as he possibly can. It follows from that infinite gift of his Son, and the divine intention that lay behind it as he gave that gift.

So then these chapters are difficult, but in them we shall find many a rich lesson on the glory of the character of God. After our studies, if we have learned our lessons anywhere near correctly, our hearts will be elevated to worship God's wisdom. If we do not feel like that, then surely we have missed their major point.

Romans 9–11 deals with the problem arising out of the fact that the majority in Israel as a nation rejected Jesus and denied that he was the God-appointed Messiah. That created a

problem, such that when Paul began to outline the gospel in a systematic way in this great epistle, sooner or later he was obliged to turn to it. Some Christians have been known to get to chapter 8 and then to practise the long jump and start again at chapter 12! 'Let us be practical,' they say. For Paul, however, these chapters were exceedingly practical.

Let us imagine a scenario for a few minutes. Paul is in prison at Caesarea and Governor Festus sends for him.

'Paul, my wife and I know that you are not a criminal, and we would like you to come to dinner tonight.'

So Paul comes and sits down at their highly polished table.

During the meal Festus says to Paul, 'I don't understand why you are in prison. What is it exactly that you believe?'

So Paul starts to tell Festus what he tells us here in Romans. 'Well, sir,' he says, 'it begins with God's story of how he chose our ancestors of the Hebrew race. He chose out Abraham and called us out to be a special people, unique among the nations. He gave us a role to play in history, and Jesus is the fulfilment of all those promises and prophecies that God made to our people down those centuries before Jesus was born.'

Now Festus says, 'Is that so? Paul, can you really guarantee to me that the Old Testament was written before Jesus was born? Didn't you Christians make up an Old Testament?'

Paul replies, 'No, sir, not at all. There is abundant evidence to satisfy any academic test that the Old Testament was written before Jesus was born, most of it centuries before.'

'Then show me some of those prophecies,' says Festus.

So Paul goes through the prophecies of the Old Testament and says, 'Our Christian gospel is based on the writings of those Old Testament prophets, and that Jesus Christ was born, according to the flesh, of the seed of David. He fulfilled those prophecies; even recently in his death and resurrection.'

Festus is getting very impressed, and Paul thinks he's got a near convert—he is almost persuading Festus to be a Christian.

Then Festus turns to Paul and says, 'You are a Christian of course, and you say that Jesus fulfilled all these prophecies, and God raised up your nation of Israel to point the way to the coming of the Messiah. Tell me, how many other rabbis are there among the Jews who believe that Jesus is the Christ as you do?'

'Well,' Paul says, 'there's Peter of course.'

'Is he a rabbi?' asks Festus.

'No, not really; he was a fisherman.'

'Oh.'

'And then there's John.'

'Oh, yes. Is he a rabbi?'

'No, he's a fisherman, too.'

'Yes, I know,' Festus says. 'I don't mean businessmen, but rabbis, authorities on the Old Testament. How many of these rabbis agree with your interpretation of the Old Testament that Jesus is the Messiah? Would you say a majority, Paul?'

'Well, no, not a majority.'

'How many could you mention?'

‘Well, there’s Nicodemus; and Joseph of Arimathaea maybe—he was a member of the Sanhedrin.’

‘And not any others? Ah, well, that was a very interesting conversation, Paul. Have a few more olives and then let’s move to a more comfortable seat!’

You see, our gospel is not a philosophy. It is the end product of a great historical movement: a movement of God in history that chose out the nation of Israel to be the nation through whom the Messiah would come, so that all should be able to recognise him when he came. He will come of this nation, born in that place, of that tribe, of that particular family, of the seed of David. Israel was the nation commissioned to point the way to the Saviour so that all the other nations would see and know who the Messiah was. If that’s what you claim, you will have to have some explanation why to this present day the vast majority of that nation denies that Jesus is the Messiah foretold in their Old Testament. Talk about being practical! We must have some answer to it.

And there is another reason. In Romans 5–8 Paul tells us about Adam’s disobedience and the tremendous wreckage that has befallen humankind as a result of Adam’s transgression. And then we think of the nation of Israel and the role that God gave to them in the course of history. Here was the early stage of God’s great programme for the redemption of mankind. The call and formation of this special nation of Israel to demonstrate to the world what the true God was like, when the rest of the world was sunk in abysmal idolatry. What the service of God was like: not offering little babies to pagan gods and frying them on the statues and the fires of their idols. What the pure worship of God was like, as it was carried on in the tabernacle and temple at God’s instructions. Here were the initial stages of the great programme of redemption for mankind: in this nation, and through this nation all the nations of the world would be blessed.

It was bad enough when Adam went astray and ruined creation; but if Israel has broken down as well what hope is there that salvation is a realistic and a practical thing? What hope is there if the very early stages as arranged by God have come to disaster? If our gospel is to have any credibility whatsoever, you must be able to answer this question: How is it that the nation appointed by God to bring in the Messiah has, as a majority, denied that Jesus is the Messiah?

We come now to Romans 9, so let us look at the argumentation. In the notes I have highlighted some things that appear to me to be of great importance in grasping the argument of what follows. First of all notice what Paul says:

I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience bearing witness with me in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing pain in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were anathema from Christ for my brethren’s sake, my kinsmen according to the flesh. (9:1–3)

*Who is Paul talking about?*

Please notice his definition of those for whom he has sorrow. They are his ‘kinsmen according to the flesh’, that is, his fellow nationals who physically belonged to the physical

nation of Israel. He is not talking about what some people call the elect within Israel—regenerate men and women. He doesn't have sorrow over them; of course not! He has sorrow over those that are not saved.

And why should he bother his head about them? They were his fellow nationals. He loved them!

'What,' you say, 'when they were unsaved?'

Yes, he loved them!

'Ah, but you have just told us that the majority of them have rejected the Lord Jesus. You are telling us now that Paul loved them and had sorrow over them, are you?'

Indeed I am! Even though his fellow nationals had rejected and crucified the Lord Jesus, and are still unrepentant of their sins and persist in rejecting him, Paul loved them and had sorrow over them.

You must state the argument of this passage if you think that Paul is saying: 'They are the non-elect and they are going to perish in hell forever by God's eternal decree. He made them simply so that they should at last be damned and perish in hell for his glory.'

'Paul, you have no reason to be sorry over them; it was by God's decree!'

No, he has sorrow over them: 'I could wish myself anathema from Christ for my brothers' sake, who are physical Israelites.' If ever there was a time when Paul's emotions and heart and love for Israel in their sin and impenitence reflected the heart of almighty God, it was then! For as Paul felt, so God felt.

You say, 'Why did he not feel a little bit like that for the Gentiles who live in England? Well, he scarce knew about us at the time, and the Jews were his fellow nationals. Is it right for Christians to love their fellow nationals? I get the impression that Americans and the English love their fellow nationals! You may have a fellow national—your own physical child. You patiently taught him the Scriptures all through his childhood and teenage years. Now he's gone astray, and in spite of all your prayers and tears he seems impenitent still. Is it right that you should sorrow after him simply because he is your child? Indeed it is! And in your sorrow you reflect the sorrow of God himself, who is not willing that any should perish. Pray on!

*What do Israel's privileges amount to?*

Next we should notice that it was to these kinsmen according to the flesh that God gave these extraordinary privileges that are described in vv. 4–5. Isn't that what grammar dictates?

who are Israelites; whose is the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; whose are the fathers, and of whom is Christ as concerning the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forevermore. Amen. (9:4–5)

These wonderful, glorious privileges were given to physical Israel as a nation. That is very important. Paul will presently tell us that not all physical Israelites are true spiritual Israelites—some have turned out to be quite unregenerate people. But it remains nonetheless that it was to that physical nation that God gave these privileges.

That prompts us to ask what these privileges amount to. The adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises, and the fathers, of whom is Christ—what are they? Do these privileges add up to salvation?

You may say: 'In my estimation they do—they are so wonderful that they must add up to salvation for the people to whom they were given.'

But Paul is about to tell us that not all of this nation were saved, and it was to the physical nation that God gave the privileges.

*Do Israel's privileges deny salvation to others?*

Let me take your side for a moment—that these privileges, if they had been understood amount to what we should call salvation. Now let me ask you a big question. You should decide this absolutely before you go further in this chapter. Suppose these privileges amount to salvation. Does it mean that when God chose Abram and his descendants and gave them these privileges, at that moment God stopped saving everybody else except Israelites? And for the next two thousand years he just let the whole world go? Because he'd saved Israel, and that meant they were chosen to be saved; and God had chosen nobody else so nobody else was saved. Is that how you read it?

Well, if you do, you'll have to ask a few questions about Melchizedek, for he was neither Christian nor Jew. He was priest of the Most High God, accepted by God, who blessed Abram himself. And you will have to ask other large questions. Why did God save the Ninevites, for instance. Is he not the God of the Gentiles? Is he only the God of the Jews, for two thousand years? That's what Jonah thought until God drowned him in the belly of a big fish to teach him better! God sent him on a mission of compassion, for he cared for Nineveh and for the children so young that they didn't know their right hand from their left—and for the cattle! (Jonah 4:11). Why does God care for cattle? He made them, and as Creator he feels a moral responsibility for his creatures. God has created no one just as a toy thing that when he gets tired of them he flings them over the battlements of heaven. Having made them he has a moral responsibility to them, and God will be loyal to his creatures. You will never accuse God effectively of being disloyal to anything that he has made.

These things are not a sign that, in choosing out Israel, he was saving them and letting the others all be damned. Not at all! They show the special role in history that God gave to this nation; for by this time the nations at large were sunk in an idolatrous interpretation of the universe, much like our contemporary Western society. To make himself known to men and women therefore, God started again and made a new nation and gave them this revelation of himself: the law, and the covenants; and, what is more, the presence of God among them in the tabernacle and temple. He gave them the promises so that they might be his witness to men that eventually through that nation he might send his Son as their Messiah. We are thinking, therefore, here, not so much about Israel's individual salvation, but about the role that God designed for the nation to carry in history, which meant creating the nation out of Abraham and Sarah (Rom 9:7–9).

*The lesson taught to Abraham and Sarah*

Now Paul observes an important point, and it comes into his argument like this. At the time of Paul, many in the nation of Israel had rejected the Messiah and his gospel. Paul is going to argue that, in spite of the fact that they are physical Israelites, if they reject the Messiah and the Messiah's gospel they are not true, spiritual Israelites. Down the centuries from Paul's time all true spiritual Israelites have welcomed Jesus as the Messiah. After Pentecost there were some thousands in Jerusalem itself. Being converted, they showed themselves as true Israelites and witnessed to the Messiah. There have always been a few; and in our day there are increasing numbers of true Israelites who believe that Jesus is the Christ.

Paul now moves to prove his point that not all the physical descendants of Abraham are true spiritual Israelites, even though they had these great privileges. At the first level he mentions the historical fact of Abraham's physical children. Abraham had two sons, Isaac and Ishmael. Both of them were equally sons of Abraham; but when it came to God giving Israel the great promises and privileges, God did not give them to all Abraham's physical children. The promises were not given to Ishmael; they were given to Isaac and his seed. That establishes the fact that not all Abraham's physical children carried even these privileges.

How did God determine which of Abraham's sons should have this privileged role in history, of being the patriarch of the nation that should bring in the Messiah? Two incidents are recorded—one in Abraham's life, and the other in Isaac's. The first was with Abraham and Sarah. That's a charming story; let me first remind you of its broad details. When God promised Abraham that he would have a son, Abraham was by then a bit middle-aged and getting on for retirement, and Sarah was barren. God promised that they would have a son; in that son all the nations would be blessed; and Abraham's seed would be in number like the sand on the seashore and like the stars of the heavens. So that was that, and Sarah and Abraham were very pleased!

Time went by, and one day Sarah said to Abraham, 'Abraham my dear, I've been thinking about the promise that God made to us, that we are going to be the parents of a child and he shall grow into a great nation.'

'Yes,' said Abraham, 'isn't that marvellous!'

'Well,' said Sarah, 'I really don't know.'

'What's wrong?' said Abraham.

'Well, God seems to have overlooked something.'

'Oh, really, dear?'

'Yes, he promises a son, and he's overlooked the fact that I'm barren, and he's overlooked the fact that his promise is just impossible. And so he is being a little contradictory: he has shut up my womb, and I can't have a son.'

'Oh,' said Abraham, 'I hadn't thought of that. What can we do?'

'Well, I'll tell you what I've been thinking,' said Sarah. 'When God promised that he was going to give us a son who's to be the father of this special nation, he didn't just mean I'm going to give you a son, did he now? When God said I'm going to give you a son he meant that God helps those that help themselves. He meant us to use our own resources so that his promise should be fulfilled.'

'But we don't happen to have any resources, Sarah my dear.'

‘Oh yes we do! There’s my handmaid Hagar, and I suggest that if this promise is ever going to be fulfilled we shall have to start fulfilling it, Abraham, so you take Hagar.’

What would you have felt like if you had been listening to that conversation in the tent? I think I might have been a bit worried! Here’s the great purpose of God in history, that he is going to create a physical nation that one day would bring in the Messiah! What a marvellous scheme of God, but he seems to have overlooked a few details. All credit to Sarah, she’s thought of a way of getting the Almighty out of the difficulties arising from his lack of forethought! My knees would have wobbled a bit to think that all the promises of God to raise up the nation of Israel and bring in the Messiah all depended on Sarah! She was a good enough soul but if the salvation of the world had depended on her where would we be?

‘No,’ said God, ‘you have misunderstood me. When I promised, I meant it as a promise! I’m going to *give* you a child and thus create a nation.’

‘But, God, would you not accept Ishmael?’

‘No. For a promise is a promise is a promise! And when I said promise, I meant it as a gift, not according to your works—a sheer gift of my grace.’

Thank God for that! I’ll tell you something: if you are saved it’s not because of what Sarah did. Your salvation is of God, and you can shout, ‘Hallelujah!’

We must not mistake that lesson for the other lesson that is drawn from this. In the Epistle to the Galatians Paul teaches us a spiritual lesson from that historical instance. Like Isaac, we are children of the promise; but there is a very big distinction to be made and you should try to grasp it. In the actual history Isaac was a child of promise. It was not because of Isaac’s faith—the lesson was being taught to Abraham and Sarah. They would have a child, given to them by God not by their merit, not by their deserts, not by their power. It was a genuine gift from God! It was Abraham and Sarah who had to learn what faith in God’s promises means—not Isaac. Isaac was born according to the promise through the faith of Abraham and Sarah.

When that is applied in the New Testament listen how the lesson goes: ‘We, brothers, are like Isaac, children of promise’ (Gal 4:28). What does that mean? Now it is a lesson for us. (For Isaac as well, maybe.) You are not saved because your mum and dad were believers. Being a child of promise means that you take God’s holy Word for yourself—‘Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved’ (Rom 10:13)—and you dare to believe the Word of God and rest your salvation simply on God’s promise and not on your own efforts to keep God’s law.

So there are two distinct lessons, and we need to keep that in our minds. Paul is preaching both, but they need to be distinguished:

1. The historical lesson that Abraham and Sarah learned about their own personal faith.
2. The spiritual lesson that we learn from it: if we are to be regenerate and justified and saved, we must learn to put all our hope, not in our efforts to fulfil God’s word but in God’s own promise. It must be that way—God’s great salvation to the world cannot depend on Abraham or Sarah.

*The lesson taught to Isaac and Rebecca*

And then there was a second lesson that Rebecca had to learn (Rom 9:10–13). Rebecca and Isaac were expecting twins. When she went to consult the Lord he told her that two sons would be born and the elder would serve the younger. In fact, two nations were in her womb and the elder would bow down to the younger. Again we need to notice very carefully what the history tells us, and how that promise was fulfilled. It was not primarily concerned with Jacob more than Esau as individuals, because in the subsequent story in Genesis Esau, the elder, never once bowed down to Jacob, his younger brother. Esau never served Jacob. God made clear to Rebecca what he was talking about. It was about the nations that would come from these two boys. Later in history the nation that came from Esau—the Edomites—bowed down before David, king of Israel. But Esau never served Jacob—Jacob bowed down to Esau.

Which shows us what? We are talking about the formation of the nation that should carry these special privileges of being the nation on earth to represent God, to have his temple, his service, and the covenants of the law. God's choice here again was absolutely sovereign. When he raised up that nation the patriarch was going to be Jacob and not Esau.

You say, 'What was it all about?'

Well not for salvation. This is for privilege, for a role within history. On what grounds did God make his choice of which of those two boys would be the patriarch of the nation that would bring in Messiah? Was it that Jacob deserved it more than Esau? No, indeed not! The choice was according to God's purpose regardless of their works, for they had done neither good nor evil at that stage (v. 11). God's choice was sovereign, independent of works. It is not a question of God's determination to save one and damn the other. It is God's choice of this special nation for a special role in history. God chose Israel through Jacob, and he told them subsequently: 'I did not choose you because you were better than others; I chose you because I would choose you, to give you this role in history' (see Deut 7:7).

That is a lesson that the New Testament will repeat to us as servants of God. Listen to Paul talking to Timothy: 'Stir up your gift!' he says, 'for God has not given us a spirit of timidity but of boldness, for he saved us . . .' That's number one. But in addition to saving us, 'he called us to this ministry to serve him.' On what ground did he call us to serve him—because we were better than our fellow Christians? No, indeed not! 'He called us to his service, not on the ground of our works but according to his mercy and grace that was given us before times eternal' (2 Tim 1:6–9).

All of us are called to serve God in one way or another, but you are not called on the ground that you are better than somebody else. You may have the most spectacular gift that God has given you, but you are a sinner like I am. Your role in the body of Christ was not given to you according to your works. Like us all, in spite of many a bad work, it was given to you by the sovereign grace of God that chooses you to be his servant. That doesn't mean that you should go out and sin and think that sin is not important. Even so, God chose us not for our merit. By his sovereign grace he chose us to play our role and to serve him.

*The lesson taught through Israel and Pharaoh*

Thus far then we have been thinking about God's choice of the physical nation in Israel and through what line of physical descent it came—through Isaac and not Ishmael; through Jacob

and not Esau. That is the physical line of the nations through whom Messiah would eventually come.

You say, 'But doesn't salvation enter into it, somewhere along the line, as well as "role"?' Yes, it does, and you can see that in the next pair that Paul quotes from history to push home to our hearts the sovereignty of God's choice.

God says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose did I raise thee up, that I might show in thee my power, and that my name might be published abroad in all the earth.' So then he hath mercy on whom he will, and whom he will he hardens. (Rom 9:15-18)

Now we enter the sphere of salvation, strictly so-called. Israel, appointed as a physical nation to this tremendous role in history, distinct from all the other nations, sinned against God Almighty. Scarcely had they been given the covenants of the law than they forsook the worship of the Lord and went over to the worship of the golden calf. God said to Moses, 'Moses, stand clear. I am going to destroy them root and branch and I will start again from you, Moses, and make the physical nation from you.'

Had God done that, he would not have broken any of his promises. His promises were to the physical nation, not to the individuals within the physical nation. His loyalty was to the nation as a nation; and had God destroyed the whole nation and started again with Moses, his descendants, like Moses himself, would have been of the seed of Abraham, and God's promises would have been fulfilled. The promises were to the nation, and when God made that tempting offer, Moses was loyal to his kith and kin and pleaded for Israel. God listened to his intercessions and eventually said: 'Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy' (Exod 33:19). God had mercy on that enormous apostate nation and restored them to their role in history. There is one thing about mercy: you can't deserve it! You can't say, 'I qualify for mercy, Lord.' If God has mercy then it is because that's what his heart is like. He's a God of mercy and compassion and chooses sovereignly to have mercy. 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion' (Rom 9:15).

You might say: 'But he hardened Pharaoh.' So he did, but I must ask you to remember the situation. When did God harden Pharaoh, and why? What did the hardening mean? Was it that from all eternity past God had decreed in his sovereignty that there should be one nation called Israel on whom, for his glory, he would have mercy? And that there should be another nation called Egypt, headed by Pharaoh, and God made them on purpose for no other reason than that he should damn them? No, that's a blasphemy to say that. God never made anybody so that he could damn him or her; that's blasphemous. God 'would have all people to be saved' (1 Tim 2:4), and if you want an example of the longsuffering of God that would lead a man to repentance, you could do no better than to take Pharaoh.

Israel were sinners, Pharaoh and his nation were sinners. From that point of view they were of the same lump; both deserved God's wrath. God had mercy on Israel, and what did he do to Pharaoh? God foreknew what was going to happen. So he could tell Moses in

advance what was going to happen. Pharaoh's heart would be hardened—God would eventually harden it (Exod 7:3). God foresaw that, but when it came to the working out of the actual details in history this is what happened, according to the account in Exodus. God sent Moses to Pharaoh with a message: 'In the name of Yahweh, let my people go that they may worship me.'

And Pharaoh said: 'That would seriously interrupt my building operations, Moses! Have you got some alternative scheme for getting these cities built at a reasonable cost?'

'Don't trifle,' said Moses, 'this is the word of God to you, your majesty. The God of our fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, commands you to let his people go.'

'That's alright,' said Pharaoh, 'but I don't happen to believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Isn't that a lot of old legend from the past? Nobody nowadays believes that kind of stuff, Moses. Anyway, I'm not going to let them go. How can you prove to me that your God is real anyway?'

'By a miracle,' said Moses.

'Well bring it on then.'

So Moses told Aaron to cast down his rod and it became a serpent.

'What's that supposed to be, Moses?'

'A miracle,' said Moses.

'My scientists can reproduce that kind of thing in the laboratory!' said Pharaoh. And he called in all the wise men and sorcerers and the magicians of Egypt and said, 'Gentlemen, Moses here thinks he has done a miracle! Show him that we can reproduce the same kind of thing in our laboratories. So the scientists obliged and cast down their rods and they became serpents. But Aaron's serpent gobbled up theirs.'

'Explain that bit,' said Moses.

'Well we can't quite yet, but science has explained so much already, it certainly will get round to explaining it one of these days. Anyway, it's no miracle, Moses. You'll have to do better than that!'

If you had been God, what would you have done to Pharaoh then? Six feet of clay! You say, 'I would have banished him forever.' But not God! Here is the sovereign God, he does what he likes, you know. But do you know what he likes doing? He likes having mercy! 'What if God . . . *endured* with much longsuffering' (Rom 9:22) these vessels that were fitting themselves for wrath—that's God. He likes having mercy. When Pharaoh rejected the evidence, what did God say? 'Moses, you must get up early in the morning.' And three more demonstrations came—signs—upon Egypt. In the course of those signs Pharaoh asked Moses to intercede with God for him to take one of the plagues away. Do you know what? Moses prayed for Pharaoh! I'll tell you something more wonderful than that: God listened to Pharaoh and gave him what he asked for. How about that!<sup>9</sup>

Moses would eventually pray for Israel when they sinned. God listened to Moses' prayer at that time and answered and saved Israel. Now Pharaoh asks Moses to pray for him. Moses prays and God answers and gives Pharaoh what he asks and the plague is taken away. That's God's mercy! Enduring with much longsuffering.

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<sup>9</sup> [Question 7](#) (p. 58) deals with Exodus 7:1–5.

Three further signs are given as evidence, until the old scientists come in. This time they said, 'Pharaoh, we have to tell you, as professionals, that we can't do this thing that Moses has done. In our estimation this is the finger of God' (8:19).

So now Pharaoh has the evidence he asked for, that God is real; he has done a whole series of miracles right under Pharaoh's nose. And what does Pharaoh do? He rejects it!

Now surely he will destroy the man. Not God! He sends another three signs—more evidence. At the end of those three signs the scientists couldn't come in. They were so covered with boils that they could not stand before Moses (9:11). So much for their version of science. Pharaoh rejects that as well.

What will God do now when, after showing all that mercy and clear evidence, Pharaoh responds with raw, arbitrary, arrogant refusal to bow to God? God would have been just in destroying him then, wouldn't he? But he said to Moses, 'I'm not going to destroy him this moment, Moses. I'm going to make the man stand. I'm going to harden Pharaoh so that he stands instead of crumpling up. I'm going to harden him in the attitude he himself has chosen. If he won't submit to me and have it my way, he'll have it his way.' God hardened the man in that man's own choice. He made him stand, so that now in punishing him with the punishment he had already deserved, God could use the punishment of Pharaoh to make known his name to the world at large. This is what must happen, under the holy wrath of almighty God, to a sinner who will not repent in spite of God's longsuffering and mercy.

What would you have God do to such a man? (Tell me, what would you have God do with some of the other great tyrants throughout history?) Here God will make known his very character, now that the man had deserved his punishment and had chosen it. Then God hardened him in his choice and so punished him that he became a vessel of wrath, and the surrounding nations heard of it. As we noted earlier, Rahab in distant Canaan heard of it, and that was the beginning of her repentance (Josh 2:10). Being warned by the judgment on Pharaoh and his people, she sought the true and the living God. She found salvation and became an ancestress of the Messiah himself.

Oh, the wisdom and the mercy of God! Isn't it wonderful? Yes, God is sovereign: he has mercy on whom he will have mercy. It is not his will that any should perish. He would have all men and women to be saved and will be longsuffering to the very last to the Pharaohs of this world.

Who decides when the point comes that God's longsuffering must cease, and deliberate, impenitent sinners, sinning against the light, must now be punished? Well of course God decides when that time comes. It is in his sovereign choice. But please notice once more when it happened—only after God's tremendous longsuffering and patience, and appeals and beseechings and evidences galore, and answering Pharaoh's prayers so that he would know that God is real. Only at last, when Pharaoh rejected it all, and did so knowingly, then God decided the time and hardened Pharaoh, and Pharaoh was destroyed.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Please note that further consideration is given at the start of Seminar Four to what it means to be either a 'vessel of mercy' or a 'vessel of wrath'.

**The Father's Gift to the Son;  
the Father's Drawing;  
the Illumination of the Holy Spirit**

*Seminar Four Handout at Appendix, p. 78*

In our last study we considered the character of God in his sovereign mercy, his sovereign wrath and his dealings with what Scripture here calls vessels of mercy and vessels of wrath. Let us take a moment more to consider what these phrases mean.<sup>11</sup>

**What is a vessel of mercy? What is a vessel of wrath?**

I suggest to you that a vessel of mercy is not simply a man or woman upon whom God has mercy and that's that. And similarly a vessel of wrath is not simply someone on whom God pours out his wrath and that's that. A vessel of mercy is someone upon whom God has mercy so that that person becomes an advertisement of God's mercy to others. Let us look at how Paul describes God's mercy towards him and the purpose of it.

I thank him that enabled me, even Christ Jesus our Lord, for that he counted me faithful, appointing me to his service; though I was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: howbeit I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord abounded exceedingly with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. Faithful is the saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am the chief: howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me as chief might Jesus Christ show forth all his longsuffering, for an example of them which should hereafter believe on him unto eternal life. (1 Tim 1:12–16)

Two reasons are given here why God showed mercy to Paul. The first is: 'because I did it ignorantly in unbelief.' Let's look at the second one now: 'for an example of those who should hereafter believe on him unto eternal life' (v. 16). 'Christ intended to use me, and his mercy towards me,' says Paul, 'as an example to millions of other people—those who should subsequently believe on him unto eternal life.'

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<sup>11</sup> The material on 'The Illumination of the Holy Spirit' was not covered in the session but is included in the handout.

The matter is simple, though marvellous. God saved Paul, on his own admission the very chief of sinners. It was no accident, no picking of a man out of a lottery. He had mercy on Paul to make it evident that if God would have mercy on him he would have mercy on anybody. If God would have mercy on the chief of sinners, there wouldn't be anybody that God would not have mercy upon. He was made into a vessel of mercy, and uncounted millions all down these two thousand years have heard of Saul and his persecution of the church, his bitter, arrogant persecution of the risen Lord Jesus, and how Christ had mercy on him. And not only did he have mercy on him but he put him into his service. They have read Paul's experience: 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, and if he saved me he'd save you!' Encouraged by that example, millions have trusted the Saviour. That's what it means to become a vessel of God's mercy.

Similarly, in becoming a vessel of God's wrath. As we said in our last study, it was not merely that Pharaoh, when he refused to repent, was eventually destroyed by God, under God's wrath. God used Pharaoh as an exhibition of what must overtake hardened, impenitent sinners in the end. God made him stand like a beacon in the night as a warning to all those who should come afterwards so that they might repent and seek salvation. We saw how God used Pharaoh's punishment and destruction as a means of bringing, for example, Rahab the prostitute to repentance (Josh 2:9–11). Many since have heard the story of the Passover and the judgment that fell on the people of Egypt. And they have heard how God had made a way of escape (even for Egyptians, had they chosen it) in the lamb and its shed blood. Millions have been moved by that story to find and seek mercy at the hand of God.

If that is what vessels of wrath and vessels of mercy are, let us now ask the question: *What do you have to do to become a vessel of mercy?* It's pretty obvious what you have to do to become a vessel of wrath, but can anybody be a vessel of mercy? Or is it that God, by some eternal decree in times past, chose out some to be vessels of mercy (and therefore they eventually became vessels of mercy), but bypassed others, and therefore they never had any chance of becoming vessels of mercy, even if they would like to have been? No—that is not true!

By his own confession, the great problem that lay upon Paul's sorrowful heart was: 'Why was the majority of Israel not saved?' Whose fault was it? Why were they not vessels of mercy, like Saul of Tarsus was? And Paul tells us why.

What shall we say then? That the Gentiles, which followed not after righteousness, attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is of faith: but Israel, following after a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. (Rom 9:30–31)

Why didn't they succeed in becoming vessels of mercy? They were keen enough in their religion; they were seeking after righteousness. They weren't alcohol-soaked reprobates! Then how was it that they didn't become vessels of mercy? Was it because God hadn't chosen them to be vessels of mercy? No it wasn't! It was because they refused to be vessels of mercy! They persisted in their own idea that they could earn salvation by keeping God's law, and by their own efforts to keep it, they could attain to righteousness.

That isn't possible. You cannot find salvation that way: 'by the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified in his sight' (Rom 3:20). But suppose Israel could have succeeded, by their

own efforts, to keep God's law. Well, marvellous, but I'll tell you one thing they then could never be: vessels of *mercy*.

'Why not?' you say.

Well, just imagine it was you, and you go round to your next door neighbour and knock on their front door and you say to them: 'Look at me. You're an old sinner, but I've diligently persisted in keeping the law of God and have succeeded in keeping it so I'm a shining example of righteousness!'

'You do look well,' your neighbour says to you. 'I could never be like you, so, goodbye.' And when you've gone they'll likely remark on how arrogant you are.

If you succeeded in earning your own salvation, then by that means you cancel out all possibility of ever being a vessel of mercy. Oh, but if by God's grace your eyes have been opened to see that you were a sinner on your way to hell, and God had mercy on you, you can go to your next-door neighbour with a very different message. You can say: 'Look at me. I never could be as good as you, if I tried. And if you knew me and could see me as God sees me, you'd know that I am a sinner deserving of hell. I want to tell you that God has saved me! If he'd save me, he certainly would save you.' That's you being a vessel of mercy!

Why couldn't Israel be vessels of mercy? Because they wouldn't be! As chapter 10 goes on to explain, they had a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. In going about to establish their own righteousness they would not submit to God's way of making a person righteous (10:2-3). It was their own pride and misdirected religious zeal that stopped them from being vessels of mercy. I say it in all the fear of God: by God's grace anybody can become a vessel of mercy if they will agree with God that they deserve his wrath, flee to the Saviour who died on Calvary for them, and accept God's mercy, free and for nothing.

But when I say that, I'm sure I will clash with some very fertile theological minds! 'We cannot quite follow you there,' they will say, 'because the Bible does say that it isn't a question of making up your mind to become a vessel of mercy—it is God's sovereign choice. As the Lord Jesus put it: "Those whom the Father has given me come to me" (see John 6:37). You have to be given by God to the Saviour before you can be saved. And God decides whom he will give to the Saviour by his election carried out before the foundation of the world. God decides to give some people to Christ, and by that very decision passes by others. He does not give them to Christ, and therefore they are not saved. In fact, they never had a chance of being saved. How can you say therefore that anybody can become a vessel of mercy if they will come in repentance and faith to the Saviour?'

That is a big problem for many people. I may have aggravated that difficulty in our second study when we looked at John 10. Our Lord Jesus said: 'My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me and I give unto my sheep eternal life, and they shall never perish' (vv. 27-28). 'On the other hand', said Christ to the Pharisees around him: 'You believe not, because you are not of my sheep' (v. 26).

So, 'My sheep hear my voice, but those who are not of my sheep don't hear my voice.' And that seems to suggest to some people that you become God's sheep because of God's sovereign decision to elect you as one of Christ's sheep. Being elect therefore, and now being Christ's sheep, you will eventually hear the voice of Christ and come to Christ. Whereas, if God has not elected you as one of the sheep, you are not of Christ's sheep, and because

you're not you will never believe on him, and you will be lost. Surely then you could say it all depends on whether or not God has chosen you to be a sheep and has then given you to Christ.

In our second study I was rash enough to say that, according to the end of John 10, when Christ was still speaking to people that were not yet his sheep, he showed them the path they must follow to become his sheep. The fact that they were not yet his sheep did not mean that they could never become his sheep. He has just proved to these Jews that his claim to be the Son of God is not blasphemous, as they thought it was. He proves it by citing the Old Testament Scripture to them where God describes certain human beings as gods (Ps 82:6) because the Word of God has come to them.

Jesus answered them, 'Is it not written in your law, I said, "You are gods?" If he called them gods, unto whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken), say you of him, whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, "Thou blasphemest"; because I said, "I am the Son of God?"' (John 10:34-36)

It is not an insuperable theological difficulty, as many Jews imagine it to be, that Jesus Christ claims to be the Son of God and equal with God. That difficulty being now disposed of, does Christ turn on his heel and walk away from these people saying, 'It's no good arguing any further with you? You are not of my sheep; you are not of the elect; God has not given you to me, and therefore it's useless my speaking to you. Goodbye!'

No, he doesn't. They are not yet of his sheep but he tells them how they may become his sheep. Listen to him:

If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not. But if I do them, though you believe not me, believe the works: that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father. (10:37-38)

Do you suppose that our Lord was mocking those men by holding out in front of them a thing that was never a possibility because they weren't elect? Our Lord mocked nobody. These men were not yet his sheep. They were frightened of him. When he stood in front of them and claimed to be the Son of God, as orthodox Jews it frightened them. Was that not sheer blasphemy? And if it was, they had a right to stone him; they were commanded to in the Old Testament. Frightened little sheep they were, and when they heard his voice they thought it was the voice of a blasphemer, and they couldn't trust him. In their eyes trusting him would mean going off into idolatry. What would Christ do? They were not yet his sheep, but there is a way of dealing with sheep.

All sheep have the potential to get to know a shepherd, you know. That's a potential that sheep have; they're not rhinoceroses! When they've got used to a man and discover that he is kind to them, feeds them and protects them, they'll follow him. They recognize him as a shepherd and will come running to him. But if they don't know you and you should call: 'Come here little sheep,' wisdom suggests to the sheep that he shouldn't trust you. So what do you do? You pluck a bit of juicy grass, stand at a distance and throw it down to the sheep, and then withdraw. The sheep looks at that grass—it is very green—and then looks at you.

He doesn't trust you, but he trusts the grass and he makes a dive for it, eats the grass and runs back again! So then you get another bit of grass and you say, 'That was lovely grass, wasn't it?' And you throw another bit down, this time nearer to you. The sheep makes up his mind that the grass is good, so he does another run and you throw another bit much nearer. By that process, by believing the grass and finding it very good, he gradually comes right near you; until in the end he starts to trust you and will take the grass out of your hand. He has become one of your sheep!

Such is the infinite compassion of God when he sent his Son to save people! These dear religious Jews got it into their heads that the very Son of God was stating blasphemy, and they ought to stone him or crucify him or something. They couldn't trust him. But listen to the compassion of God incarnate: 'Ah, gentlemen, you can't trust me yet, can you? I tell you what. If you don't believe me, believe my works. You've just agreed that my works are good. All right, I'll step back now for a moment. You start here and believe the works. Then, believing the works and finding out what their moral quality is and admitting the obvious fact that they are done by supernatural power and that the works save people and bring them nearer to God to discover what the heart of God is really like, you will come at last to admit something, just as the blind man did.'

In his argument with the Pharisees the blind man said, 'I don't know much theology, but it was never heard from the beginning of the world that anyone should open the eyes of one born blind. This man must be of God' (9:32–33). The blind man was trusting the works, and the Lord had withdrawn. Though he was not a very theological sheep, the blind man was experiencing one of the good works and in his heart was rising a trust in this Jesus. Even though the Pharisees said he was a wicked man, the blind man said, 'That can't be—look at his works. God doesn't hear sinners; he must be from God. God used him to open my eyes!' So he began by trusting the works, then he eventually met the Saviour again, and the Saviour asked him: 'Do you believe on the Son of God?' He said, 'Who is he, Lord, so that I might believe?' (vv. 35–36). He was ready to believe now, and the Lord said: 'You have both seen him'—seen him physically, reminding him of the miracle—'and he it is that speaks with you.' He said, 'Lord, I believe!'

How wonderful the actual truth is, as distinct from men's imagination! I remember being in a certain place once, speaking at a conference. I had done my poor best to expound some passage of Scripture, and I was assailed by a gentleman who took exception to something I had said.

He said, 'No, if people were not Christ's sheep that was that—it was no good preaching to them; there was nothing to preach to them except the certainty that they would perish forever in hell. The question was: "Were you one of Christ's sheep?" If you were you would be saved; if you weren't there was nothing you could do about it.'

I said, 'That's odd, because in that same chapter 10 of John's Gospel, when our Lord is talking to people who were not yet his sheep, told them how they could become his sheep!'

'That's downright impossible!' he said, and walked off.

So he hadn't given me the chance to say all of this.

Sometimes our systematic doctrines stop us from looking to what Scripture actually says. And I repeat it: those that weren't yet his sheep and couldn't believe him—Scripture tells

them how they could become his sheep. First by believing his works; and then, having believed his works, coming to experience the mercy and grace of God through Jesus Christ—coming to see that Jesus Christ must be of God, and then becoming his sheep. I told you that in these studies we would come to read the very heart of God. Let us not imagine God after the terms of Greek philosophy,<sup>12</sup> as so many medieval Christian theologians did. If you want to know what God is like, the answer is: God is like Jesus Christ our Lord. That's what God is like!

### **The Father's gift to the Son**

But it will be said to me along this line, and I respect the viewpoint: 'Does not our Lord say that the Father has given certain people to the Son?' Yes, he does, and I do believe that the Father gives people to the Son. So let's read what the Lord says about them.

These things spake Jesus; and lifting up his eyes to heaven, he said, 'Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee: even as thou gavest him authority over all flesh, that whatsoever thou hast given him, to them he should give eternal life.' (John 17:1-2)

There it is plainly stated that the Father gives people to the Son, and to them Christ the Son gives eternal life. Now let's see that amplified as our Lord proceeds with his prayer: 'I manifested thy name unto the men whom thou gavest me out of the world: thine they were, and thou gavest them to me' (v. 6). Let's pause there. These people that the Father gives to the Son: first of all, they were God's—'thine they were', not, 'thine they are'—'thine they were, and thou gavest them to me.' What does that mean?

Perhaps the easiest way to understand it is to consider who these people were historically. Here around him in the upper room were these eleven disciples. Outside there were many others, like Mary and Martha and Lazarus. Of them our Lord says to his Father, 'Thine they were'—meaning that even before our blessed Lord began his public ministry these people were already believers in God. Were not Mary and Martha and Lazarus, and John and Philip and Thomas already true believing Jews? Were they not genuine in their faith in God, doing what the Old Testament prescribed for godly Jews to do? Zechariah the priest was a God-fearing man, blessed by God. The aged Simeon, Anna the prophetess, and other men and women had lived their lives for God. They were God's people, true believers in God.

Of course there were those who belonged to the physical nation of Israel, but they were not God's people. You will read of some of them in chapter 8. They professed to believe in the Lord Jesus, and when the Lord Jesus said to them, 'All right, you profess to believe in me. Now then if you continue in my word, you shall be my disciples genuinely and really; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free' (vv. 31-32).

They replied, 'What do you mean, free? Free from what?'

Our Lord said, 'Free from sin, of course. Everyone that keeps practising sin is a slave to sin. I have come to set you free.'

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<sup>12</sup> [Question 16](#) (p. 65) deals with the influence of Greek philosophy on Christian thinking about God.

And they said: 'What do you mean? Free? We have never been in bondage to anybody; so don't tell us that we are slaves to sin! Who do you think you're talking to? You go and preach that to the prostitutes around the corner, not us! We are children of Abraham.'

'Well,' said our Lord, 'that's peculiar. Because if you were children of Abraham you would do what Abraham did. He didn't go round seeking to kill me—you can't be children of Abraham' (see v. 40).

And they said, 'We weren't born of fornication, even if you were; we have one Father, even God.'

'That's even more odd,' said Christ, 'for if God were your Father you would love me. I tell you straight, God is not your Father—you are of your father the devil' (vv. 41–44).

Jews though they were, they had to be brought to see that they were unregenerate rebels against God, as bad as Saul of Tarsus eventually became. The only way that Christ could ever lead such people to faith was to get them to see first of all that, in spite of being nationally God's chosen nation, personally they were unregenerate enemies of God. Until they came to see that, they would never seek salvation. It was only when Saul of Tarsus woke up to the fact that, despite his Pharisaic righteousness, he was a rebel sinner against God that he sought and found salvation through Christ, whom he had been persecuting. To bring men and women to God, particularly the religious kind, Christ has first of all very often to show to them that they are rebels and sinners against God.

But these others, like Simeon, Anna, Mary, Joseph and a multitude more, were genuine believers, weren't they? Like Isaiah and Jeremiah had been in their day, and the beloved prophet Daniel. And now here is our Lord talking to his Father: 'These folks that you have given me, Father—they were first of all yours, weren't they? They were believers in God, and you gave them to me' (John 17:6). What does that mean? Well, they came to believe not only in God but in the Lord Jesus.

Think what that would mean for a Jew. Listen to our Lord talking to his disciples. 'Do you believe in God?' Of course they did—orthodox Jews to the core, they believed in the one true God. 'You believe in God, believe also in me', he said (John 14:1). To many a Jew it would be shocking beyond description for a man to say that. Would that not be utter blasphemy? To many a Jew it would appear to be. Jesus claiming the faith of people on equality with God: 'You believe in God, then believe in me in that same way.' It wasn't blasphemy, was it? Christ was not beginning a new, blasphemous, heretical sect in Judaism, as the Pharisees feared he was. He wasn't drawing people away from their faith in the one true God, to put faith in a mere man. It was the one true God himself—in whom these people already believed—that gave them to his Son, so that they might be believers in the Son, even as they were believers in the Father. 'Thine they were, and thou gavest them to me' (17:6). How did God give them to the Saviour? Our Lord proceeds to describe the process by which people who believed in God have now come to believe in the Lord Jesus.

I manifested thy name unto the men that thou gavest me out of the world; thine they were, and thou gavest them to me; and they have kept thy word. With this result—that now they know that all things whatsoever thou hast given me are from thee. For the words which thou

gavest me I have given unto them; and they received them, and knew of a truth that I came forth from thee, and they believed that thou didst send me. (see vv. 6–8)

That's how they were given to the Son. They believed in God; and when the Lord Jesus came God gave him his word to preach, and not only his word but his very words. And these people, listening to the word and the very words of Christ, found that those words were the words of God himself. They came to realize that everything Christ had—his words and his miracles—came from God. Waking up to that fact, they believed that God had sent him and they came to believe in Jesus, just as they believed in God. For to believe Jesus is to believe God and to believe God is eventually to believe Jesus. That's how they were given. And now our Lord says: 'You have given me these men, and this is how it's been done: through your word that I preached to them, through the miracles you gave me to do, they came to know that everything I've said and done comes from you. They have believed therefore that I come from you, and that I am your Son, and therefore they believe in me. Now keep them, Father, in the name that you have given me' (see 17:8–11). That blessed name: 'Son of God'—equal with the Father! 'Keep them in that faith'—that they not only believe in the Father but now they have come to believe in Jesus, who carries the very name of God—given to him by God. That's the process, not some mysterious choice or decree before the world began! That's how it was done.

### **The Father's drawing**

But someone will ask, 'Doesn't it say somewhere also that no one can come to the Father except the Father draws him?' That is perfectly true—John 6:44. When we come to interpret what our Lord meant, once more we would do well to regard the historical context. He had fed the people with bread, and therefore they came to him seeking more bread.

'Give us this bread,' they said.

Our Lord said, 'You haven't realized: I am the bread. It is not that the bread that I give you is something different from me—I am myself the bread' (v. 35).

They couldn't quite make out what that meant.

'Well,' he said, 'just as the manna came down from heaven, I have come down from heaven, sent by the Father, to be the bread of life for the world.'

They said: 'You've come down from heaven? Moses gave us the manna, but Moses didn't come down from heaven; and you say you've come down from heaven!'

So there arose an argument among them: 'We can't make out what this fellow is talking about,' they said. 'He says that he's come down from heaven—how can he come down from heaven? We know his father and mother, and his aunts and uncles! What is he talking about?'

And our Lord said, 'You find that difficult, don't you?'

They'd never heard anyone make such a claim. They knew his mother, and they thought they knew his father. They'd followed the development of this baby ever since he was born. They were finding it very difficult to think that he came down from heaven, or even to make sense of the idea.

'It is virtually impossible for you to understand it,' said Christ, 'except God the Father himself should draw you and teach you, and then you could understand. You'll never understand it unless my Father draws you and teaches you.'

You say, 'There you are; you've admitted it now! The Father decides to draw some and to teach some, but that automatically means there's a lot of others whom he's not prepared to teach.'

Oh, really? Now our Lord quotes the Old Testament to prove this—that the Father has to teach you if you're going to understand that Jesus is the Son of God come down from heaven (John 6:45, quoting Isa 54:13). He doesn't quote it: 'The days come when they shall, some of them, be taught of God.' No—'When they shall all be taught of God.'

'All?' you say.

Yes, all. God is prepared to teach all.

There are dangers when he teaches people. When he opens anybody's eyes at last to see and they reject it, then there is nothing that God himself can do further to save such people. Do remember that God, who has given us light and eyes to see with, in his wisdom gave us eyelids; and when at last he opens people's eyes and shows them the light of his truth, it still remains that people can choose, if they wish, to shut their eyes against the light. That is not God's fault. It doesn't stem from some eternal counsel that, so to speak, damns people even before they are born.

We might follow that by observing the argument in Romans 10 on which we were concentrating earlier. We got to the point at the end of chapter 9 where Paul points out, if I have understood him correctly, that anybody could become a vessel of mercy, if they chose to, by acknowledging that they deserve God's wrath, repenting of their sin, and finding refuge in the Saviour. Why then were Israel not saved? Whose fault is it? In chapter 10 Paul, with sorrow in his heart, analyses for us why the majority of them are still not saved and gives us the reason: 'They have a zeal of God'—they are highly religious—'but not according to knowledge' (10:2). Ignorant of God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. That's why.

You say, 'But was it possible for them to be saved? Weren't these people whom God had decided to pass by, and he wasn't prepared to give them faith, and therefore they couldn't believe? Isn't that the reason? Wasn't it, in fact, impossible for them to be saved because they were not elect?'

No, indeed not!

'Salvation could have been as easy as this,' says Paul: 'the word was nigh them, in their mouths and, going deeper still, was in their hearts' (see v. 8). See how far God will go to save somebody! The conditions are that 'if you shall confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you shall be saved' (10:9). And God, willing that none should perish, desiring that all should be saved, put the very word in their mouths. God can't speak it for them; they will have to say it. But God will do anything that God can do. He puts the very word in their mouth so that all they have to do is to speak it. He will go deeper still: he will get right down into their hearts. The word is in their heart, but they will still have to close in and accept the offer (v. 11). God can't do that for them. He will do all he can for them. And there is no difference, says Paul; 'there is no respect of

persons' (v. 12). It is not that God would save some and wouldn't save others. There is no distinction between Jew and Greek. For it stands written: 'that whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved' (Rom 10:13, quoting Joel 2:32). It is not God's fault that they are not saved.

Someone may say: 'Your enthusiasm is running away with you. You would do better to resume your more orderly style with which you began.'

So, I will do that then.

You say, 'It's all very well you standing there and saying that anybody that calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved; but it isn't as easy as that, for it says: "How shall they call on him in whom they have not believed?"' (v. 14). So, first of all, if they are ever going to call on the Lord to be saved, they have first to believe, haven't they? As the verse says, "How shall they call on him in whom they have not believed?" So they have to believe first.'

But then how are they going to believe? Because it says here, 'And how shall they believe in him. . .' Now notice the next word; it is very important, and a tremendous amount hangs on it. 'How shall they believe in him *whom* they have not heard?' The Greek here makes this very evident. It is possible to hear somebody just with the hearing of the ear, like sounds coming out of a radio and you're not really listening to them, but you hear the noise. It is possible also to hear with that deeper hearing, and the Greek makes it clear that Paul is talking about that. 'How shall they believe in him *whom* they have not heard?' If ever you are going to believe in Christ you will have to hear Christ. It is not a question of believing the preacher. It is not a question merely of reading and believing certain marks of ink upon a bit of paper! Through that inspired written word the Lord speaks, and you hear the Lord and know it is the Lord's word, and you believe him. If you are going to believe on him you will have to hear him, for 'faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ' (v. 17).

I'd better stop now, because I can hear the theologians' swords already rattling in their scabbards as they draw them!

'You've forgotten the plain straightforward teaching of holy Scripture, which says—"by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph 2:8-9). Saved by faith—but the faith in question has to be the gift of God. God gives it to you and you believe him. And if he doesn't give you the faith you can't believe him.'

Oh, I see. So, let us go through these difficulties.

1. *'How shall they call on him in whom they have not believed?'* And you say, 'Well that is a point, but they can't believe on him unless God gives them the faith to believe with. The elect are given faith, they believe Christ, and therefore they call on him. Those that are not elect, God doesn't give them the faith, and they can't believe on him.' You say, 'Faith is a gift of God,' and perhaps you reinforce it with your own experience: 'In my case it was so—God gave me the gift of faith.'

Praise the Lord, he did! Faith is certainly the gift of God. I don't begin to disagree with the point. How could I? Faith is the gift of God, but let me ask another question.

2. *How does God give you faith?* Here's an idea! After this lecture come to me and show me your faith. Where do you keep it? Have you got it in a kind of a box inside your ribcage somewhere? What is this faith thing that you've got, that he gave you? When God gives you

faith, how does he give it? It comes from God, of course—from Christ, if you like. But this is how the gift comes: 'Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ' (v. 17). There's no great mystery about that! That's how faith comes with anybody.

If you are engaged in business, you may say of one man: 'Yes, I would trust him with uncounted gold! I would take his word for it and I wouldn't demand he sign the agreement. I know him, he's an honourable fellow. You see, I've done business with him for years and I know that he is a man of his word. I've listened to him speak and I've learned you can trust everything he says.'

How did your faith come? The man gave it to you, didn't he? How? By the way he behaved, the way he talked, the way he kept all his promises—and you came to have faith in him. You didn't have to try to believe him; it was he that provoked the faith in your heart to trust him.

Sir, why did you marry that lovely lady? And, madam, why did you trust that handsome fellow you married?

She says, 'I've got great faith in him!'

How did you come to have that? Did he give you a present one day, and when you opened it there was a bundle of faith?

'Of course not! I watched him even before he watched me,' she says. 'I kept my eye on him and watched how he behaved. I saw how kind and generous he was, even to elderly people and children. I listened to the tone of his voice and noticed how he kept his promises.'

So the faith that arose in your heart came from listening to him, didn't it? How does God give us faith? He does it by the same method. He speaks, he works, and he acts. He sent his dear Son to show us exactly what he is like. 'Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.' That's how it comes! And now you see the force of the argument, don't you? 'How shall they call on someone in whom they have not believed?' If they don't call, they won't be saved. But in order to call they have to believe on him. Well, how could they possibly believe in him whom they have never heard? Unless they come to hear in this deeper sense, faith will never arise in their hearts.

Here come the battalions of the theologians. They say, 'Now this is where you are going to get caught out! They can't believe unless they hear, and the trouble is that, being unregenerate, they are dead in trespasses and sins, and they can't hear. And if you preach the gospel to them you might as well preach to the people in the graves in the cemetery—they can't hear!'

Well, if they can't hear, then certainly they won't be saved, will they? But let's proceed to the argument. If they are going to hear, 'how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall he preach unless he's been sent?' (vv. 14–15). It's not enough for a preacher to get up and speak just a lot of words. If what he says is going to produce faith in the hearts of the congregation, then that man must be sent by God with the very message of God and empowered by God's Holy Spirit to cause the people to hear. These are the conditions that must be fulfilled if people are going to call on the name of the Lord and be saved.

3. *Why are Israel not all saved then?* All they have to do is to call. Could it be that Israel did not hear in that deep sense because they were unregenerate and couldn't hear? And not

hearing Christ they couldn't believe in him; and not believing in him they couldn't call upon him? This becomes absolutely vital, doesn't it?

Paul uses a form of a question in Greek that puts the matter beyond doubt. There are three ways of asking a question in English and perhaps many more. You can have a question that is open: 'Is it raining?' The answer could be 'Yes' or 'No.' That's an open question. Or you could say: 'It's raining, isn't it?' And the way you phrase the question means that you are expecting the reply, 'Yes it is.' Or you could put the question another way and say: 'It's not raining, is it?' And the way you put it expects the answer, 'No.'

Paul here phrases the question expecting the answer, 'No.' What is the question? 'Is it true that Israel did not hear (v. 18), and that's why they are not saved? They didn't hear so they couldn't believe, and therefore they couldn't call. Is it true that Israel didn't hear?'

No, that is not the truth! They did hear! (v. 18). Listen to God, and not systematic theology at this point: unregenerate people though they were, God says they did hear, they could have believed, they could have called.

Paul repeats the question: 'Is it true that they didn't know (v. 19), and that's why they didn't believe?' No, that isn't true either. They did know. And as Paul comes to the end of that chapter he brings together evidence from here and from there to show that Israel did know and could have been saved, if only they would have repented and believed. Among the evidence is the fact that Gentiles by the hundreds, who hadn't even been seeking God, had come to faith. It was intended to provoke Israel to jealousy as they saw them being converted and won from heathenism.

I use the argument with my Jewish friends to this present day. I say to them, 'I'm an old Gentile, and now I believe! But I don't believe in any old kind of God. I should think not! I have come to believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.'

And then they ask me, 'How did you come as an old pagan Gentile to believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?'

'It was through a Jew—his name is Jesus! As a Jew he has brought millions of Gentiles to believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Why can't you Jews believe in him? Show me another Jew who has brought more pagan Gentiles from their idolatry to believe in the one true God of Israel. Show me a Jew who has done more than Jesus Christ! Did Israel know? Yes, of course they knew!

There's more than that! God wasn't prepared to leave it to mere rational argument; for in the end the matter is instinctive, isn't it? It's a person's relationship with his Creator. Listen now to God. Did Israel know? 'All the day long,' says God, 'I have stretched forth my hands' (v. 21). What a vivid metaphor—can you picture it? Almighty God, maker of heaven and earth, Lord of the billions and billions of galaxies with their multibillion stars, stretching out his arms to these people! He has a moral responsibility for them—he made them, they didn't ask to be made. He owns his moral responsibility for them. And though they have sinned he's provided a Saviour for them. They needn't perish, but they won't come. So God comes in the person of Jesus, and all day long stretches out his arms—like parents would to a little child—pleading with them to come. Oh how near God's arms came to us when his own dear Son was given up to Calvary. How near did God stretch his arms to guilty sinners!

God still stands with his arms open, pleading by his very gesture as well as his words for people to repent and believe. I ask you this: Is God being sincere, or is he just pretending? Is it so that he has an external counsel by which he would be willing for folks to be saved, and so he stretches out his arms, pleading with them to come? But he has a secret counsel because he himself decreed in eternity past that he would pass by these particular people and allow them to perish because that was his divine, sovereign will? He had determined that they should perish. Is that true—two different kinds of counsels? Yet he stands there pleading with them to come, and he knows in his heart they can't come? Why can't they come? Their only chance of coming would be if God gave them the faith to come with, and he is not prepared to do that. But he makes out that he wants them to come. And he could have them come if he would only give them the faith, but he has decided that he doesn't want to. He has decreed that they shall go on unsaved and perish eternally.

So he has two counsels. He stands there, according to the one, pretending that he wants them to come—and in his heart of hearts he doesn't want them to come at all. My dear brothers and sisters, to take that view, I humbly submit—and let me not say it with too much warmth—that is a blasphemy upon the character of God. He would have all people to be saved. 'They have heard,' he says. They could therefore believe, and believing they would call. 'And it's easy because I put the very word in their mouths and into their very hearts. All they have to do is to say it and accept it. And I would save them at the cost of my Son's sacrifice. I want them to come, but all day long as I've pleaded they've stood back and argued and refused and rejected.'

And what does God do then? I say it in all reverence. Does he say: 'I am so glad that they have rejected it, for now I have a good reason to say it's their fault and I can get on with damning them!' No. We know what God's attitude is. For when our Lord Jesus stood for the last time outside Jerusalem and looked at it, strong Son of God though he was he wept over it. 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered your children underneath my wings as a hen gathers her chickens, and you would not!' (Matt 23:37) He wept brokenheartedly over Jerusalem. Tell me, was his weeping a protest against God? Had God decided to pass them by and let them be damned without trying to save them? But Jesus was kinder than the Father and he would have saved them, but God didn't cooperate somehow and give them the faith to believe with? Oh, perish the thought!

Do you want to know what God's attitude is? Look at Christ: he is the Word made flesh. Look at Christ and you see God—'He that has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). If you want to know what God's attitude is when he has to consign people to eternal perdition because they wouldn't accept the salvation that he offered—it is the same as Christ's attitude. 'Oh, Jerusalem, how often I would, but you wouldn't.' That is God, the God whom Jesus Christ our Lord has shown us in the gospel.

## Questions and Answers

DR GOODING'S INTRODUCTORY REMARKS: Now let me say a genuine thank you for coming and putting these questions to me. That shows me that you take seriously my few remarks in these four seminars, and that you cooperate with me genuinely, in the sense that we work together, to try to help one another to understand what God has written for us in his Word. Let me also remind you what I said in the Preamble. I am aware that these are topics over which godly men and women have disagreed for many centuries. We must learn to respect each other. God himself has abundantly blessed men who held quite opposite opinions in these matters. He blessed John Wesley and George Whitefield. He blessed Spurgeon, and he blessed Billy Graham.

I also pointed out very sincerely that I did not suppose that I would solve these problems in these four brief seminars. That would have been conceit on my part, would it not? Nor did I pretend to offer you a complete and fully worked out system of theology. What I was simply doing was to call attention to certain Scriptures that seem to me to have a very important bearing on this general topic—important because they pertain to the honour and character of God. Our wisdom therefore, no matter what system we hold, is constantly to come back to holy Scripture as it is written, to test and, if need be, modify our system according to Scripture.

Still less do I suppose that I am going to be able to answer all your questions in a few seconds devoted to each one. That would be to insult your questions. In these last five minutes that I have been able to have a very brief look at your questions, I can see that some of them would take half an hour to debate even superficially. You must therefore understand that if I attempt to give a brief answer I do it within the limits of the great constraints that are now laid upon me.

If I appear to be unfair to your question, please put it down to my lack of time. (You may also put it down to my sheer ignorance, for the extent of my ignorance it would be impossible to exaggerate!) In that spirit let us proceed.

Ed. Note—*The chairman arranged the questions in their biblical order, which worked well up to Question Eight, after which point the next few questions are linked together by the topics of light and evidence.*

## Question One

*In the light of John 1:13 must we conclude that the will of man is not exercised in the salvation process?*

But as many as received him, to them gave he the right to become children of God, even to them that believe on his name: which 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)

DR GOODING: No, that does not imply that the will of man is nowhere involved in the salvation process. What verse 13 does is to describe for us this process of the new birth. That is a process that we cannot accomplish by our own will. You can't will to perform upon yourself what is here called the new birth. The new birth is something that only God can do. It is not produced by the will of man. On the other hand, when God offers you Christ the terms are, 'to as many as received him'—only to those who receive him does God perform this great act of regeneration. Whether you receive Christ or refuse him will involve your will. The reason why some Jews were not born again of God was, as the Saviour put it: 'You will not (i.e. are not willing to) come to me, that you may have life' (John 5:40).

## Question Two

*If Dr Gooding's interpretation of John 10:26 were true, Jesus should have said: 'You are not of my sheep because you do not believe.' What he did say however is: 'You do not believe because you are not of my sheep', which is quite the opposite.*

DR GOODING: Well, I have to confess I am a trifle surprised by the question, for I believe with you that what Christ said was: 'You believe not, because you are not of my sheep.' I do believe that, and I accept the order of it. The reason why they didn't believe was that they were not Christ's sheep. Christ's sheep hear his voice and they believe and trust the Saviour. The reason why these people at this point didn't believe was because they were not *yet* Christ's sheep, so they had no confidence in him. But he shows them at the end how they may come to believe and at last become his sheep. That is what I was arguing because, as I see it, that is what the Lord Jesus said.

### Question Three

*Could you explain how we may understand John 12:37–41?*

But though he had done so many signs before them, yet they believed not on him: that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spake, Lord, who hath believed our report? And to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed? For this cause they could not believe, for that Isaiah said again, 'He hath blinded their eyes, and he hardened their heart; lest they should see with their eyes, and perceive with their heart, and should turn, and I should heal them.' These things said Isaiah, because he saw his glory; and he spake of him. (John 12:37–41)

DR GOODING: The question in v. 37 is quoting Isaiah 53:1. Isaiah was astonished that, in spite of the many signs, the people wouldn't believe. John 12:39–40 says something even more serious, if that were possible: 'For this cause they could not believe, for that Isaiah said again, he hath blinded their eyes, and he hardened their heart; lest they should see with their eyes, and perceive with their heart, and should turn, and I should heal them' (cf Isa 6:9–10). They couldn't believe because God had hardened their hearts.

If we are to understand this remark, we must observe where it comes in the Gospel by John—there are similar remarks in the other Gospels (cf Matt 13:13–15). It is not said at the beginning of the Gospel before Christ did his signs; it is said after Christ had done much preaching, after he had done many signs. But by that point many of the people, in spite of the preaching and in spite of the signs, still rejected Christ; and then God stepped in and hardened their hearts.

The Lord Jesus warned the people of that in the comparable passage in Matthew chapter 12. When, in spite of the signs that the Lord had done, the Pharisees said that he was doing those signs by the power of the devil (v. 24), Christ replied by warning them solemnly that if they persisted in rejecting the evidence of his signs they were sinning against the Holy Spirit. If they persisted they would not be forgiven in this age or in the age to come.

The verses in John therefore are to be understood in a similar context. They come not at the beginning of our Lord's ministry but towards its end when those who had the gospel preached to them, but knowingly had sinned against the Holy Spirit, would find that their hearts were hardened. From then on they could not believe.

### Question Four

*Does Acts 2:47 suggest that there were some people who should, and therefore others who shouldn't, be saved? Is there a better translation of this verse?*

Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved. (Acts 2:47 KJV)

DR GOODING: Well, in modern English there would be. The verse says simply, there were added to them day by day those that were 'being saved'. It is a present participle in Greek,

and the Greek present participle can convey all kinds of meanings. But here the most probable one is of a continuous process. As the word was being preached people were being saved: three thousand on the day of Pentecost and a few days later the number had risen to five thousand—‘the Lord added to them those that were being saved from day to day’.

### Question Five

Does not Acts 13:48 teach that those who believe were those who were appointed to eternal life? Granted there is no eternal decree to arbitrarily damn humans; is there not a decree to appoint some to eternal life?

And as the Gentiles heard this, they were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord: and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed. (Acts 13:48)

DR GOODING: I hesitate to use the word decree. It is a very rare word in the New Testament, and as far as I can remember it is not used in connection with man’s salvation. I know what you mean, however. Does the term, those that were appointed to eternal life believed, mean that they were thus *appointed* by God’s pre-choice, his pre-determination?

The matter will turn on two things. First, the context is contrasting the Jews of the synagogue who, having heard the gospel, rejected it furiously; and Paul and company shook the dust off their shoes and said, ‘Seeing you judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, we turn to the Gentiles’ (Acts 13:46). Here were Jews making their own decision, coming to their own judgment—regarding themselves as unworthy of eternal life, and they wouldn’t have it. That was how they judged the situation. They were Jews.

Secondly, in contrast to that, many (not all) of the Gentiles believed. To take it seriously, you will have to consider the possible translations of that Greek word translated ‘appointed’ or ‘ordained’. It is used in a military context in the middle and passive voice, in this kind of sense. A detachment of troops could form themselves up into battle formation or line of march, and so the word would be used like that of a squad of troops taking that particular formation. We could therefore quite rightly take it as ‘those who were *lined up* for. . .’

Lined up how? Well, I myself believe that when it comes to the work of salvation God always takes the initiative. It is not that humans come to God saying, ‘Please consider saving me.’ And God replies, ‘I hadn’t thought of doing any such thing, but I’ll consider your application.’ God always takes the initiative. What is more, as any practical evangelists will tell you, as they go to this place and that, they find people who have been worked upon by God’s gracious Holy Spirit and their consciences have been aroused. Maybe they haven’t got to the point of complete illumination, but they are starting to think. And God in his mercy brings a preacher to them, and these folks have been prepared, and when they hear the gospel they believe. That doesn’t mean that nobody else in the town is ever going to get saved. Some are not just ready yet. I take it that what Luke is saying is that, when those among the Gentiles who were ‘in line for . . .’ (either had lined themselves up for, or God’s gracious Spirit had been working in them, or both) finally heard the gospel, they believed.

## Question Six

*Romans chapter 5 is obviously a very important passage relative to one's view of the effects that Adam's sin had on the human race—whether it involves the judgment or simply the damage that sin does. Dr Gooding rejects the doctrine of immediate imputation in Romans 5:12, which states: 'all sinned'. What is his view of this disputed phrase? Did Adam's sin have an effect on the race? If so, what? Are we born under judgment (Rom 5:17)?*

Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned. (Rom 5:12 KJV)

DR GOODING: The question that has vexed Christian people for centuries is, what is meant by the term in v. 12—all have sinned? Now comes the point of disagreement. The Greek word is a verb in what we call the aorist or, in some languages, the past definite. The Greek past definite tense, or aorist tense, has a wider possible field of meaning than the English past definite tense. There are occasions when the Greek uses the past definite and in English we have to use the past definite: 'My Aunt Sophia came last night.' The Greek would use an aorist, and the English would use an aorist. But Greek can sometimes use an aorist in situations where, in order to translate it properly into English, you must not use an aorist; you must use a perfect.

Now both points of view on Romans 5:12 admit this matter of Greek grammar. There is no dispute upon this. In Romans 3:23 it says, 'For all . . .' Now what should it say? 'For all . . . and come short of the glory of God.' The intervening verb is the verb, 'to sin'; it is in the aorist tense in Greek. Would you have it translated by a past definite in English—'For there is no difference: for all sinned and come short of the glory of God'? The King James Version translators said, 'No, here is a case where the Greek past definite should be translated by the perfect: "For all have sinned".' I agree with them. I don't always agree with the King James translators (it's a little impertinence on my part); but all agree in Romans 3:23, and both sides of the argument on Romans 5:12 admit that you can either translate it as an aorist ['For all sinned']; or as a perfect ['For all have sinned']. The King James Version at Romans 5:12 translated it once again as a perfect—'For all have sinned'.

Those who take the contrary view say that here it would be better to translate it as, 'all sinned'. What is the difference? If you translate it, 'all have sinned', it would mean that death passed upon all men because all, individually and personally, have sinned. Some say, 'What about little babies? They haven't sinned personally, but they die don't they?' And therefore on that ground, and some others as well, they hold it should be translated, 'death passed on all men for that all sinned'. And if you say, 'What do you mean, all sinned? When did they sin?', the answer comes back, 'They sinned in Adam.' Augustine held that view (though he mistranslated the Greek, not understanding it, and working from the Latin, which was a wrong translation anyway!). But he held the view that it meant all sinned in Adam, and of course many hold that view still.

Some say that Adam's disobedience ruined him and the entire race that came from him, so that the race of men and women since him are born with a fallen nature, sinners by nature

even before they have done any particular sin. I would agree with that bit. The effects of Adam's sin are upon us to ruin us, so that we are born sinners by nature long before we have actually done any personal sinning. That's the effect.

But some go further and say that it means more than that. Because we were in Adam, when Adam sinned we sinned. Therefore, as Adam was guilty of disobeying God, we too were guilty of disobeying God—we sinned when Adam sinned. In a slightly different way they explain that the guilt of Adam's sin is imputed to all his posterity. That is what I find very difficult to believe: that God would impute the guilt, not just that he would allow the effect of Adam's sin to ruin us, but he would blame us for Adam's sinning and impute the guilt of it to us. I find it impossible actually to believe that it means that everybody sinned in Adam, because verse 14 talks about people who died even though they had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression. If everybody sinned in Adam, and when he sinned they sinned, and his sin was a sin of disobedience, and they sinned Adam's sin; how could Scripture subsequently talk of people who did not sin after the similitude of Adam's transgression? If they sinned in Adam they didn't merely do a sin similar to his sin, they did exactly the precise sin. Well, that phrase makes me think that the translation: 'sinned'—that is, 'sinned in Adam', cannot be what Paul intended.

I bring considerations of common justice to bear upon the matter. Here is an analogy (of course, analogies don't prove anything but they are useful to help us to see what the question is). In Singapore, if a woman is caught selling drugs and is convicted, she suffers the mandatory sentence of being hanged. Suppose a woman is caught and convicted of selling drugs and she has a newborn baby boy, two weeks old. The authorities condemn the mother to death—justly, according to their laws. Would they also be just to take the baby and say: 'Because you were in your mother when she was selling drugs, we must execute you too. You sinned when your mother sinned.'

I don't think the Singaporeans would do that! Yes, the child could well have been ruined by what his mother did and be born suffering the withdrawal symptoms of the drugs that his mother took, which are penetrating the child's blood stream. Born defective, when he grows up he could possibly engage in drugs himself, having a tendency to that area. If he did engage in drugs himself, then he would be rightly condemned. But how would it be just to condemn a baby to be hanged along with his mother, because he was in his mother when she broke the law? That I fail to see.

There is a theological difficulty too. Verse 19 says: 'For as through the one man's disobedience the many were constituted sinners (that is, the effect of his sin upon them) even so through the obedience of the one shall the many be made righteous.' If it is true that when Adam disobeyed we have to admit that we also disobeyed, then of course we had a part in rendering ourselves sinners. But what would that do to the other half of the equation—'so by the obedience of the one shall many be made righteous'? Are we going to say that we had a part in that as well? Can I say to my blessed Lord, 'You obeyed and so I am constituted righteous because of what You did. But Lord, please remember that I helped, for I am in You!' That would be very questionable theology, wouldn't it? On those and other grounds, and with due respect to better scholars than I, and much more godly men who take the

opposite view, I put these before you as some of my considerations. To sum up: We are damaged by Adam's sin, but not guilty of Adam's sin.

One final thing. Some argue here from Hebrews 7:9–10 (it is a very common argument which is why I detain you to mention it): 'Doesn't it say that Levi was in the loins of Abraham when Abraham met Melchizedek, therefore when Abraham paid tithes Levi paid tithes?' It does say that indeed, but you can't compare that with this passage in Romans 5, for the simple reason that they are talking about two completely different things. Hebrews is talking about the status of Levi. The father of the Jewish people shows himself as inferior in status to Melchizedek by doing what an inferior needed to do—pay tithes to Melchizedek. If the very head and fount of the nation had that lowly status then none of his descendants could have a bigger status. It is not attributing to Levi either the credit for what Abraham did or the blame for it. It is simply a matter of their status.

## Question Seven

*Why did you not mention that God had said that he would harden Pharaoh's heart, prior to Moses meeting Pharaoh (Exod 7:1–5)?*

So then he hath mercy on whom he will, and whom he will he hardeneth. (Rom 9:18)

And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt. (Exod 7:3)

DR GOODING: In reading Exodus, as I pointed out in the notes, you will notice that God told Moses long before anything happened that God would eventually harden Pharaoh's heart. The question is, when did God actually harden his heart? The King James Version will give you the impression that God hardened Pharaoh's heart earlier than in fact God did. It is an inadequate, not to say mistaken, translation. Read other translations and you will find that they are different. The point at which God himself steps in, and it says explicitly in Scripture that God hardened his heart, is to be found in Exodus 9:12. It is not said explicitly that God hardened his heart before that occasion.

Because God foresees all things, he announced to Moses (7:3) that eventually he would harden Pharaoh's heart. After that you will read two different phrases: 'Pharaoh hardened his heart' (8:15, 32; 9:34); and, 'Pharaoh's heart was hardened' (7:22; 8:19)—by whom it doesn't say. So the first time you actually read that God hardened his heart is only later on when Pharaoh had rejected God's persistent offer of evidence (9:12, and again in 10:20, 27; 11:10).

## Question Eight

*Relative to those who may not have heard the gospel, in what sense may we understand John 1:9? In what sense has the light come to every man?*

There was the true light, even the light which lighteth every man, coming into the world. (John 1:9)

DR GOODING: John chapter 1 tells us of the Word that was with God already in the beginning, and was God. It adds that ‘all things were made by him, and without him was not anything made that was made’. To explain that further it says: ‘In him was life; and that life was the light of men’ (v. 4).

In him was life—what does it mean? It doesn’t mean simply that he was alive. We are alive but we are not a source of life. When this verse says ‘in him *was* life’, it is explaining and elaborating on the fact that all things were made by him, and without him was not anything made that was made. If you observe the vast variety of the created universe and all the kinds of life that are there—giraffes and centipedes, angels and men and orangutans and things, and you say, ‘Where did he get the life from to make all these things?’ Well, he didn’t get it from anywhere! He is the source of life—‘In him was life’. And (permit the translation that the Greek allows here): ‘In him was life and *that* life was the light of men’. What life? The life we have just been talking about! If you want to know the meaning of the created world around you, you must trace it back to its source.

Life is one of those things; it is like light. Imagine you are walking along a dark road in the middle of the country when suddenly through the hedge a beam of light appears across your path. Your friend says to you, ‘Where did that light come from?’ And you say, ‘Don’t be silly; it doesn’t come from anywhere!’ I think he might call for a psychiatrist! Light doesn’t come out of nowhere; it has to have a source. We have a universe teeming with life: it is a light to mankind, demanding that we seek the source of this light. That evidence is open to all mankind. Romans 1:20 says that the fact that the creation offers us evidence about God is not an accident. God has arranged it so, revealing himself—his Godhood and power through the things that are seen in order that his creatures may be without excuse if they reject that knowledge and go off into idolatry.

In what sense does the light lighten every man? First of all: that light, who in creation gave evidence to all mankind, eventually came into our world (John 1:10, 14). So all men have evidence; they have light. Romans 2:15 argues that they have the light of conscience.

Now let me point you to what Romans 3:25 says in great precision: ‘God passed over the sins done aforetime’. It means the sins done by men and women who lived before Christ was born into our world. Jews, for instance, and others who sinned, when they did what they were told and repented and brought a sacrifice, they were forgiven, says Leviticus. But their sacrifices didn’t pay for their forgiveness. So their sins were not paid for—‘passed over’—until Christ came and died and paid the price of the forgiveness that God had given those early people. This made it apparent that God was just in passing over the sins that had been done, and which he had forgiven even before Christ came into the world. He was just in

doing so because now when Christ came he paid the penalty and paid for the forgiveness that God had given in times past.

Now the people who lived in those times past—even the Israelites, let alone the Gentiles—hadn't heard of Jesus. Nobody knew that the Saviour was going to be called Jesus until the angel informed Joseph of the matter. So, not knowing about Jesus, yet in repentance and faith, and believing what God had revealed to them, they were forgiven. Now at this time that Jesus has come and offered his sacrifice, God is seen to be just in justifying 'him who believes in . . .' Ah, not just like Abraham—Abraham 'believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness' (4:3). God is now just in justifying 'him that believes in Jesus' (3:26). Notice the human name: they couldn't possibly have believed in Jesus until Jesus had been born and named. So at this present time those who believe in Jesus are justified.

What then of those who still have never heard of Jesus? I am for missionary work, but here I am bound to upset some of my missionary friends, and I beg their forgiveness! I hold that God will never condemn anybody for not believing what they never heard, or for not seeing what they couldn't see. Old Testament folks and many folks still today have evidence. They will be judged according to the light they have—not the light they don't have. Our Lord himself said (and I elaborated on this in the seminars), 'If I had not come and spoken to them, and done miracles in front of their very eyes that no one else had ever done, they would not have sin'—they would not have been blamed for not believing what they had never been told and never had seen (cf John 15:22). But of these particular people he says, 'Now they have seen, of course.' That alters the case completely.

### Question Nine

*Can it be today that there are those who believe in God but have not been blessed with the light of the gospel and the knowledge of the Lord Jesus, and are thus safe, if not saved?*

DR GOODING: That is a very neat way of putting it. I might wish, if I had the time, to correct a comma or two in that sentence, but that's a decent way of putting it. Thank you very much for the suggestion!

### Question Ten

*Having foreknowledge of who will be saved (assuming that he does not determine who will be saved), does God waste time trying to convert the lost?*

DR GOODING: No, of course not! God never wastes time, but I know what you mean. When God tries to convert the lost, as you put it, is it a waste of time because it doesn't succeed? No, it isn't a waste of time, for God is determined that when the final judgment comes he shall be seen to be just.

Paul describes his own ministry under God: 'For we are a sweet savour of Christ unto God, in those that are being saved, and in those that are being lost' (2 Cor 2:15). God has preached the gospel to men and women, and it is not a waste of time. If they reject it and he

must consign them at last to eternal perdition, it will be seen that it is not God's fault that they perished. God sincerely preached the gospel to them. There were no hidden agendas in the heart of God; he meant what he said. As he stretched out his arms to them he was being sincere. He was not outwardly acting a show as if he wanted them to be saved, but in his heart he didn't. So, when they stand before God's judgment throne and are condemned, God will be in the clear. It will not be God's fault that they perish. If God had not bidden them to come and given them light whereby they might be saved, you could have said it was God's fault that they weren't saved.

## Question Eleven

*Jesus said:*

The men of Nineveh shall stand up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, a greater than Jonah is here. (Matt 12:41)

*So then, can we say that, although the evidence that has been given to men and women is not altogether even or equal, everyone has sufficient evidence so that the Lord Jesus can judge those who do not know God?*

DR GOODING: Amen! It is an interesting thing to me that our blessed Lord himself talked of this matter of evidence. He is going to be the judge at the final judgment, and he talked to the people of Capernaum about this matter. When the judgment happens and the people of Capernaum are brought before Christ the judge, witnesses will be called—'The men of Nineveh shall stand up in the judgment with the men of this generation' (Matt 12:41). In that context the verb 'stand up' is a semi-technical term. It's a term you would use to describe the goings on in a law court when a man would stand accused, and the counsel for prosecution would stand up and deliver the accusation. The counsel for the defence would also stand up, and then witnesses would be called, and they would stand up and say their bit.

In the final judgment the men of Nineveh will stand up. What for? Because they will be called upon as witnesses. To establish what? Before the people of Capernaum are finally condemned the question will be raised: Did they have enough evidence to secure their faith if they had been willing to believe?

On what evidence did the men of Nineveh repent? They had the preaching of Jonah. He was not a spectacularly good prophet: he had to be dug out of the belly of a whale to give his evidence at all. But he did eventually go, and they repented, even on that slight evidence of a curious miracle of being vomited up by a whale! 'I tell you that a greater than Jonah is here', said Christ. The men of Nineveh repented on the grounds of comparatively small evidence. That shows that the men of Capernaum who had the Son of God right on their doorstep and heard him preach many times, had enough evidence that, if they had accepted it, they could have been saved.

According to the authority of him who is to be the final Judge, that question of how much evidence people had will be an issue in the courtroom of that final judgment. The judge will

make sure that they had enough evidence on which they could have been saved, and only when it is shown that they rejected that evidence will they be condemned.

## Question Twelve

*What does Paul mean in Ephesians 1:4 and 1 Peter 1:2?*

Even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blemish before him in love. (Eph 1:4)  
to the elect . . . According to the foreknowledge of God the Father. (1 Pet 1:1-2)

DR GOODING: My dear fellow believers, I believe in God's election. In spite of all the appearances to the contrary that I may have given in the seminars, I do believe in it. As I said earlier, God always takes the initiative. My salvation was not a scheme I thought up and proposed to God and asked would he possibly consider saving me. I am saved because God took the initiative, and he chose. He didn't choose according to my good works. He had other reasons for choosing the type of people—he chooses the weak of this world and not many mighty (1 Cor 1:27). When a young man proposes to a young woman it is commonly thought that he takes the initiative. The theory is that the gentleman proposes to the lady—he chooses her! That doesn't mean she has no choice. She has to choose him as well, and she can say 'No'. God chooses therefore.

As to your particular passage in Ephesians 1:4 it is not saying that God chose us to be in Christ, but God chose us in Christ. In choosing Christ, God chose everybody who would be in Christ. How you get to be 'in Christ,' is something that many Scriptures will tell you.

And, yes, according to 1 Peter 1:2: 'elect . . . according to the foreknowledge of God'. Quite so. We must be careful before we make the deduction that God's choice means that he passes other people by. As it is often pointed out, Christ himself is the chosen one of God, and that does not imply that God passed by others. God really wants us to be saved, and when we get saved we discover that it is God's choice—his pre-choice. That doesn't mean that he doesn't want some people to be saved. That wouldn't be true. Scripture says that he wishes all people to be saved (1 Tim 2:4).

## Question Thirteen

*In the light of the question on foreknowledge, is there any good reason, textually or otherwise, to believe that foreknown means foreloved?*

DR GOODING: No, not at all.

## Question Fourteen

*Does 2 Thessalonians 2:13 not teach that God chose the Thessalonians for salvation? Admittedly they were to exercise faith, but God chose them beforehand.*

DR GOODING: If you follow the manuscripts that the King James Version follows, you will read these verses thus:

But we are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth: Whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. (vv. 13–14)

The context is this. Paul has just issued the solemn statement that when the man of sin arises, with all his lying wonders, God also will intervene. God will send some people a strong delusion so that they believe the lie, that they might be condemned. Why so? 'Because they received not the love of the truth' (v. 10). If you won't have the truth, by definition you are siding with the lie. If you persist in that, God will then harden you so that you believe the lie.

In contrast to that, Paul talks to the Thessalonians. Imagine these comparatively young converts. Paul has been telling them of the sad and sorry things that will happen at the end of this age. When the man of sin comes God will send some people a strong delusion so that they will believe the lie. They are saying to themselves, with some anxiety, 'That could happen to us.'

'No', says Paul. 'Right from the very beginning God chose you to salvation. That's what the scheme was—inherent in the gospel by which you were called. The gospel that you heard from the beginning wasn't like this: "Believe this gospel and you can be forgiven and justified—for now! But watch how you behave, for if you don't behave too well you might be deceived by the man of sin. God will send you a strong delusion, and you will be damned in spite of your initial belief."'

What! That wouldn't be a gospel, would it? Yet some people still manage to believe that kind of thing.

'No', says Paul. 'When you think about these things you may put on your head the helmet of the certain hope of coming salvation, to guard your thinking (1 Thess 5:8). You are to know that, right from the very beginning, from the very moment that God saved you, the scheme was to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ when he comes again, so that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him. That is God's scheme; he invented it; he called you to it by our gospel. God has not appointed you to wrath but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ (v. 9). And the reason I go and preach the gospel is so that the elect may come upon that salvation that is with eternal glory. You don't need, therefore, to have any fear about the future.'

That is how I understand the verse.

Let me briefly give you a beautiful little illustration from the Old Testament of escape from the wrath of God. Joshua and the armies of God arrived in the vicinity of Jericho, commissioned by God to execute the judgment of God on that evil civilization in Canaan (Josh 2). The spies came to reconnoitre what the psychological position was of the people within Jericho, and eventually landed in the house of this prostitute. She had heard what God did to the Egyptians, and as she looked out her window and saw the armies of God advancing she knew it meant the destruction of Jericho. So she sought salvation from the living God. She said: 'Give me a sincere token that when you come you'll save me alive and all my family.'

The spies said, 'We will.'

But she'd had a lot of men in that house from time to time, who would whisper all sorts of sweet nothings to her, and when she let them out of the door in the middle of the night that was the last she ever saw of them. She wanted to know how she could be utterly sure that they would keep their word and the armies of God would not destroy her and her family.

'Swear an oath,' she said. So they swore an oath to her, poor pagan woman, by the name of God (v. 14). Here was a woman now who learned where security lies—in the oath and the word of God.

'Tie this scarlet thread in your window', they said, as they got down towards the ground and jumped out of the basket, 'and when the armies come you will be safe.' Now, imagine Rahab looking out of the window. Here were the armies coming to execute the wrath of God. Now that she had come to believe in God, the armies would not execute the wrath of God on her. She had turned to God from idols, to serve the living and true God, and to wait for Joshua to come—her deliverer from the coming wrath (cf. 1 Thess 1:9–10). Joshua is very careful to explain that no drop of wrath ever fell on Rahab (6:25).

## Question Fifteen

*Can you help us understand Revelation 17:8?*

They that dwell on the earth shall wonder, they whose name hath not been written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world. (Rev 17:8)

DR GOODING: I think I would be wise to say that I don't know! Having said that, I could possibly add that other theologians seem to be in a comparable difficulty. I will not tell you all the reasons why. My solution for the time being is to look back to how the phrase is used in Scripture. It comes in the book of Exodus after the worship of the golden calf, where God threatens to destroy Israel. Moses pleads for Israel and asks God to forgive their sin—'and if not, blot me out of your book which you have written' (32:32). What book? Well, the Book of Life. In other words, Moses is saying: 'If you physically destroy the nation, physically destroy me'. God says, 'No, whosoever has sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book'. So the names are already in the book, for when they sinned God said, 'I will blot them out; I shan't blot you out'. Before he blots the name out he gives them opportunity to hear and to believe.

There comes a point (and the Scriptures we have considered bear it out) that, when a man or woman refuse to believe and repent, in spite of God's pleadings, then God intervenes. In the words of Hebrews, there is nothing but expectation of fiery judgment (10:27). Their name is blotted out of the book, and they have no further opportunity to repent. You may probably disagree with that. I merely put it into the pool of your thinking. I'm suggesting then that this phrase, 'whose names were not written in the Book', refers to names that have been blotted out.

## Question Sixteen

*You mentioned the influence of Greek thought on the theology of God's election and on the idea of God himself. In what sense has Greek philosophy influenced Christian thinking about God?*

DR GOODING: In the early days when people began to get converted to Christianity there were not many Christians that were well educated. But by the third century there were Greek Christians who were sizeably intellectual and educated in the philosophy of the day. When they tried to engage in preaching the Christian gospel and apologetics with their fellow citizens who were also intellectuals, they frequently used the categories of Greek thought and philosophy in order to explain their beliefs. That happened, notoriously so, in the attempts of the church fathers to explain how Jesus could be both man and God simultaneously. If you look at the explanations they give and the terms they use, they are the terms borrowed from Aristotelian philosophy and so forth. They were the only categories of thought open to them at the time, if they wanted to be philosophical.

Some of the Greek philosophers were fatalists, the Stoics for instance. Stoicism commended itself to many, and to Romans in particular, as being a manly faith. They couldn't accept Epicureanism, which, among other things, made the whole universe—man included—depend upon chance. Stoics were more fatalists. It is not surprising, therefore, that medieval schoolmen and even the Reformers (whose education was firstly in classical philosophies and classical languages, and then in theology) took some of their concepts of God from Greek philosophy. Some of the fatalism that lies behind extreme forms of Calvinism owes a tremendous lot, in my humble estimation, to the influence of the fatalism of Greek philosophy on men like Calvin, who were first students of Greek philosophy before they became believers and then theologians.

If you want a clear example of that kind of thing, you could take the question whether it is possible for God to suffer. It has only been comparatively recently—within my lifetime—that Christian theologians have been willing to admit that God the Father can suffer. They held steadfastly over many centuries that God was impassible, meaning that God can't suffer. They argued, therefore, that God experiences no emotion, because emotion implies change, and God is utterly unchangeable. He is, they said, supreme perfection. If he changed for the better he wasn't perfect to start with; if he changed for the worse he was no longer perfect. And since emotions imply a change in you, from being calm to being emotional, God cannot experience emotion. And it went down the centuries, until recent times, in Christian theology

that God cannot suffer, and you would be told it would be wrong to say that at Calvary the Father suffered anything. Only Jesus could suffer, because he was human.

I don't know how Christian theologians could ever have thought that was true, when they had the whole of the Old Testament saying the very opposite: 'God is angry with sinners every day' (Ps 7:11); 'In all their affliction he was afflicted' (Isa 63:9). The God of the Old Testament is no Aristotelian god of Greek philosophy. He happens to be the true God. You don't suppose that when God the Father saw his son hanging upon Calvary he sat upon his throne unmoved, do you? Greek philosophy has so influenced Christian theologians that, for many centuries, they held that God was utterly impassible. We now see, of course, that is wrong.

If we have studied a great deal of Greek philosophy, we need to make sure that the God we worship is not one described in terms of Greek philosophy. The God we serve is, excuse the term, a Christian God. If you want to know what God is like, God is like Jesus Christ, his Son.

### Question Seventeen

*Using glory as God's purpose in the salvation of men and women, would not God receive more glory by choosing and saving through his prerogative, as opposed to sinful man deciding on his own initiative to believe the gospel message?*

DR GOODING: Let me just say again that I do not believe that man takes the initiative in his salvation. If God hadn't taken the initiative there would be no salvation to have anyway. It was God's idea to save men and women, his idea to offer them eternal life. God thought it up that we should, if we consented, become children of God and not just creatures of God. That is all God's doing. What is more, as the Saviour put it, 'The Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost' (Luke 19:10). We were lost. God took the initiative, sending his Son to seek us.

In the matter of faith, I say again that I believe with you that faith is the gift of God. It is the gift of God, not in the sense that faith is a kind of commodity that God happens to pour into you. We have the faculty of believing: 'If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for the witness of God is this, that he hath borne witness concerning his Son. He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in him' (1 John 5:9-10). If you accept the testimony of unregenerate men, you ought to accept the testimony of God then, for his testimony is far more trustworthy.

What does it mean that God takes the initiative and gives us the faith? He gives us faith, not as some commodity but by talking to us, showing himself and thus evoking our faith. We are not asked to believe in a vacuum. God comes and offers himself to us, speaks to us, shows us his actions, records endless chunks of big history to show us how he has acted in the past. He has deliberately recorded the conversion of Saul of Tarsus so that it might be an example to us. 'He's the very chief of sinners,' says God. 'If I saved him I certainly could save you.' So God takes the initiative.

This afternoon I questioned some of the ladies present. What made you believe that man you married? Where did you get the faith from to trust him enough to accept his proposal? And the answer that I thought came back was not, 'I was getting desperate and I decided any old man would do! In fact I didn't wait for him; I proposed to him!' No, no! The answer was, 'I watched him and I observed him. When he first proposed I had a bit of doubt (he seemed a bit flashy!); but then as I watched him and saw how kind he was to little children and how considerate and patient he was, things began to happen in my heart, and I found I could trust him.' Then you had to make a decision, didn't you? He wasn't literally irresistible. You could have said 'No!' You got the faith by listening, watching, studying his character, and that called out the faith.

'Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ' (Rom 10:17). That is how faith is provoked within us. God takes the initiative; he shows us his life. But the God who gave us eyes with which we could see the light also gave us eyelids; he gave us the ability, though not permission, that when he shows us his life we can, if we insist, close our eyes against the light. We are free to say 'Yes'. God has also given us the awful honour of being able to say 'No'. For God wants love, and love that is forced is not love.

## Question Eighteen

*Where there are groups of believers who hold different views on these matters, can both groups dwell together in unity?*

DR GOODING: They can, if they are behaving like good Christians! And I recur to what I said at the beginning. God's people have been divided on these matters, largely through accepting this or that system of theology.

Somebody asked me early on in the seminars why I didn't come out and say it was Calvinism that I didn't agree with. Well, to start with, there are many grades of Calvinism; and some good Christians who hold views in common with Calvinists wouldn't like to be called Calvinists, because they don't share everything. Some Calvinists think I am an Arminian, and they think that by putting a label on me it defines exactly what I believe; but I find that the label they put on me doesn't describe me fairly at all. In the end we are better without labels, aren't we? We mustn't say, 'I am of Paul, or, I am of Apollos' (1 Cor 1:10-15), and you certainly mustn't say, 'I am of Calvin', or 'I am of Arminius'. We are all believers—Christians, and we must love each other. God blessed Whitefield; God blessed Wesley—mighty men of God that God used for the conversion of thousands.

We must learn to respect each other and be very careful before we call a fellow believer an apostate. We may be moved to speak strongly that some doctrine seems to us to border on blasphemy, but we must observe that our dear brethren who sometimes hold wrong doctrine don't intend thereby to blaspheme the Lord or to dishonour him. They sincerely believe that what they believe does honour him; we need to help each other.

In my little experience the disruptions arise when people become convinced, say, of their Calvinism, or the opposite, and then they push it, and push it, and push it and push it and push it until that disrupts the harmony in the church. Then it becomes in a practical way very

difficult for the church to proceed. The elders may say: 'Now look, we've heard what you say. A substantial body of us, with equal zeal and wishing to please the Lord, believe that you are not correct in that. So, now that we have heard what you say, please have enough grace not constantly to push the thing, and we can live in harmony.' When people are not prepared to do that then it can disrupt, and has seriously disrupted, the work of God in more than one mission field. It may be, therefore, that you will feel as Paul felt about Barnabas that when it comes to being a team on the mission field, because Barnabas held rather different views about the suitability of John Mark to be a missionary in Paul's team, Paul said, 'I think we had better go our own ways, dear Barnabas. The world's a big place. You go with what you feel in methods and I will go with what I feel in methods, and we shall love each other in the Lord.'

You may feel that the views I have talked about and shown to be mine mean that you couldn't work with me as a close partner and preach the gospel, because I might tell unconverted people that Christ died for their sins, and you don't think that's true. So you couldn't work in close collaboration with me in an evangelistic team on the mission field. All right, my brother, I understand it if that's how you feel. I hope you won't cast me out of the church, will you? I hope you will find it in your heart to believe that I hold these views for the time being as sincerely, and in the fear of God, as you hold your views. What I would exhort you to do is in meekness to try and instruct me further. I shall come back at you, and do the same. Then together—and I hope in Christian grace, harmony and tolerance, respecting each other—we may all admit that there are things we don't yet know, and we may move on carefully to discover yet more and more where the full truth of God lies.

## APPENDIX: NOTES FOR SEMINARS

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### SEMINAR ONE

### The Justice of God's Judgments

**1st Scripture:** Revelation 20:11–15

*Conclusion*

- (i) The sentences will vary according to people's works (vv. 12–13. cf Matt 11:22, 24).
- (ii) But the basic judgment, consignment to the lake of fire or not, will be made solely on the ground of the presence or absence of a person's name in the book of life (v. 15).

**2nd Scripture:** John 3:18–19

*Conclusion*

- (i) if unbelievers are to be condemned (not for their works merely but) for not believing, it must have been possible for them to believe if they had chosen to.
- (ii) if unbelievers are going to be charged with preferring darkness to light, they must have seen the light and have deliberately refused to come to it.

**3rd Scripture:** John 9:39–41

*Note:* 'not to have sin' does not mean 'to be sinless', but 'not to be blameworthy, or guilty'.

*Conclusion*

No one will be condemned as guilty for not seeing something, if he could not see it because he was blind.

**4th Scripture:** John 15:22–25

*Conclusion*

- (i) No one will be condemned for not accepting and believing what was never told them. Not ever having been told something would be an excuse for not believing it.
- (ii) No one will be condemned for rejecting evidence that was never put before them. Compare with this the 'no excuse' of Romans 1:20; 2:1.

**Summary so far:**

The unregenerate people of whom Christ spoke, could and did hear Christ's words; they could and did see both Christ and the Father; they could have believed if they had chosen to. They had therefore no excuse for not believing. They are justly condemned for not believing.

**Against this it is often claimed:**

- that unregenerate people are quite unable to believe;
- that their only hope of believing would be if God should give them the gift of faith;
- that God, however, has decided to pass many people by, and not give them the gift of faith; they remain therefore incapable of believing;
- that they will nevertheless be condemned for not believing, that is, for not doing what they were quite incapable of doing;
- that this condemnation will nonetheless be just, because though this basic inability to believe was something which they were born with, it was their own fault that they were born with it. They were in Adam when he sinned. Therefore when Adam sinned they sinned, and God holds them guilty of Adam's sin. By this sin they brought upon themselves their own ruin, and with it their inherent inability to believe. It is their own fault; so they are rightly condemned for not being able to believe.

**5th Scripture:** Romans 5:12–14

1. *A question of translation* (v. 12): 'for that all have sinned', or 'for that all sinned'? Compare also Romans 3:23.
2. *A question of justice*: a drug addict in Singapore is convicted of possessing and pushing drugs, and is sentenced to be hanged. Would it be just to execute her new-born child as well on the ground that it was in the mother when she committed her criminal offences? The child was certainly damaged by the mother's drug-taking; it was born with withdrawal symptoms; and as a result it might well turn in later life to drug-taking and drug-pushing, for which it would be rightly condemned. But would it be right to impute the mother's guilt to the new-born child, or to say that it was the child's fault for being born with its drug-damaged constitution?
3. *A question of comparative religion*: Hinduism teaches that if a child is born with a disability it is the child's fault. It is the result of some sin of which the child was guilty in a previous incarnation. Does the New Testament similarly teach that it is our fault that we were born sinners; that it is the result of a sin that we did thousands of years ago when we were in Adam?
4. *A question of exegesis*: if all sinned when Adam sinned, and if God counts all guilty of Adam's sin, then all must have sinned exactly the same sin as Adam. How then can verse 14 say of some people that they did not sin 'after the likeness of Adam's transgression'?
5. *A question of theology*: if we disobeyed when Adam disobeyed and thus helped to bring our sinful nature upon ourselves, then, according to the parallel of verse 19, we could claim that when Christ obeyed, we obeyed, and thus helped to secure our own righteousness. This cannot be true.
6. Conclusions
  - (i) It is not people's fault that they are born sinners as a result of Adam's sin; though it is their fault if they subsequently sin (as in fact all do).

- (ii) Though 'ruined by the fall', people can, and do, 'receive the testimony of men', if they choose to; and they can, if only they will, 'receive the testimony of God which is greater' (1 John 5:9).
- (iii) Those who refuse to believe the testimony of God are justly condemned for not believing, because they could have believed, had they chosen to.

## SEMINAR TWO

**Christ the Revealer of God, the Light of the World,  
the Creator of Faith, the Giver of Sight**

**Scripture says** (Eph 2:1) that the unregenerate are dead through their trespasses and sins.

From this some theologians infer that unregenerate people cannot 'hear', 'see', repent or believe unless and until God first quickens them (that is, gives them new life, regenerates them). Regeneration and life, therefore, must precede repentance and faith.

When, therefore, God decides to regenerate someone and thus make it possible for that person to hear, see, repent and believe, God acts sovereignly and irresistibly, altogether independently of that person's desire, choice, faith or even awareness. The person cannot resist being regenerated, or avoid repenting and believing thereafter. But God also decides not to regenerate some people. They therefore remain dead, unable to hear, see, repent or believe; and as a consequence they will be lost eternally.

Let us now test these views by Scripture.

**1st Scripture:** John 3:14–16

Numbers 21:8–9 says: 'when he sees it, he shall live . . . when he looked . . . he lived'. It does not say 'As many as lived, looked to the serpent'.

John 3:15 says: 'that whosoever believes, may in him have eternal life'. Not 'whosoever has eternal life, may believe in him'.

*Conclusion*

- (a) looking to the serpent *preceded* life.
- (b) faith in Christ *precedes* life.
- (c) the unregenerate dead must and can believe *before* they are regenerated.

**2nd Scripture:** John 5:25

*Conclusion* The spiritually dead must, and can, hear the voice of the Son of God *before* they receive new life.

**3rd Scripture:** John 5:40

*Conclusion* The unregenerate must, and can, come to Christ *before* they receive new life, and in order to receive it.

**4th Scripture:** John 7:14–24

In this passage unregenerate people are exhorted to exercise their moral judgment and to arrive at a just and fair assessment of Christ's moral character (v. 18) and of the moral quality of his teaching and miracles (vv. 16–17, 21–24).

*Conclusion* The fact that unregenerate people are 'dead', does not mean that they cannot use their moral judgment on Christ's character, teaching and miracles.

Compare Matthew 12:22–37.

**5th Scripture:** John 8:1–11

*Conclusion* Unregenerate people, though dead, can see the light of Christ and their own sinfulness which that light exposes. They can then either run away, as the men did, or stay put like the woman did.

**6th Scripture:** John 9:1–41

1. The man was born without the faculty of physical sight. (N.B. Christ said it was not his fault.)
2. Christ gave the man the faculty of sight.
3. The gift of physical sight led on to the gift of spiritual sight, to see that Jesus is the Son of God. No one can see that, unless he is given the sight to see it with. See v. 39.
4. But notice the decisions and the processes which the physically blind man had to take *before* he received physical sight (vv. 6–11); and the process of moral and theological reasoning he went through *before* he came to full spiritual sight (vv. 13–38).

*Conclusion* Though people are born spiritually blind, it is not true to say that there is nothing they can do *before* they are given spiritual sight, and *in order to* get it.

**7th Scripture:** John 10:1–42

1. All sheep have the ability to get to know a shepherd.
2. Sheep will not trust a shepherd until they have got to know him, and become one of his sheep. So the Jews did not believe that Jesus was the Christ, because they were not of his sheep (vv. 24–26).
3. But to those same Jews the Lord explained how and by what steps they could come to believe, and know and understand him and so become one of his sheep (vv. 37–38).

*Conclusion:* The fact that a person is not yet one of Christ's sheep, does not mean that he or she can never become one.

## SEMINAR THREE

### Vessels of Wrath and Vessels of Mercy

#### **1st Scripture:** Romans 9–11

*Question* Why is the problem of unbelieving Israel raised at this point in this epistle?

*Answer*

- (a) If the gospel is promised in the Old Testament prophets, if Jesus is claimed as the seed of David, if Israel was the nation appointed by God through whom the Messiah should come . . .

THEN some explanation must be given of the fact that the majority of that nation denied (and still deny) that Jesus is the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies and that Jesus is the Messiah.

- (b) Romans 5:12ff. admits that God's creation went wrong in Adam. But Abraham and Israel were the preliminary stage of God's great strategy of redemption. If now Israel has gone disastrously wrong as well, how can one still be confident about the rest of God's strategy of redemption?

#### **2nd Scripture:** Romans 9:1–5

1. *Observation* 'My kinsmen *according to the flesh* who are . . . whose are . . . whose are . . . of whom . . .'

*Conclusion* Paul is here talking of the physical nation of Israel, and asserting that the long list of privileges here mentioned were given to, and belonged to, the physical nation.

2. *Observation* Paul's kinsmen according to the flesh, i.e. his fellow-nationals, to whom these privileges were given, caused him great sorrow of heart. They were obviously not regenerate.

*Conclusion* These great privileges were entrusted to the physical nation as a nation, even though often many (sometimes the majority) of the nation were not regenerate.

3. *Question* What does the list of vv. 4–5 amount to? Salvation?

*Conclusion* No! it amounts to a special relationship with God, and a unique role in history given to the physical nation of Israel and to no other physical nation.

4. *Question* In giving this unique role and these privileges to Israel, and not to other nations, was God thereby denying salvation to all other nations throughout all the centuries between Abraham and Christ'?

*Conclusion* Obviously not! Melchizedek never belonged to Israel. And what about the Ninevites in Jonah's day? Was God the God of the Jews only and not also of the Gentiles (Rom 3:29)?

### 3. **The lesson taught to Abraham and Sarah:** Romans 9:6–9

#### *Observations*

1. In this lesson we must distinguish between the literal physical and historical lesson taught to Abraham and Sarah, and the application of its spiritual principles here in Romans 9 and in Gal 4:24–31 (especially 4:28, 31).
2. Abraham was already justified by faith (Gen 15:6) when God had to teach him and Sarah this further lesson.
3. The lesson was not on how to get saved, but on how they should become the physical parents of a child and through him, eventually, of a nation, i.e. not by trusting in their own wisdom, plans and strength, but by trusting God's promise.
4. Historically, the statement that Isaac was a child of the promise is not talking about his spiritual birth through his personal faith in God's promise but of his physical birth, through the faith of Abraham and Sarah, as the physical ancestor of the privileged nation.
5. At the spiritual level we become children of the promise (Gal 4:28) through our personal faith, when we learn to put our trust not in our own wisdom and strength but in God's word of promise, and so become spiritual children of Abraham and Sarah.
6. The unique role and privileges (vv. 4–5) were given to Abraham's physical descendants; but many of them never became spiritual children of Abraham, and at one special moment in history the majority of them, in spite of their privileges, rejected the Messiah.
7. But there were always some physical Israelites who learned to put their trust not in their own wisdom and strength, but in God's promise, and so became spiritual children of Abraham. These welcomed Messiah (see John 3:21). They were the true Israel.

### 4. **The lesson taught to Isaac and Rebecca:** Romans 9:10–13

#### *Observations*

1. The privileged role of being a physical ancestor and patriarch of the privileged nation was to be given to one of Rebecca's twin sons, Jacob (and the nation that came from him) and not to the other, Esau (and the nation that came from him).
2. This privileged role was to be given not on the ground of primogeniture, nor on the ground of moral merit, but solely as a sovereign free gift of God.

3. Special roles as evangelist, teacher, etc. are still given on those same terms today (2 Tim 1:6–9; 1 Cor 12:11).
4. That is not to say that sin does not matter; but if role, gift and service were given on the ground of moral merit, none would qualify, and God's purposes for the world's blessing would be defeated (Rom 9:11).

#### 5. The lesson taught through Israel and Pharaoh: Romans 9:14–23

##### 1. *The lesson so far:*

- (a) Just as at the physical level not all Abraham's sons and grandsons were given the unique role and privileges of the special line and nation (Ishmael and Esau were rejected), so at this present time not all physical sons of Abraham are spiritual sons of Abraham.
- (b) The true spiritual sons are those who put their faith not in their own strength but in God's promise.
- (c) The distinction between those who are given the privileged role and those who are not, lies not in physical precedence or moral merit (both Jacob and Esau were sinners) but in God's sovereign choice.

##### 2. *In making these choices God is not unjust: witness Israel and Pharaoh:*

- (a) Both Israel and Pharaoh sinned grievously: they were 'of the same lump'. Both deserved to be destroyed. Neither had a right to mercy. Mercy by definition cannot be deserved.
- (b) Israel, chosen as a nation, to be God's special people, God's priests in the earth, etc. (Exod 19), rejected him, turned to idolatry, and forfeited their role (Exod 32–34). God threatened to destroy them.
- (c) But Moses interceded for Israel and Israel showed contrition, and God had mercy and compassion and restored them to their role.
- (d) Pharaoh rejected God's command. God gave him signs. He rejected the signs and demanded better evidence. God gave him more signs and stronger evidence. Moses, at Pharaoh's request, prayed to God for him, and God granted Pharaoh's request (Exod 8:8–14). But still he refused to obey. God gave him yet more signs. Pharaoh rejected them all. Then, and only then (9:12; NB 7:13 should read, 'And Pharaoh's heart became hard', and not 'And he [God] hardened Pharaoh's heart') did God step in and harden Pharaoh's heart.

##### *Conclusion*

1. God's mercy can never be deserved. It is always the action of God's sovereign will.
2. But God never acts arbitrarily: he always grants mercy to those who repent, never to those who refuse to repent.
3. When people, like Pharaoh, refuse to repent, he does not at once harden their hearts, but is patient and perseverant, and gives them evidence, and pleads. But if they persist in rebellion, he will harden them.

**6. Pharaoh: an example of a vessel of wrath:** Exodus 9:13–16

- (a) When Pharaoh persisted in his rebellion, God could justly have destroyed him (Exod 9:15), for he already deserved it.
- (b) Instead of that God hardened him, made him stand, so that then God could eventually make him into a vessel of wrath, that is, a world-wide example of the punishment that God in his justice and power must and will inflict on those who persist in their defiance of God.
- (c) Pharaoh, as a vessel of wrath, became a warning that led to the Philistines' repentance (1 Sam 6:6), and to Rahab's conversion (Josh 2:9–10).

**7. What it means to be a vessel of mercy:** Romans 9:23

- (a) Someone in and through whom God may exhibit his mercy and glory.
- (b) Paul is a good example: 'I obtained mercy that in me as chief [of sinners] might Jesus Christ show forth all his longsuffering, for an example of them who should hereafter believe on him unto eternal life' (1 Tim 1:16).
- (c) Why could the majority in Israel not become a vessel of mercy? Because they would not accept God's mercy and salvation by grace, but insisted on seeking righteousness not by faith but by works (Rom 9:30–32).

## SEMINAR FOUR

### The Father's Gift to the Son; the Father's Drawing; the Illumination of the Holy Spirit

#### 1. **The Father's gift to the Son:** John 17:6–8

'Thine they were and thou gavest them to me.'

##### *Observations*

1. The best way to understand this statement is to begin, at least, by taking it in its primary, historical context.
2. 'Thine they were' = they were already believers in God before they met the Lord Jesus.
3. But Christ demanded of his disciples that they believe in him in the same way and to the same extent as they already believed in God: 'You believe in God: believe also in me' (John 14:1).
4. This demand would have seemed blasphemous to many of the orthodox Jews, as though Christ were luring his disciples away from monotheism to idolatry, to putting their faith in a mere man.
5. But it was not blasphemous, for it was God himself who gave these people to Christ, to believe in Christ in the same way and extent as they already believed in God (v. 6).
6. vv. 7–8 explain *how* this giving was effected: it was by God giving Christ God's own words, so that when people believed Christ and the words Christ spoke, they were believing God and God's words; and they came to realize that Christ had come forth from God, that God had sent him, and that 'all things whatsoever thou hast given me are from thee' (v. 7).

#### 2. **The Father's drawing:** John 6:42–45

'No one can come to me except the Father who sent me draw him.'

##### *Observations*

1. Again the best way to understand this statement is to read it within the thought-flow of its original context.
2. vv. 32–34. The Jews were ready to think that the Lord Jesus could give them 'the bread of God, provided by God, which comes down from heaven to give life to the world'; and they asked the Lord Jesus to give them that bread.
3. But when the Lord pointed out that this bread was not something external to, and independent of, himself, but that he himself was the bread, and that he personally had come down from heaven, they found it impossible to

understand or accept it. To them he was a mere man whose father and mother they knew. How could he say 'I have come down from heaven'? (vv. 35, 41–42).

4. The Lord Jesus admits their difficulty: it is impossible for them (or for anyone) to understand and accept this unless the Father draws them (v. 44). He draws them, however, by teaching them; and when they have heard and learned from the Father, they understand and come to Christ in faith (compare Matt 16:17).

*Question*

Does the fact that no one can come to Christ unless the Father draws him imply that the Father is only willing to draw some people and not others—to teach some, but not others?

*Answers*

1. John 7:17 'if anyone is willing. . . he shall know'.
2. Luke 10:21 if people put their trust in their own wisdom and understanding, God hides these things from them. But he is perfectly willing to reveal them to those who adopt the attitude of babes.
3. John 6:45 'they shall all be taught by God'.
4. The argument of Romans 10:6–21.
  - (a) *the basic facts*: salvation is easy and open to all: all one has to do is to call; whoever calls shall be saved.
  - (b) *the necessary conditions that must be fulfilled*:
    - (1) to call on the Lord you must first believe in him;
    - (2) to believe in him you must first hear him (not simply about him): see also v. 17.
    - (3) to hear him you must have a God-sent preacher.
  - (c) *questions arising and their answers*:
    - (1) 'it is not so that Israel did not hear, is it?' No! They have heard.
    - (2) 'it is not so that Israel did not know, is it?' No! They did know.
    - (3) What is more, God himself made sure that they knew:
      - a. by provoking them to jealousy by the fact that Gentiles who knew so little were getting saved;
      - b. that God was prepared to reveal himself even to those who neither sought nor asked after him;
      - c. by the fact that, when Israel refused to believe and disputed with him, God continued all day long with arms outstretched pleading with them to come;
      - d. and can we think that, though God pleaded, and adopted the outward stance of wanting them to come, he inwardly did not want them to come, and was not prepared to give them the necessary teaching, hearing and faith to come with?
5. Compare Christ's stated willingness to gather all Jerusalem's 'children'. Luke 13:34.

*Question* Were his tears on this occasion because his Father had declined to draw Jerusalem's children to him and so they could not come? Or was it that the Father drew them and they would not come?

**3. The illumination of the Holy Spirit**

- (a) Mercy is available to those who act 'in ignorance and unbelief', unenlightened by the Holy Spirit. See 1 Tim 1:12–13; Acts 3:17; 13:27.
- (b) But once people have been enlightened so that they know the truth, if they persist in rejecting the truth, there comes a point when God seals them in their own choice. See 2 Thess 2:11–12; John 12:35–40; and the story of Ahab (1 Kings 22).
- (c) Is it *possible* to resist the grace, power and illumination of the Holy Spirit? Yes: Acts 7:51–53 (cf Luke 7:27–30).
- (d) If the benefits of the sacrifice of the Son of God, the blood of the covenant and the grace of the Holy Spirit were never intended by God to be available for every given person, how could any given person be punished for knowingly rejecting them (Heb 10:26–31)?
- (e) Does the true light lighten every man or only some? Answer: John 1:9.

## About the Author

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