

The Power, the Wisdom and the Glory

*Six Studies from Romans 9–11 on
God's Character and Work*

David Gooding

Myrtlefield Sermons



MYRTLEFIELD
HOUSE

www.myrtlefieldhouse.com

Contents

1	God's Indefectible Purpose	3
2	God's Longsuffering Power	9
3	God's Sovereign Choice of his Advertisements	18
4	God's Indiscriminate Offer of Mercy	26
5	God's Commitment to Israel's World-enriching Role	36
6	God's Discipline of Apostasy	45
	Appendix: Charts	54
1.	The Epistle to the Romans	
2.	The Argument of Romans 9	
3.	The Argument of Romans 10	
4.	The Argument of Romans 11	
5.	The Nine Plagues on Egypt	
	About the Author	61

David Gooding has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

Copyright © The Myrtlefield Trust, 2018

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the English Revised Version (1885), the *King James Version*, or are Dr Gooding's own translations or paraphrases. Scripture quotations marked NIV are from the Holy Bible, New International Version® Anglicized, NIV® Copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

This text has been edited from a transcript of six talks given by David Gooding at Crescent Church, Belfast (N. Ireland) from 19 October to 2 November 1986.

All rights reserved. Permission is granted to reproduce this document in its entirety, or in unaltered excerpts, for personal and church use only as long as you do not charge a fee. You must not reproduce it on any Internet site. Permission must be obtained if you wish to reproduce it in any other context, translate it, or publish it in any format.

Published by The Myrtlefield Trust

PO Box 2216

Belfast, N Ireland

BT1 9YR

w: www.myrtlefieldhouse.com

e: info@myrtlefieldhouse.com

Myrtlefield catalogue no: rom.001/jf

God's Indefectible Purpose

Shall we begin our meditation by reading in the Epistle to the Romans in chapter 9.

I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience bearing witness with me in the Holy Ghost, 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: 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 for ever. Amen. But it is not as though the word of God has come to nought. For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: neither, because they are Abraham's seed, are they all children: but, 'In Isaac shall thy seed be called.' That is, it is not the children of the flesh that are children of God; but the children of the promise are reckoned for a seed. And this is a word of promise, 'According to this season will I come, and Sarah shall have a son.' And not only so; but Rebecca also having conceived by one, even by our father Isaac—for the children being not yet born, neither having done anything good or bad, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calls, it was said unto her, 'The elder shall serve the younger.' Even as it is written: 'Jacob have I loved but Esau have I hated'. (vv. 1–13)

My first pleasant duty here this morning is surely to thank you all warmly and most sincerely for your kindness in asking me to come along and have fellowship with you here once more. My second duty is to try to explain to you why I have chosen to speak on these difficult chapters for, as our chairman has just remarked, chapters 9, 10 and 11 of the Epistle to the Romans are some of the most difficult in all of holy Scripture. One German theologian has remarked that traversing Romans 9–11 is like traversing the north face of the Eiger in wintertime: anybody could make a perilous and fatal slip, for this part of Scripture is a quarry from which learned theologians have extracted their massive blocks of theological masonry to build their imposing edifices of systematic theology, which alas in the end tend to conflict among themselves. Anybody who is rash enough to get caught up in the conflicts between the mighty theologians does so at the risk, if not of life and limb, certainly of his reputation, and I am aware how many theologians sit before me. As you know, I make no pretention to be a systematic theologian, and as my discourse in these coming weeks will evidence that to you once again, I beg you to return to the prayers of your childhood and pity my simplicity.

The burden of the Apostle Paul

I wish to discuss these chapters with you at an altogether different level, for when we open at chapter 9 of Romans we find that Paul bears his innermost heart before us. Hitherto in his letter he has been discoursing to us about Christian doctrine, and all glorious it has been! But now the great apostle opens his heart and confides in us the inner feelings of his emotions. And we discover that at the centre of his heart there is a grievous burden, a perpetual sorrow and a pain that constantly gnaws at his very vitals. That at first may surprise us, for in the previous chapter of this epistle, Paul has been leading us to great mountaintops of spiritual joy, bidding us join him in his joy in the Saviour and in his God-given confidence that nothing shall ever separate him from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord! And so strong is his confidence that he can face life present and life to come, be it life or death, height, depth or any other creature, and defy them all, confident that nothing shall separate him from the love of God (8:18–39). Such is the glory of the gospel that he bids us share. Now at once he plunges headlong into the confession that he has, at heart, a terrible sorrow.

A problem that arises from the gospel

We notice that the sorrow is not simply in spite of the Christian gospel that he enjoys. There is a sense that this sorrow has been occasioned by the very gospel itself, for Paul has come to see that Jesus is the Messiah, that Jesus is the Saviour; he is the Son of God who has loved him and given himself up for him, has died, has risen again and ascended to glory! There is salvation in him and in none other. Therein lies a sorrow, for the very reasons that cause Paul to rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory in the confidence of his own salvation, remind him that multitudes of his fellow nationals, the Jews, reject and persist in rejecting the Saviour. And he is all too aware that if they continue in that attitude of heart it must lead to disaster.

For all I know there sits here this morning somebody with a similar burden on his heart. You have come to rejoice in the Saviour yourself but some loved one of yours still rejects the Saviour. And there is no pretending it is otherwise: if they continue to reject him it must lead to disaster. And for the very real reason that you love them with all your heart, your joy in the Saviour and in his salvation has another side to it: a perpetual sorrow of heart for your loved one that is lost.

I shall never forget an elegant Spanish lady coming to me years ago. Her son had recently found the Saviour and was rejoicing in his salvation and had persuaded his mother to come along to certain lectures that were being given. The lady was a widow. After some lectures she came to me and said, 'But tell me, please. My husband is dead. What has happened to my husband? If the gospel you preach is true, he's lost isn't he?'

In vain were all my attempts to try and say, 'It is not given to us to know what finally transpires between the soul and God, as the soul finally departs this life and enters eternity.'

She would have none of it. 'Young man,' she said, 'if your gospel is true then my husband was not saved! That I know!'

How difficult for a woman to receive the gospel herself, when it had such implications for her loved one. We would be peculiar Christians indeed if we could sit here rejoicing in our

salvation and in our hearts say, 'Let the world go hang! Whoever is lost I care not; I'm saved. What does it matter about the rest?'

Our interest will be to follow Paul as, guided by the Holy Spirit, he wrestles with this problem. And our delight will be to see how God so reveals himself to Paul through the darkneses of life: the glowing wonders of his wisdom, of his power, of his glory and supremely, of his mercy and his love, so that when Paul comes to the end of his contemplation of this problem his heart is moved and carried up as though on eagle wings to adore the Almighty! It doesn't mean that Paul's sorrow will have vanished, but through that sorrow there will come the light of what God is really like and, discovering God again, Paul's pain will be eased, for he shall discover that this is what God is like, even when he is left to himself. God, without anybody to advise him, without anybody to give him counsel, without anybody to plead with him, is such that he will use all his infinite wisdom towards the saving of the maximum number of people that it is possible for divine power and mercy to save! He 'has concluded them all in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all' (11:32).

Our studies therefore shall be studies in the wisdom of God. Pray God that as we come to the end of them we too may find our hearts lifted up into the wonders and the glories and the confidences of the superlative wisdom of an infinitely loving God.

The deeper problem

Paul's problem of course had more than a personal dimension. For he tells us at the opening of his letter to the Romans that this gospel he preaches is witnessed to by the law and the prophets, that is, by the Old Testament Jewish Scriptures. Indeed the very way of salvation, how a man or woman can be right with God, being justified solely by faith, is affirmed in the Old Testament, and the Old Testament is the very basis for that affirmation.

You can imagine, therefore, the difficulty Paul would be in some evenings, perhaps with one of those two famous Roman governors: Felix or Festus (Acts 24–26). Perhaps on occasion, wanting a little bit of interest, they took Paul out of his cell of an evening and quietly invited him to dinner, and over the olives and the cheese Felix would begin to talk to Paul:

'Paul, old chap, now do I get this gospel of yours right? This Jesus—you say he's the Messiah, don't you Paul?'

'Yes. That's right; I do.'

'And you say that all this was written about in your holy book, the Old Testament?'

'Yes. That's right. Yes.'

'And it's all come to pass exactly as the prophets said?'

'Yes. That is true.'

'Well that is marvellous. And can you prove to me, Paul, that that Old Testament was written before Jesus Christ came?'

'I can indeed. It was written hundreds of years before he came!'

'That's extraordinary. And your claim is that Jesus fulfils it all?'

'Yes.'

'Ah. Tell me,' says Felix, as he puckers up his nose, 'tell me, old chap, how many in Judaism believe, like you do, that Jesus fulfils the Old Testament?'

'Well, not many.'

‘Oh, well never mind Paul. I’m not talking about the rabble, you know. I’m talking about the rabbis, the real experts who understand your holy book, the Old Testament. How many of those experts agree with you that Jesus fulfils the Old Testament?’

‘Well, let me see, there’s . . . Now let me think. Well, there’s Nicodemus; he agrees.’

‘Oh yes. Anybody else from the rabbis?’

‘Well, no.’

‘Oh, I see, Paul. I see . . .’

And Felix would draw his own conclusions, as you well might if you were an unconverted Roman.

How can Paul be right in saying that Jesus fulfils the Old Testament if the vast majority of the Jewish rabbis say he doesn’t, when it was the Jews who gave us the Old Testament? Obviously, if Paul has no answer to the question, here is a problem that might undermine the very foundation and security of the gospel itself, or at least its credibility in the eyes of men.

The problem goes even deeper

When we stay with our problem a little longer we shall find it goes even deeper. To show you how, I must diverge a little at this point and remind you of the position of chapters 9, 10 and 11 in the great discourse that is the Epistle to the Romans.¹

You have heard many times that Romans deals with the very topic of salvation, as Paul himself announces in chapter 1: ‘I am not ashamed of the gospel: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believes’ (v. 16). And if you should ask: ‘But, Paul, why do I need to be saved anyway?’ then the rest of Paul’s document is devoted to explaining why.

Saved from the wrath of God (1:1–5:11)

Why do you need to be saved? ‘In the first place,’ says Paul in his early chapters, ‘you need to be saved because you, in common with us all, stand as a sinner under the wrath of God. You are a sinner, and not only a sinner but a guilty sinner, proved as such by God’s holy law.’ Herein is a gospel worth preaching, a gospel that can save us from the guilt of sin and from the wrath of God against that sin, a gospel that saves us not by our merit nor even by our improvement but through the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we may have peace with God. And as Paul comes to the end of that part of his work, he takes on the implications of that great salvation: saved from the wrath of God, already being at peace with God, and with a glorious future ahead, we shall attain to the very glory of God! We shall at last and forever be saved from the wrath of God.

Saved from the wreckage of sin (5:12–8:39)

When he has dealt with it sufficiently, as he feels, he turns to answer the question a second time. ‘Why do you need to be saved? You need to be saved,’ he says, ‘not only from the wrath of God, but from the fearful wreckage and moral and spiritual ruin that has been introduced into our human race by the sin of our forefather Adam.’ We need to be saved from the terrible dominion of sin and the awful tyranny of death. And when people thought that the law of God could save us from those two tyrannies, then it turned out that the law of God couldn’t

¹ See the chart in the Appendix for an analysis of the sections in Romans.

save us and proved in itself to be a kind of a tyranny and a dominion and a slavery. We need, therefore, to be saved from this bondage, this wreckage induced by Adam's sin. Thank God for a gospel so wonderfully glorious that it can save us now!

'When it comes to its great conclusion,' says Paul, 'it shall deliver not only us, it shall deliver creation herself from her bondage to corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God.' And what a day it shall be when creation grows no more and tyrannies of sin and death and the law are behind us forever.

It is a lovely gospel. Who would be ashamed of it? But now here in chapter 9 Paul begins another great part of his work and shows us the early stages of this great plan of redemption.

How God went about the great process of redemption

When God determined to save us by sending his Son, he didn't send him all of a sudden one Tuesday afternoon without any warning, did he? What use would it have been? What use would it be if God sent his Son to call upon men to be reconciled with God, if men had gone so far into idolatry that they didn't even know what God was like? What good would God sending his son to die for us be if we hadn't been prepared, by all sorts of illustrations and pictures and experiences, to see the need of the death of Christ and to see what the significance of that death would be?

So God, in his wisdom, had long since started the early stages for the redemption of mankind. He summoned out from the mass of the Gentiles a man called Abraham and began from him a brand new nation that never had existed before. It wasn't that God was saying there was not anybody else saved in the whole world except Abraham. Of course there were still multitudes of people that were saved. Melchizedek the priest was one shining example of a Gentile that was saved. But when the nations at large were beginning to sink into idolatry, God began again and took out Abraham and gave him a special status before God and gave that special status to all his *seed*. As Paul remarks here, the first thing to get hold of about Israel is this: 'whose is the *adoption*' (9:4), that is, 'the placing as sons'. It may not mean 'son' in the sense that we evangelicals are used to employing the term, but listen to God speaking to Pharaoh: 'Pharaoh,' he says, 'let Israel go. Israel is my firstborn' (see Exod 4:22). So God gave Abraham and his seed this special status before God: to be sons of God.

Then God did a marvellous thing, almost too marvellous to believe. The transcendent Lord came down into space and time, positioned himself on Mount Sinai, and revealed himself to Israel in all the splendour of his glory! In doing so, he made his mark in our world that this world is not a closed shop; it is not just a closed system of materialism. There is a transcendent Lord, and that transcendent Lord has intervened in the course of history! (Let Mr Gorbachev remember it.) He has intervened. He stood on Mount Sinai. He presented himself in the tabernacle and temple of Israel. What a story it is. (Do you believe it?) As that little tribe went across the wilderness the very glory of the unseen God shone in their midst! Here was the very beginning of redemption, and God made his promise to that people that through them, through Abraham and his seed, would all the nations of the world be blessed.

What a marvellous revelation it was given to us in his holy law — given to Israel. This law was unique among all the nations of men that it might serve as our schoolmaster to show us our need and to bring us to Christ for salvation when he came (see Gal 3). Here then were the

promises and the covenants with this special nation—a special vehicle of the knowledge of God through many a century, preparing the way for the Lord Jesus: ‘of whom’ at length ‘according to the flesh’ came the Messiah (see Rom 9:5).

And now?

You say, ‘Unfortunately the whole scheme has gone astray, sir, for the very nation chosen out by God, thus to be his witness and to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah, the whole nation has rebelled and rejected the Saviour, and declares to the world that Jesus is *not* the Messiah, nor saviour of the world.’

That’s a difficult situation to be in, isn’t it? It was bad enough when Adam sinned and went and ruined the whole creation. Now we face a deeper problem. God began to prepare the way of redemption, but if the early stage of redemption has gone astray and the whole thing has come to nothing, what ground would there be for thinking that there is anything in the story of redemption at all?

It is no mere academic problem, therefore, that Paul faces as he writes to us chapters 9, 10 and 11 of his Epistle to the Romans.

You’ll say, ‘Mr Preacher, I’ve got the answer to the problem.’

Oh, yes?

You say, ‘I don’t think about it!’

Well, what do you mean?

‘You see, I am saved myself, and I don’t bother my head about these things. I am saved and on my way to heaven so I don’t trouble about the Jews or these funny things that you have been talking about this morning. I have simple faith, my dear brother!’

Oh, well, God bless you! I am delighted to tell you that your simple faith will prove to be valid, because the gospel is one hundred percent sound and valid! There are some of us who, if we were escaping from the skyscraper down a fireman’s ladder, would like to be assured that the bottom of the ladder was secured. And I can’t think that there are many of you in this modern world who are prepared to trust a gospel without examining whether it be secure or not.

What then is the answer to the problem? I shall not this morning have time to discuss the answer with you; I have spent my time elaborating the problem. (I am under your discipline as well as Paul’s). But this I can say: unless you are prepared to face the problem, you won’t find the solution, will you? Only they who see the problem will come to see the wisdom of the God who solves the problem. And, seeing the wisdom of God and his solution to the problem, their hearts shall be moved to profound worship of God, as was Paul’s when he meditated upon these things.

I can enjoy a daisy in the simplicity of my childhood, and my enjoyment is valid, but if I am able to look behind the scenes by the aid of my botanist and biologist friends, then there awaits me a marvel of the wisdom of God in creation that will make my world glow all the brighter with the glory of the world that God has made and put me in! I may be saved by simple faith in the Saviour this very moment, but if I will allow the great apostle to take my hand and lead me behind these scenes and consider the problems that face us there, and by God’s Holy Spirit to lead me through to God’s divine solutions, then likewise my heart will be lifted up and my mind fortified and exhilarated by such exhibition of the marvels of God’s character! It shall deepen my faith and make my worship the more profound. God grant it may be so, for his name’s sake. Amen.

God's Longsuffering Power

Now, shall we listen while God speaks to us through his holy word. We read together in the epistle of Paul to the Romans and chapter 9, and we begin to read there in verse 14.

What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. For he 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 wills, nor of him that runs, but of God that has mercy. For the scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose did I raise you up, that I might show in you my power, and that my name might be published abroad in all the earth.' So then he has mercy on whom he will, and whom he will he hardens. You will say then unto me, 'Why does he still find fault then? For who is it that is withstanding his will?' No but, O man, who are you that replies against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?' Or has not the potter a right over the clay, from the same lump to make one part a vessel unto honour, and another a vessel unto dishonour? What if God, willing to show his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering vessels of wrath fitted unto destruction: and that he might make known the riches of his glory upon vessels of mercy, which he before prepared unto glory, even us, whom he also called, not from the Jews only, but also from the Gentiles? As he says also in Hosea, 'I will call that my people, which was not my people, and her beloved, which was not beloved. And it shall be, that in the place where it was said unto them, "You are not my people," there shall they be called sons of the living God.' (vv. 14-26)

And may God cause us all to hear his voice through his word.

Past the point of no return

The first message that God would have us draw from his holy word this evening is, I suspect, a loving and kindly but exceedingly serious warning. It is a warning stark in its realism and unspeakable in its solemnity. It tells us, to put it briefly, that it is possible for people to say, 'No' to God one time too many. It reminds us that it is possible for men and women to hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, to listen to the love of God and the appeal of God, to hear God calling them to take with both hands the gospel of forgiveness that he offers them, to hear it all and say, 'No'. And say, 'No' again. And say, 'No' a third time. And to say, 'No' at last one time too many, and in doing that to pass beyond the point of no return, to find themselves in a position where they no longer have the power to change their minds but are fixed, and fixed forever.

This, as I say, is an exceedingly solemn matter, but then all of us tonight are grown-up people and surely admire the frankness of God that he dare, in his kindness, tell us of this thing. It is a subject, of course, that many people have taken up from the Bible. Poets and prophets and preachers and authors—hundreds of them—have taken it up as they have caught the seriousness of the matter and reminded us of it. That famous Irishman that one hears quoted so many time these days—Professor C. S. Lewis, in the end of his famous book entitled *The Pilgrim's Regress*, wrote a poem on this very topic, and I read it now in your hearing.

Nearly they stood who fall;
 Themselves as they look back
 See always in the track
 The one false step, where all
 Even yet, by lightest swerve
 Of foot not yet enslaved,
 By smallest tremor of the smallest nerve,
 Might have been saved.

Therefore, oh, man, have fear
 Lest oldest fears be true,
 Lest thou too far pursue
 The road that seems so clear,
 And step, secure,² a hair's
 Breadth past the hair-breadth bourne,
 Which, being once crossed forever unawares,
 Denies return.³

That is the professor giving way to poetry, but what he is saying is all too true. There is a line over which, if we pass, there is no return.

Believing the lie

That is such a serious matter that God in his loving-kindness has gone to great pains to explain to us in his word how it happens. Let me read you a passage. I read it from another part of the New Testament. This passage is not talking about everybody; it is talking about certain people who have heard God's gospel. They have discovered themselves to be out of line with God, to be sinners and guilty before God. They have heard the delightful story of the love of God: how he sent the Saviour, our Lord Jesus Christ, to die for us. And many times they have heard in their inmost hearts the voice of God's Holy Spirit pleading with them to be saved: 'Now, now, now! This time trust the Saviour and be saved.' These people have said, 'No, no, no! Not this time, no.' Now listen to what God says about them in his word. There will come

² That is, unthinking and carelessly.

³ The stanzas of the poem quoted here are 1 and 3. See chapter 4 in Book 10. Clive Staples Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, London: Harper Collins, 1983.

a time when God will send them a 'strong delusion, that they shall believe *the lie*, that they all might be judged who believed not the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness' (see 2 Thess 2:11–12).

You say to me, 'I can't believe it, Mr Preacher. Why would God ever send anybody a strong delusion that they should believe the lie? Why would God deceive anybody?'

Ah, but let's go carefully. God isn't going to deceive anybody. All God will do is this: for those people who have known his truth, have known his gospel in all the delightful love of God, and God has pleaded with them to receive his truth and they wouldn't face the truth and they wouldn't receive the truth and they wouldn't love the truth, there will come a point, says God, when God shall say, 'Then have it your way, friend. If you don't like my truth then have your choice. Have the lie.'

That isn't God being unfair. That isn't even God being unkind. That is God being kind and loving and merciful, for he has given us a free will, and he respects our free will. He will plead with us and plead with us and plead with us, but if in the end we say, 'No,' then, though it break his heart to do it, God will say, 'Well, if you must, have your own way.'

An Old Testament illustration

We can perhaps best illustrate to ourselves how solemn that is by a story that God tells us in his word. For these people that won't have the truth, and in the end God sends them a strong delusion and they believe the lie, the eternal torture of it will be this—that they know it is a lie. It isn't that God has deceived them. They will exist for all eternity knowing it is a lie. Unable to receive or believe the truth, they are not willing to accept the truth.

Let me tell you a story. Perhaps you may even know it already. It comes from a long, long time ago in history, and it concerns an Israelite king, and his name was Ahab. And Ahab went a courting to a beautiful Syrian lady. At least she was one of the most colourful ladies in all of antiquity (colourful in many senses). Alas, she was a pagan woman, and when Ahab married his delightful Jezebel, she brought with her into Israel the worship of the false god, Baal, and Israel were led astray into many a miserable, foolish, lying old idolatry.

God in his mercy followed Ahab still. At length God determined to try and get the truth across to Ahab and his people, and God staged an enormous demonstration (1 Kgs 18). He had the priests of Baal with all their hocus-pocus assemble on Mount Carmel. There he told them to offer a sacrifice on the altar and cry to their god and, if their god was real, let their god send fire down from heaven and consume the sacrifice in front of everybody's eyes. And so the old priests gathered together and they built their altar, and they put the wood on it, and they put the animals on it, and they called on their god: 'Oh, Baal, Baal, hear us Baal!' But there was no voice or anybody that answered. And the prophet of God whose name was Elijah began to provoke them a little sarcastically: 'Go on,' he said, 'shout! Shout a bit louder! Perhaps your god, old Baal, has gone on holiday, or perhaps he's even gone to the toilet! Perhaps he doesn't hear you. Shout a bit louder!' and they cried in their frenzy: 'O Baal, hear us!'

But there was no voice and none that answered. It was a lie from start to finish! They saw it was. Then the true prophet of the Lord came near, and he built his altar and he put on it the sacrifice, and he told his servants to get barrels full of cold water and pour it over the sacrifice

until the whole thing was running—drenched in water. There before Israel he lifted up his eyes to heaven and called upon the living God: ‘O God, tell your people, show your people that you are the real God, and turn their hearts back again to you that they might be undeceived and know the truth.’ And as he called on God there came down fire from heaven, we are told, and consumed the sacrifice and consumed the wood and consumed the very stones of which the altar was built!

It was a vivid, clear, indisputable demonstration that God was the true God. And Ahab did what? And Jezebel did what? They couldn’t deny the evidence, but they just clenched their fists and gritted their teeth and they said, ‘No!’ to God and rejected his prophet.

You say, ‘What did God do then? Did he destroy the man?’

Oh, no, friend. He did not destroy him. Patiently, mercifully, long-sufferingly, God continued to plead with Ahab. And I haven’t time now to tell you the many times God preached to that man his gospel message and implored Ahab to turn round as a man and face the truth and face the reality and seek the Lord and trust him and be saved! But Ahab continued to say, ‘No’. Then it happened. He said, ‘No’ one too many times, and he passed the line. That is how he came to his end (1 Kings 22).

The Syrians, so we are told, had taken a city that belonged to Israel, and Ahab got it into his head that he ought to go and recapture that city from the Syrians. So off he went, and he persuaded the king of Judah whose name was Jehoshaphat to come and accompany him. There before the battle they sat themselves on their royal thrones all dressed up in their robes. You never saw such a sight! And there they had in front of them a whole menagerie of false prophets to encourage the king to go up in his battle and take this city and recover it.

Here came the false prophets, and the king said to them: ‘Gentlemen, now tell me, shall I go up and take this city, and will God prosper me and give me victory?’

And they said, ‘Yes, your majesty, you go up, and the Lord will deliver it into your hand!’

And when these false prophets had had their say, we are told the king of Judah had a word in the ear of Ahab: ‘Ahab, old boy,’ he said, ‘I have heard what these prophets say, but haven’t you got a *real* prophet here? A prophet of the Lord?’

Ahab said, ‘Oh, Jehoshaphat, my good chap, you are old-fashioned! We used to have gospel meetings by old prophets like that, but they’ve long since gone out of fashion, Jehoshaphat. Where have you been all these years? We have one prophet of the Lord, but he’s an objectionable fellow and he’s in prison. But if you must, well, I can get him out, but I warn you he won’t say anything decent!’

So they sent the jailer, and he brought the prisoner, the Prophet Micaiah, the true prophet of the Lord. As he was coming along to meet the king, the jailer had a little word in his ear. He said, ‘Micaiah, allow me to give you some advice. You know, I am not telling you what to say, but all the other prophets have encouraged the king that he is beautiful; he is glorious; he will prosper and God will bless him in spite of his sin. So I should advise you that I would say something pleasant if I were you, when he questions you, because if you say something unpleasant you might find yourself back in jail here, and bread and water isn’t very nice stuff, you know.’

So the prophet stood before the king, and the king said to the prophet Micaiah, 'Tell me Micaiah, what is the word of the Lord? Shall I go up and fight against this city, and will the Lord give me victory?'

'Oh, yes, your majesty,' said Micaiah, 'yes, yes, yes, yes. You go up and the Lord will give you victory!'

And the king looked him in the face, and he said, 'You stop that, you liar. I didn't bring you here to tell me lies. Now, do stop it! You tell me the truth!'

You will say, 'That's a funny thing isn't it? How long has Ahab been interested in the truth?'

Ah, yes, when the false prophets said that he could go on in his sin and it wouldn't matter and everything would be all right, he was glad to listen to them. When the true prophet of God came along and said, 'No, no, Ahab, you go up and the Lord will bless you,' Ahab knew it was a lie. How can a man live a godless life and put his thumbs up to God, and think in the end he shall be saved? Ahab knew it was a lie.

'All right,' said Micaiah, 'if you want to know the truth, your majesty, I'll tell you the truth. Because you have rejected God's word times without number, God allows this lying spirit in the mouth of your prophets to come and deceive you, to tell you that you're going to be all right, even though you carry on in sin. It is a lying spirit, Ahab.'

Then the sorry story comes to its end. Ahab knew it was a lie, and he knew what the truth was. He found he couldn't change and rejected the truth and believed the lie. He had gone past the point of no return.

Perhaps as you hear these ancient stories you feel that somehow God must have become unkind. But he is not unkind, is he? What we should be wondering at tonight is the marvellous endurance of God—how long God waits, how often he calls. As we think of these things we remember the words of our blessed Lord Jesus. As he stood outside of the city of Jerusalem that he loved so much, with tears in his voice he said it: 'O Jerusalem, how many times would I have gathered you as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings and saved you from the coming disaster that must come upon you? How often I would have done it, and you would not' (see Matt 23:37). What then? Then he left them, and his voice was silent, and they did not hear him again.

Rejecting the evidence

As we listen to the story that we read in Romans 9, the thing that surely must strike us is the tremendous length to which God will go in his patience, and how long he will wait with mankind. The story of which that chapter reminded us is the story of Pharaoh, the ancient king of Egypt (Exod 3–12).

Pharaoh and the evidence

The story tells how God on one occasion sent Moses, his prophet, to talk to Pharaoh and to say to Pharaoh: 'Now, look. Israel that you hold in slavery is my people. Please let my people go that they may serve me.'

But Pharaoh wouldn't. He said to Moses, 'Look here, Moses. I don't believe your God. Why should I listen to the voice of your God?'

'Oh, you don't?' said Moses. 'Well then God has given me a miracle to do, and I'll do it in front of you, Pharaoh, so that you can see this miracle and you'll know it is true.'

So, as God had told him, Moses took hold of the rod he had in his hand, and he flung it down on the ground, and it became a serpent—a live, deadly serpent!

When Pharaoh saw that he grinned all over his face. He said, 'Come off it, Moses. You don't suppose I'm going to be impressed by that, do you? That is no miracle! My scientists could do that in the laboratory.' Then he pressed a button and in came the scientists all in their white coats (like scientists wear). And he said to the scientists: 'Gentlemen, this Moses here is going to convert me, you know. He tells me there is a God called Jehovah who is the supreme God, and I am to listen to him and I am to obey him! And he's tried to do a miracle to prove that there is a God. It isn't a miracle, is it, gentleman? Now show this Moses you scientists could do the same thing by your scientific techniques.'

And lo and behold they did it! They got some rods and put them on the ground, and the rods turned into serpents. Pharaoh said, 'That's what I told you. You'll have to do better than that before I am prepared to believe you, Moses.'

What did God do to him then?

You say, 'I think God just struck him out.'

No, he didn't, for God is fair. Let me put it to you. What is your difficulty? Why aren't you a Christian? Is it that you feel that Christians preach, and they've tried to persuade you that the gospel is true, and they've tried to persuade you to receive the Saviour? And you are standing back and you say, 'But it doesn't make sense to me in this modern scientific world. Where is the evidence? They don't give me enough evidence!'

Oh, friend, God loves to hear you talk like that! Do you want evidence? Well, God will give you evidence. He is not asking you to shut your mind and believe in the dark and bury your head in the sand. If your difficulty is that you haven't got the evidence, and you would like it demonstrated that Jesus Christ is true, then be bold and come to God and ask him for the evidence! Ask him to show you the evidence, and God will wait ages for you while he demonstrates to you the evidence that God is true.

He did it with Pharaoh. We read how Moses was told to take his rod and to take water out of the river and put it on the dry land. When he did that the water turned to blood. Then the magicians came along (the scientists as we are calling them) and they did the same, and they turned the water into blood. 'There you are,' said Pharaoh. 'That's not a miracle after all, is it?'

It was a case of what we would call pollution. It was a very bad case of pollution, but there you are, yes, I suppose man can produce pollution if he wants to, can't he? Our modern scientists have shown us that is one of our problems on our planet, and if we're not careful one of these days man will make the planet unworkable by his polluting of the natural sources of life on earth. Be warned. And so man can produce pollution.

'All right,' says God, 'that doesn't satisfy you as a piece of evidence, Pharaoh? Well let me give you another piece of evidence and another piece of evidence and another piece of evidence!' And six times over God gave him evidence, for God is longsuffering, not willing that any should perish (see 2 Pet 3:9).

Oh friend, I say it again. You are not saved tonight because you are not convinced that Christianity is true and you are asking for evidence? Oh, please carry on! Only, be sincere. Ask God for the evidence. He'll be delighted to give you the evidence, and he'll wait while you think it through. God gave evidence to Pharaoh such that, in the end, his scientists came to him and they said, 'Your majesty, now this has gone beyond us. This is a something we couldn't possibly explain by our science. This is a miracle, your majesty!'

What did Pharaoh do then? Well then the very pharaoh who had said he wanted the evidence wouldn't listen to the evidence, for he was not prepared to repent.

And, my friend, that is our danger tonight, isn't it? It could be that some of us are not yet saved because we haven't been convinced by the evidence. Ah, but there might be others of us and we are not saved. Why not? Well, it isn't really because we've not been convinced by the evidence; the evidence is there. We know we ought to give in to God and receive the Saviour, but we are not prepared to repent. It is to such people's hearts that the word of God talks tonight and talks directly and talks very clearly.

If you are there, be careful. What happened to Pharaoh could happen to you. He said, 'No' one too many times, and then God fixed him—hardened his heart. Pharaoh found it impossible to change.

If you read the story you will find sad things indeed. When the next plagues came in all their fury and Pharaoh began to feel the consequences of his folly, he cried out to Moses: 'Oh, I have sinned Moses! What a fool I have been!'

And you say, 'Will God then hear a man confessing himself a sinner and not take any notice?'

No, it isn't that, friend. Pharaoh knew he had sinned. God said, 'All right, I'll take the plague away, Pharaoh, and then you repent.' Ah, but when God took away the plague, Pharaoh didn't repent. He couldn't change his mind. And he stands as a beacon light.

Why did God do it? Why did God tell us about it? He puts it like this, 'God was willing to make known his wrath' for God is a holy God (see Rom 9:22). We cannot forever trifle with God. What would you have God do with a man like Pharaoh, who for years had persecuted the Israelites and ground them down in his slave labour camps, and was called upon by God to repent and be saved and forgiven and let Israel go? What would you have God do? A man of six feet of clay turns round to almighty God and persistently says, 'No!'. Would you have God turn round and say, 'It doesn't matter, and in the end, well, do as you like'? Of course you wouldn't. You wouldn't respect a God like that, would you? A God who in the end said sin didn't matter, who said you can blast out somebody's brains with drugs, you can do what you like and destroy somebody's home with your immorality, and it doesn't matter? You wouldn't respect a God like that, nor would a God like that have a heaven for anybody to go to. When Pharaoh refused God's gospel, God moved in and fixed him there and made him a beacon light to us all of the judgment that must follow rejection of God.

Oh but my good friend, God not only did it that we might have a warning of judgment. He gave it as a superlative evidence of God's compassion and his tolerance and his longsuffering and his waiting. What if God, willing to show these lessons, *endured* the treatment he got at the hand of Pharaoh?

What God has endured

Since those days, history has gone on. Time and time again God has given us examples of his mercy, his incredible longsuffering. Tonight as we sit here we think supremely of that great exhibition of God's endurance that we call the cross of Jesus Christ our Lord. God sent generation after generation of prophets into this world to call on men to repent and, almost without exception, men in the end had rejected those prophets. Then, instead of deluging our world with judgment, oh see what God did! He said, 'I've yet one only son, one darling son. If they won't listen to the prophets then I will send my son for them. Surely they'll reverence him' (see Luke 20:13). The story is that as they saw him coming, the wicked husbandmen decided to take him; they killed him and slung him out of the vineyard. They nailed him to a cross.

Then let me tell you the story again if I can find words to sketch it. In those moments Jesus '*endured* the cross' (Heb 12:2). Oh, why didn't the world turn black? Why was our planet not eliminated? God's own Son hung on a cross at Calvary, and God *endured* the cross, not willing that any should perish.

Since then how many times God has talked to our hearts. How many times his Spirit has pleaded with us to bow down and receive the Saviour and accept the love of God in Christ. Tonight he pleads again. Tonight he waits still. Shall we not receive him?

Did I hear somebody say, 'I would love to receive him, but the fear that torments me is this, that I may already have gone beyond that line that you speak of, and God won't any longer receive me'?

Oh, no, friend. If you would like to be saved, if you would be willing to repent, and repent of anything and trust the Saviour, and would love to receive him and have him as your Saviour, but the thing that torments you is that you think you may have gone beyond the line of no return, then let me tell you the very fact that you would love to be saved right now is evidence that God still waits for you. Put those fears behind you. The Saviour is waiting. Listen to his word: 'Come unto me, all you that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest' (Matt 11:28). 'To him that comes to me I will by no means cast out' (see John 6:37). Come then, and Christ will receive you and make you a vessel of his immeasurable grace and his eternal love.

To us all, I repeat, tonight the Saviour waits. Oh, friend, if ever you have said, 'No' to him before, as you love your soul, don't say, 'No' again now! For it is possible to say, 'No' to God one time too many.

Shall we pray.

Oh blessed God we thank thee that today is still the acceptable year of the Lord; now is the day of salvation, and we thank thee for thine infinite mercy and thy patience. We thank thee for speaking to us again here this evening. We thank thee for the sincerity of thy offer that 'Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord, shall be saved'.

Oh Lord, grant we do beseech thee, that if never before, then tonight in these moments as we wait before thee, all of us may rise up in our hearts and deliberately come to the Saviour and call upon him in repentance and faith. And we bless thee for his assurance that tells us, 'him that comes to me I will by no means cast out'.

So we commit ourselves to thee, that we may hear thy word, and hearing it, do it; and doing it, be blessed. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

God's Sovereign Choice of his Advertisements

Then let us begin our study this morning by reading in the Epistle to the Romans and chapter 9, and we shall commence to read there at verse 14.

What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' So then it is not of him that wills, nor of him that runs, but of God that has mercy. For the scripture says unto Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose did I raise you up, that I might show in you my power, and that my name might be published abroad in all the earth.' So then he has mercy on whom he will, and whom he will he hardens. You will say then unto me, 'Why does he still find fault? For who withstands his will?' No but, O man, who are you that replies against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?' Or has not the potter a right over the clay, from the same lump to make one part a vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour? What if God, willing to show his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering vessels of wrath fitted unto destruction: and that he might make known the riches of his glory upon vessels of mercy, which he before prepared unto glory, even us, whom he also called, not from the Jews only, but also from the Gentiles? As he says also in Hosea, I will call that my people, which was not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved. And it shall be, that in the place where it was said unto them, "You are not my people," there shall they be called sons of the living God.' (vv. 14-26)

And may God give us good understanding of his word.

The great problem

In our study last week we began to investigate the sorrow and the problem that weighed down the heart of the Apostle Paul. The sorrow we found was a daily and constant and unabating sorrow because the majority of his fellow nationals (the Jewish nation) were rejecting the Lord Jesus as their Messiah and Saviour. The sorrow was incessant because of the inevitable end that must overtake individuals that reject the salvation that is in Jesus Christ. 'For there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved' (Acts 4:12), and to reject him finally is eternal disaster.

But if that was Paul's sorrow, he had an additional problem, because God's choice of Abraham, the formation from Abraham of a nation called Israel, God's self-revelation to that nation, the wonders of Sinai, the glories of the tabernacle, the superb magnificence of the very

God transcendent Lord, dwelling in Israel's midst: this all had been planned of God as the initial stage of his great plan of redemption. Through this at last the Messiah would come—his way prepared, his sacrifice already explained in the allegories and symbolism of Judaism. It was the initial part of God's programme of redemption through which, at last when the Messiah came, all the nations of the earth should be blessed! And now, if the very nation that had been raised up by God to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord Jesus to initiate the great redemption, had turned round and rejected the Lord Jesus and rejected his sacrifice and repudiated forgiveness in his name; and were now telling the world that Jesus Christ was a lot of nonsense (and worse), then what, we might ask, had come of the great plan of God for the redemption of mankind?

It was bad enough when Adam sinned and ruined God's fair creation, but then there was a chance that God might put it right by his great plan of redemption. But now if the plan of redemption itself had gone wrong and come unstuck in the middle, what confidence could you have in the rest of the plan of redemption? And if this were a real problem without solution, you and I sitting here this morning could have no confidence in our Christian gospel, and all our hopes of a heaven to come would be moonshine. Paul therefore very swiftly comes to his assertion that Israel's defection, Israel's rejection of the Saviour, does *not* mean that the great plan and purpose and word of God has come to disaster and is of no effect.

Paul's answer to the problem

Paul now proceeds to argue that Israel's rejection of the Saviour, instead of proving that God's plan and ways have gone wrong, shows rather that his plan is running according to his normal practice. For Paul now calls our attention to this, that even from the earliest times the descendants of Abraham, the seed of Abraham, were divided into two groups. There were those that carried on the purpose of God; they rose to fulfil the role to which God had called them. And there were the others that did not walk with God and did not fulfil the role.

Two examples of God's normal way of working (9:6–18)

For instance, Paul cites the case of Abraham's sons: Isaac and Ishmael. Both of them were sons of Abraham; both of them were his seed according to the flesh, and yet God chose Isaac, says Scripture, that Isaac might carry this great and tremendous privilege and responsibility of being the one through whom the predestined seed should come. And Ishmael, though equally Abraham's child, was not given that privilege.

To enforce the lesson, Paul quotes the case of Isaac's two children. And there the lesson is all the more vivid, for Isaac's children—Esau and Jacob—were not born one of one mother and one of another mother; both were born of the same mother and both, in fact, were conceived at the very same time. They were both, in a special sense, equally Isaac's seed, but Jacob was chosen for the role of being the father of the nation that should bring in Messiah, and Esau was put aside.

Paul cites these two instances now to invite us to apply the principle. In his own day there existed the physical nation of Israel but, as at the beginning so now, it was divided into two groups. There were those who like Anna and Simeon, Peter, James and John, Mary and

Martha, were carrying out the great role that God had given to the nation of being those through whom the Messiah should come into this world, those who were witnessing to the Messiah. And then there was the rest of the nation, equally Abraham's physical descendants, but not carrying on their role. In fact, they were opposing it. And the recital of these historical precedents is meant to cause us to see that, far from the whole thing now coming unstuck, Israel's behaviour in the time of Paul was proceeding, as it always had done, right from the very beginning. But Paul, by his description, invites us to go deeper and to ask ourselves, 'On what principle then did God choose one of Abraham's sons — Isaac — and reject the other?'

The principle on which the choice was made between Isaac and Ishmael

Here we must pause to make it very clear in our minds what we are talking about. When God chose Isaac and put aside Ishmael, it was not that God was choosing Isaac for salvation and consigning Ishmael to damnation. Far from it! The issue at stake was not salvation. Far from rejecting Ishmael, in that sense, God in the book of Genesis goes out of his way three times over to repeat that he is going to bless Ishmael. Ishmael's very name (*ishmael*: 'heard by God'), proclaims God's interest in that boy and his blessing on Ishmael. God explicitly tells Abraham: 'I shall be with the lad and I shall bless him and make him a large nation, just like I am going to make your son Isaac a large nation' (see Gen 17:18–21).

It is not a question, therefore, of choosing Isaac for salvation and consigning Ishmael to damnation and perdition. The question at stake is: 'Who will be given this great privilege of being the ancestor of Messiah, the one through whom the seed shall come, through whom all the nations of the earth shall be blessed?' And God gave that privilege, we are told, not to Ishmael, though he were Abraham's seed; he gave it to Isaac. On what principle? We are told explicitly. It was that God had *promised* Abraham and Sarah a son, and Isaac was the fulfilment of that *promise*!

Let us grasp hold of the fact of what a promise of God is. When God made a promise to Abraham and Sarah that they should have a child, it was a promise. It wasn't a suggestion. It wasn't an exhortation. It wasn't a question of God coming to Sarah and saying, 'Now, Sarah my dear, I've got a scheme for the redemption of the world. One of these days I am going to bring in the Messiah, you know. I wonder, could you think up some scheme, Sarah, of having a few children so that my scheme would work?'

Well, of course not. When God announced his scheme that there was coming this promised seed, it was a *promise*, and at first Sarah and Abraham didn't perceive that, did they?

Sometimes, in order to bring home to my little mind the importance of the principle at stake, I imagine myself sitting in the cool of the day with Abraham and Sarah in their tent over breakfast. (Pity my simplicity, won't you?) All unseen, I am sitting there while Sarah is handing Abraham the marmalade, and presently Sarah says to Abraham, 'Abie, dear?'

And he says, 'Yes, what Sarah?'

'Abie, you know that scheme that God has, that he announced the other day? You know, that through our seed all the nations of the earth are going to be blessed?'

'Yes, my dear; I know that.'

'Well, I have been thinking,' says Sarah.

'Oh, yes? You have?'

‘Yes, I’ve been thinking and, do you know what? The Almighty has forgotten something!’

‘Really?’

‘Well, yes, it’s even worse than that, Abraham. The Almighty is acting rather inconsistently? He says with one breath, he’s going to have this tremendous scheme and through our seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.’

‘Yes, I know my dear. Well, what about that then?’

‘Well, he is acting so inconsistently! The Lord has gone and shut up my womb so that I can’t have a child, Abraham! Just you fancy the pickle the Almighty’s got himself in. I think we better come to the rescue Abraham, don’t you? I’ve been thinking, and I’ve got a scheme.’

‘Thank you very much,’ said God. ‘But, Sarah, my dear, that was very nice of you, but I don’t need your scheme!’

And as I was sitting there just now, eating my toast and marmalade and listening to Sarah, I began to get very afraid. I said to myself, ‘Is that really true? The Almighty’s got a scheme for the salvation of mankind, that all the nations of the earth might be blessed and they of this church likewise? And do I gather right now that it’s a good scheme, but the Almighty hasn’t quite thought it through, and it’s all going to depend on Sarah and her ingenuity?’

Well, Sarah is a delightful soul, but if the blessing of mankind depended upon Sarah, where should we be? No, it could not be so! When God announced his scheme it was a promise! It was a promise! It was a promise! And God would do it; God would fulfil it! He didn’t need man’s puny little effort. Oh, rejoice your heart; rejoice your heart in the scheme of God’s salvation! It doesn’t depend on the puny effort by man (see Gen 16).

The principle on which the choice was made between Jacob and Esau

Similarly we shall have to think of that other pair — Isaac’s children: Jacob and Esau. Only here we shall have to go even more slowly because these verses have in some quarters been grievously misunderstood.

Shall we notice that these words that are spoken: ‘the elder shall serve the younger’, are not spoken of the individual men: Jacob and Esau? For in actual fact if you will read the history, the individual man Esau never did serve the individual Jacob. Nor did the individual Esau ever bow down to the individual Jacob — never. It was, in fact, the other way round. It was Jacob who in the end bowed down before Esau (Gen 33:3). The verse then is not talking simply about individuals.

If we will listen to what God said to their mother, we shall hear the thing solved. Said the Lord Almighty to their mother: ‘Two *nations* are in your womb, and two *peoples* shall be separated from your bowels . . . the elder shall serve the younger’ (Gen 25:23). What the Almighty was talking about was the nations that should spring from these two infants. And therefore it was in that connection he was talking once more about the privileged role of being the witness for God, the major witness for God in the earth. He wasn’t talking about salvation; you can’t save nations as nations. Here God was talking about the role that he was going to give to these two peoples. It would not be from Esau, but those who descended from Jacob would carry this great privileged role of being the ancestors and the preparers of the way for Messiah.

And so likewise God's comment some hundreds of years later recorded for us by the prophet Malachi who expressed it: 'Jacob have I loved and Esau have I hated' (see 1:2-3). Pray observe that God is still talking about nations. Pray observe that he is talking now after centuries of history have gone by, and Esau as a nation has been guilty of serious and despicable behaviour. But here is God, in Malachi, talking to his nation, Israel, and saying: 'You're no better than Esau is, you know. I chose Jacob; I didn't choose Esau. I abominate Esau for what he's been doing but I'm telling you, Israel, that you are a wretched lot! Scarce would you open or close the doors of my temple without being paid for it. You bring me abominable, filthy, scrag-ends of offerings. You think I'm going to be pleased with it? What better are you than Esau?' (see Mal 1). And yet it is the strange wonder that God chose Jacob and his descendants and that nation to be the carriers of this holy task and privilege: the preparers of the way for Messiah.

On what ground did he choose Jacob then? Well, obviously not on the grounds of merit! 'In fact,' says Paul, 'God chose Jacob even before the boy was born, that it might be apparent to all that God's choice in this matter does not depend on a man's merit, or upon his performance. It is not of works. It is not of him that wills, nor of him that runs. And that has always been so' (see Rom 9:10-16).

Shall we consider our own Christian apostles? Tell me if you will, why did the Lord choose Peter, James and John and the rest of them to be apostles? Was it because they were especially holy, or because they were qualified? No, indeed not. Listen to Peter himself on the morning when he had performed that outstanding miracle outside the temple gates, and the crowd were coming round, open-mouthed, to see the lame man dancing like a young deer! And Peter says, 'Why do you look on us as though by our own power or our own godliness we have done it?' (see Acts 3:11-13). No, not even the highest apostle in the land was chosen for that role because of his own inherent worth and godliness.

My brother, might I ask you, and you too my sister, you who serve the Lord in your particular sphere, on what ground did God call you to that holy task of being a witness for Christ? Was it because of your special godliness and you were better than your next door neighbour? Oh, perish the thought! It wasn't that God had a scheme for salvation and then left it to volunteers to come and volunteer, and chose the best he could get hold of. We who sit here today may be grateful for that.

You just imagine what it would be like at the final judgment if this kind of thing could happen. Here comes a man, and in all the solemnity of that court, God has to sentence that man to eternal perdition. And the man says, 'But why? Why, Lord?'

'Because you didn't believe the gospel.'

'What gospel? I never heard any gospel.'

'No, I know you didn't,' says God. 'I know you didn't but, you see, I did have some servants, but they didn't make much of a go of it. They were a poor crowd. They never actually got round to coming to you with the gospel, but that isn't my fault. It's their fault! They just weren't good enough.'

And the man must perish because the whole thing turned on the ability and faithfulness and godliness of the witnesses? How could it be? How would you even sustain the weight of your gospel ministry if you thought that somebody could be in hell forever because one day

you slipped and fell? Oh, thank God we serve a bigger God than that! And he chooses his witnesses, not according to their work: 'It is not of him that runs, or of him that wills, but of God that shows mercy.'

Some people think that's unfair. So Paul turns now to address the question.

A question of the fairness of God's choice (9:19-33)

As you may remember, he was dealing with the problem: 'Why is it that the large majority of the nation of Israel have rejected the Messiah and refused to be heralds of the gospel?' They are so full of their imagined merit as religious people, striving to keep God's law. So why is it that God doesn't use them as vessels to proclaim the gospel? Is it that God is being unfair and arbitrary in just choosing Mary and Martha and Peter and Paul, and leaving aside Caiaphas and the rest of them? To answer that question we shall have to consider a number of things.

The same lump

'First of all,' says Paul, using an analogy of a potter and a lump of clay, 'the potter has the right to make of this same lump any kind of vessel he likes' (see v. 21). Let's seize hold of that helpful insight: 'the same lump'. All men are the same. And, indeed, when now Paul proceeds to cite the case of Israel and then the case of Pharaoh, he cites that part of their history that makes it very clear what a bad lump they were! Pharaoh was an evil, impossible, difficult lump of clay. Were Israel any better? When God said, 'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy', the occasion was when Israel had just gone off into virtual apostasy and had built their golden calf and danced themselves silly in their departure from God and their disloyalty to God (see Exod 32). What a bad lump of clay they were! But so are we all. Let me say that we shall never become worthy vessels of testimony for God unless we come to this point to admit that we are this as well. I too, what am I but an evil lump of horrible clay?

Vessels of mercy

Of that evil lump of clay God makes some vessels of mercy.

You say, 'What is a vessel of mercy?'

Well, please note, it isn't just another way of saying, 'a human being.' Let's seize upon the noun: *vessel*. A vessel is something that the master of the house uses for his purpose. Paul reminds Timothy that in a large house there are many vessels (2 Tim 2:20-21). Let's hope they are fit for the master's use. They are vessels for doing a particular job. And the wonderful story is this (let me tell it with bated breath) that out of that evil old clay, God has managed to make vessels of mercy! That is to say, not merely that he takes some men and women and has mercy on them. That would be marvellous. But he takes men and women, and having mercy on them, he uses them as vessels to advertise his mercy the world round, so that they become exhibitions, advertisements, of the mercy of God!

There was never a more famous one than the man who is writing this epistle to us: Paul the apostle. 'On me Jesus Christ had mercy,' he said. What for? 'That in me first, the very chief and worst of sinners, Jesus Christ might show forth all his longsuffering as an example to the rest' (see 1 Tim 1:12-17).

When God takes a man or woman and makes them a vessel of mercy, it isn't that he chooses them and saves them and consigns the rest to perdition. No, he chooses them and makes them vessels of mercy that they might be advertisements of his mercy to all the rest of the world! He does it so that men might look at them and say, 'Did you ever know such a God? Would God have mercy on a person like that? Just imagine that! Well, if he would have mercy on Saul of Tarsus, he would have mercy on me!'

By God's grace I too am a vessel of mercy. I cannot boast, like some can, of lurid, really exciting sins, and a colourful past. Mine were mean, horrible, little nasty sins. Oh, why didn't God put me on the scrapheap of eternity—a cheap little old thing, and eaten through with miserable little snags and sins? But, he has had mercy! And he has made me a vessel of mercy to you this morning! He wants you to see the magnificence of his mercy, for if God would have mercy upon me, he certainly would have mercy upon you.

You say, 'Can anybody become a vessel of mercy?'

Oh yes, they can, 'for the same Lord over all is rich unto *all* that call upon him. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved' (Rom 10:12–13).

'Why weren't Israel, therefore? Why weren't the majority of them taken by God and used as vessels of mercy?'

Why? Would you know the truth about it? It's simply this: they refused to be vessels of mercy! Paul explains it to us. They would insist on trying to gain salvation by their works and their *merits* (9:30–33). If you will do that you'll never be a vessel of *mercy*. Even if you succeeded in gaining salvation by your merit you would be no good to me anyway. I should look at you and say, 'What a spectacular thing. I have never seen anybody like you before, and I don't expect to see anybody like you again. You won salvation, did you, by your good behaviour? Oh, good for you! But you are no advertisement to me because that's hopeless for me!' The man I want to hear, the woman I want to hear is the vessel of mercy—someone who was a sinner, and God saved you by his grace. And, having had mercy on you, he holds you up to me as an exhibition of what God is prepared to do, even for me.

Imagine that, coming before the Olympic Committee offering my services, I say, 'You know, at the next world games I propose that you appoint me as the long distance runner for Britain.'

'Oh, yes,' they say, 'you look a likely candidate. Yes, all right we appoint you.'

It comes to practice time, and here I am with my motorcycle, revving it up and riding around the course on my motorcycle!

And the man says, 'Hey, there's been a mistake. No, you're a foot runner!'

'No, but you see, I find it easier to go by motorcycle.'

Well, the man says, 'We've got a lunatic here. How shall we explain it? You want to be a foot runner? Well you can't go on a motorcycle then!'

And you want to be a vessel of mercy? Well you can't earn salvation by your works then! And that was Israel's fault: seeking righteousness, she wanted to have it by her merit, by her works, and would not take the place of a sinner and receive salvation by God's grace.

I tell you it wasn't that God wasn't prepared to have them at that very moment. At that very moment when Israel at large were rejecting the gospel and refusing to become vessels of mercy, funny things were happening around the Roman world. You would come, for instance,

to a city like Corinth and, walking down the street, you would come to the marketplace and see a whole hubbub and a ferment of people talking excitedly! And pushing your way through the crowd you ask what this is. And here is this Jew called Paul. And do you know what he's telling these Gentiles? 'Gentiles,' he is saying, 'would you like to become vessels of mercy?'

'Vessels of mercy?' says Demosthenes. 'What on earth is that?'

'Well you are sinners, gentlemen, and you need salvation, but God has a salvation for you! You Corinthians, in all your sexual sin, your vice, your evil, God is prepared to take you and have mercy on you and save you and cleanse you and forgive you and make you shining examples of his mercy! It will shine all down the centuries and lighten even Belfast in the year 1986 and encourage people there to find the Saviour and be converted, because you were made a vessel of mercy. Wouldn't you like to be one?'

Well, they had never thought about it before! They were not even seeking it, and here is God pressing the privilege upon them.

Many of you are already vessels of mercy, aren't you? Some of us, perhaps, are not. On another occasion we shall have to talk about what you have to do to become a *vessel of wrath*. Friend, pray remember God is sovereign. Israel was chosen by God to be his witness in the world. He gave them his law at Sinai; he gave them the promise of the tabernacle; he gave them the promise of Messiah; and they turned round and made a golden calf! And, incredible though it is to relate, God had mercy on them and gave them another chance to be his witnesses! Pharaoh was invited to repent. Many, many times he was urged to repent. He said, 'No', and said it once too often. How long will God hold out the day of opportunity? No one knows. The Almighty doesn't give account of his ways. He is sovereign.

If I speak to someone not yet saved, don't miss the opportunity. Oh, what a delightful thing for God to transform you into a vessel of mercy so that your past disgrace and failure and sin now becomes transmuted and men see in you the magnificence of God's immeasurable mercy, not only now but when at last you arrive home in glory to the glory that he has prepared beforehand for you, there in that glorious light where your sin and all its darkness will be seen for what it was. Therefore the immeasurable mercy that God exerted upon you when he forgave and saved you will be seen all the more clearly. Why, you shall be such a spectacle as the most brilliant star in the firmament could not outshine you! Principalities, powers, might and dominions shall watch you eternally, my sister, and you my brother, open-mouthed as they look at you and see what a God, God is; that he had mercy on you and brought you home at last and made you forever like his Son! Don't miss your opportunity.

And may God bless his word.

God's Indiscriminate Offer of Mercy

Now we are going to listen to God speak to us as we read the Bible, which is his word. And he speaks to us this evening through the writings of one of his servants, the Apostle Paul. What he has to say is in fact quite a closely argued argument. I shall try to read it as sensibly as I can. Perhaps you will care to cooperate with me and try to follow the argument as I read it. The passage is to be found in the Epistle to the Romans and chapter 10. It is Paul the apostle speaking, and he says as follows:

Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God is for them that they might be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For being ignorant of *God's* righteousness, and seeking to establish their *own righteousness*, they did not submit themselves to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believes. For Moses writes that the man that does the righteousness which is of the law shall live thereby. But the righteousness which is of faith says this: 'Do not say in your heart, "Who shall ascend into heaven?"' (that is, to bring Christ down) or, "'Who shall descend into the abyss?"' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead.) Then what does it say? 'The word is near you, in your very mouth and in your heart' (that is, the word of faith which we preach), that if you will confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and will believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you shall be saved. For with the heart it is that man believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth it is that confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture says, 'Whosoever *believes* in him shall not be put to shame.' For there is no distinction [that is, there is no difference], between Jew and Greek: for the same Lord is Lord of all, and that same Lord is rich unto *all* that call upon him. For *whosoever* shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? Even as it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of them that bring glad tidings of good things!' But they did not all *obey* the gospel. For Isaiah says, 'Lord who has believed our report?' So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. But, I say, 'Didn't they hear?' Yes, indeed, 'their sound went out into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world.' But I say, 'Did not Israel know?' First Moses says, 'I will provoke you to jealousy with those who are no nation, with a nation void of understanding will I anger you.' And Isaiah is very bold and he says, 'I was found of them that did not seek me; I became manifest unto them that did not ask after me.' But as to Israel he says, 'All day long I have stretched out my hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people.' (10:1-21)

Why are they not saved?

You mustn't ask me how I know it, but tonight I can tell you on reasonably good authority that sometimes a congregation like this will go away and discuss the preacher. They are to be heard saying, 'What an odd fish he was. Did you notice what old-fashioned clothes he wore? They must have come out of the ark. What an odd accent he had. And did you notice those funny mannerisms? Curious. I wonder what he does for a living? Do you imagine he's married and got half a dozen children?' And so forth and so on: congregations have been known to go away and discuss the preacher. They even occasionally discuss what he preached about and whether it made sense, or whether it was all double Dutch.

Would it surprise you to know that sometimes preachers go away and discuss their congregations? I do; I confess that at once to you. I shall probably discuss you tonight before I am finished. I don't mean with my fellow Christians, but with my God. And I find I am not alone in this habit. I find there are other preachers that discuss their congregations, and one so notable a preacher was the Apostle Paul. He not only discussed his congregation, but he wrote down here in the Bible exactly what he thought of some of them. And it is easy to understand why preachers fall into that habit, for no true preacher occupies a pulpit like this just to be an entertainment for the congregation for half an hour; not to wile away a few minutes with an interesting little discourse, thereafter to be forgotten; not even to preach to people that they ought to be good and behave and be decent citizens. A true Christian preacher who occupies a platform, as I occupy one this evening, has a job to do. What he is after is this: so to preach the gospel of God that people in his congregation will come and actually find the Lord! He is expecting people as they sit on their seats to hear the gospel and to wake up to the fact that they are sinners before God. He is expecting that, as they sit there, they come to see: 'Goodness me, I am a sinner!' So that then what the preacher is saying shall penetrate into their hearts—that God has a salvation for them, a gift for them, and that they are expected to receive the Saviour, and receiving him to enter into peace with God and to experience that revolution in life that is being born again and becoming a child of God, and having peace with God! That is what the preacher is expecting.

Naturally enough, when it doesn't happen, when people come and just listen to the sermon and then go away and forget it, the preacher (if he's an honest fellow) will start to think, 'Well, why on earth didn't they get saved then?'

Paul had this problem. You see, Paul the apostle was a magnificent preacher, and he had preached thousands of times in all sorts of places. He had preached in the barbarous regions of Paphlagonia to Paphlagonians. He had preached in the sophisticated cities of Greece like Athens and Corinth. He had preached in the powerful colonies of Rome like Philippi. And Paul the apostle had seen thousands of people born again by God's Holy Spirit.

He watched one thug of a jailer one night in a place called Philippi, a man that a few hours before had ripped Paul's back open with his Roman cat o' nine tails. He watched that man that very night discover the gospel, discover the Saviour and actually pass from death unto life and get converted and born again and find salvation and peace with God! In that very same city he had watched a very sophisticated lady. She was the head of a fashion business. She imported the most beautiful material that ever a lady could wish for to make a dress from—evening gown stuff it was—'purple', or so they called it in those days. And he watched

that dear businesswoman listening to the gospel, and presently he saw it go all over her face. Ah, she'd seen it! The Lord opened her heart, and the woman grasped salvation and was saved (Acts 16).

Paul had seen it happen thousands of times but, you know, always and again as he preached the gospel in all sorts of congregations, there were certain people that just did not get saved. And it was a big problem to him. It was a big problem because you might have thought that they were the very people that would have got saved! They were his own Jewish fellow nationals, and these Jews, I must tell you, had been brought up from little children with the Bible read in their ears. They even had bits of the Bible written out on paper and attached to their doorposts. They had been to the synagogue thousands of times, ever since they were infants, and heard the word of God read. They knew the Bible. They were exceedingly religious. They were the very people you might have expected to get saved, therefore. And yet time and time and time again, when Paul had finished his preaching and preached his heart out, these were the people that remained unsaved. So Paul sat down and wrote about them and tried to work it out in his heart: 'Well, why is it they don't get saved then?'

Tonight we are going to listen to him analysing the reasons why. And we need to be careful, don't we? Because as we listen to Paul maybe God will be analysing us. Could it be with any of us that we were just the people that you might have expected to be saved? We were brought up in Sunday school; our parents were Christians; we know the Bible; we've sung the Christian hymns and yet are not saved. Why not? As we listen to Paul discuss his congregations, maybe we shall find our own difficulties. Pray God we shall find the answer to them.

The reasons why they were not saved

Reason 1: They would not come God's way

Why weren't they saved then? 'Well,' says Paul, 'I'll tell you one reason why. You know, when it came to these spiritual things they made one fatal mistake, right from the beginning. When they thought of God then they said to themselves: "Well obviously if you're going to be saved the way to be saved is to lead as good a life as you could possibly lead."'

It seemed obvious to them, so obvious that they didn't stop to think. 'Why,' they said, 'it stands to reason. You can't be an absolute sinner and expect to be saved. Therefore, the way to be saved is to try and be as good as you can, as religious as you can, go to church as often as you can, read the Bible as often as you can and try to keep God's holy law. It stands to reason that that's the way to be saved.' And of course it isn't, but they thought it was. So they made a mistake almost before they started in these things, thinking that God's holy law is given to us so that we should keep it and, doing the best we can to keep it, we should eventually qualify for God's heaven and for being saved.

That was a most serious mistake, and Paul tries to explain it here. He says, 'You see the mistake they are making, don't you? For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness, for being saved' (see 10:4).

Do you know, as I listen to Paul telling us about what the true function of God's law is and how we can be saved, and that we are not saved by keeping God's law, I illustrate it to my little mind by a thermometer. If you are feeling a bit grey or a bit sick, and you come home from work and you say, 'I don't know, I might be ill I think,' and you go to the cupboard and you get out a thermometer, and you put the thermometer in your mouth and presently you draw it out and look at it and you say, 'a hundred and five? Oh, I'm pretty ill!' And of course you being a sensible person, you say, 'Well, I must get to bed. A hundred and five, goodness me!' So to bed you go, and you get somebody to go and phone up the doctor, and you bring the learned doctor and the doctor gives you medicine so you can get better.

Now, what would you think of me, if you called on me one day and found me like this? I'm sitting up in bed with a big thermometer in my mouth, and you say, 'Hello old chap. What's wrong with you?'

I say, 'I'm pretty ill. I got this thermometer out, and I put it in my mouth and, lo and behold, I have got a temperature of a hundred and five!'

And you say to me, 'Yes, I expect you've gone and called the doctor, haven't you?'

'Oh, no,' I say, 'I don't believe in doctors.'

'You don't believe in doctors?'

'No, but look, the trouble is this thermometer thing, you see? This thermometer shows I am very bad, I'm a hundred and five, but I'm convinced that if I do my level best to sit here and suck this thermometer, I can get this thermometer down to where it should be.'

You would say, 'My dear good man, the fever has gone to your head. You are going a little bit delirious. The thermometer isn't given to you so that you can suck it to get better. The thermometer is given to you to show you that you are desperately ill and to drive you to the doctor so the doctor can make you better. You'll never get better sucking a thermometer and trying to get it down to normal!'

But that's how it is with God's law, isn't it? How many a man and woman have I met who are telling me, in the confidence of their hearts, 'But you see, I am doing my level best to please God and to keep his holy law, and I find it desperately difficult.'

Of course they do! But that isn't the way to get saved, is it? God's law is given to us to show us that we are desperately sick, spiritually speaking, and then to drive us to the Saviour who can give us forgiveness of sins and make us right with God.

I wonder if we have all seen through that.

I remember once upon a time being in Vienna, trying to learn some German (and it was difficult enough) when I met an American in the student refectory. Well, that was pleasant in its way. And as we fell to talking over our fish and chips, he told me that he had been in training as a priest. I said that was very interesting.

'Ah but,' he said, 'I am not a priest now. I'm an atheist. I've ditched Christianity completely! I've given that stuff up, and I'm an atheist. There's nothing in Christianity.'

I said, 'That's very interesting, old fellow. Tell me, if you wouldn't mind, when you were in training as a priest, what did you understand about salvation? What did you think in those days about this question of how anybody is saved.'

‘Oh,’ he said, ‘that’s simple enough. You have to be baptized as an infant, and then you have to go to church, and then you have to read the Bible, and then you have to do your best to keep God’s law.’

I said, ‘It isn’t anything of the sort, is it?’

He said, ‘Of course it is.’

I said, ‘No it isn’t. No, no. The Bible says that salvation isn’t that way. We don’t get saved by keeping God’s law. We get saved when we come as sinners to Jesus Christ and admit our bankruptcy and receive from him the free gift of forgiveness and justification, and eternal life.’

‘Oh, no,’ he said, ‘nonsense. No, I’m an atheist, but if I were going to be a Christian, I’ve got it right and you’ve got it wrong!’

What a very curious man. And I wonder if I speak to somebody tonight, and you’re about to ditch Christianity. You’ve decided there’s nothing in it. It irritates you to hear preachers constantly preaching to you how you ought to be good: you ought to do this, and you ought to do the other. Indeed, as I speak to you tonight I come across to you as somebody that’s telling you that you’re not good enough, and that you ought to try harder.

And you say, ‘I’m trying hard enough, am I not?’

And if that’s how I come across to you, well I am sorry I am not putting it right, but that is not what Christianity says! I plead with you, before you ditch Christianity at least find out what the Saviour is saying! Of course he’s saying we’re sinners, but he’s not grumbling at you and telling you, ‘Look here, you must do better than that, and pull your socks up, and try to merit God’s pardon and his heaven.’ The blessed Saviour is saying to you that you, in common with the rest of us, are a sinner, but he has a gift to give you. He could make you right with God this very night and introduce you to peace and security and assure you of a place in God’s heaven. He could give it to you as a gift. Oh let’s try, shall we, not to get started on the wrong foot? Let’s at least get this thing clear, that what God is offering is a *gift* of pardon. He calls it *justification* and *eternal life* through the Jesus who died for us at Calvary.

Alas, when Paul’s fellow Jews heard about this, they didn’t like it. They liked to think that they were good enough as they were, and they went on with their religion and they would not submit to God’s way of salvation. A thousand pities, wasn’t it?

Reason 2: They said salvation is difficult

Who shall ascend into heaven to bring Christ down?

Then apparently there were some other people, and I’ll tell you why they weren’t saved. When they listened to Paul preaching they stuck out their chests and they said, ‘Yes, yes, well it may be right, but you can’t know until you get to heaven. None of us can know, can we? We can’t know, so none of us know until we get to heaven.’ And do you know there are multitudes like it now? They say very learnedly after you have preached, ‘Ah, yes. That was very interesting, but of course we can’t be sure of these things until we get to heaven, can we?’

And I have to tell you that that’s utter nonsense! The Bible says, ‘Don’t say in your heart, “Who shall ascend up to heaven?”’ (10:6). You don’t have to. Why not? Because Jesus Christ has come down from heaven, right to where we are, to tell us. That is the glorious thing about salvation. You don’t have to wait until you get to heaven. You don’t have to wait until you

stand before God's great judgment throne before you know your eternal destiny. You can know it tonight, here, in this very place. Jesus Christ has come down from heaven for this very purpose.

Listen to him, as he stood amongst his contemporaries, with two feet on this earth. He said, 'When it comes to the final judgment, I am going to be the judge, ladies and gentlemen. Get that into your heads. I shall be the judge, and if you would like it I could tell you your verdict right now' (see John 5:19–29). That is the wonder about the gospel. Do you want to know your eternal verdict: where you will be in eternity? You could know it this very night. You could have it from the judge himself, for the judge himself is our blessed Lord come down from heaven. And listen to what he says to us: 'He who hears my word and believes on him that sent me has everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation, but has passed already over from death to life' (see v. 24).

Oh, my friend, can you capture the wonder of that? Fancy being able to know it, in your heart of hearts, on the authority of the judge himself, that you have already passed over from death to life, that you have eternal life, you shall never perish, you shall never come into condemnation, and you could have it now! It is nonsense (if you will let me tell you) sitting there and saying to yourself while you listen to me preach: 'Ah well, but we can't know for sure until we get into eternity.'

Who shall descend into the abyss to bring Christ up from the dead?

Then there were others, and they said, 'Yes, but nobody has been to the dead and come back again to tell us, is there?' And I have heard people talk like that myself. They stick out their chests as though they were scientists or philosophers or something, and they say, 'Ah, well Mr Preacher, there's nobody who has died and come back again to tell us what it's like.'

What nonsense! Of course there has been! That is precisely what Jesus Christ our Lord has done. He has died and he has come back again! And he tells us with all the solemnity of his being: 'There is a heaven, and there is a hell.'

And you and I are going to one or the other. Oh friend, don't wait until you get there to find out, will you? Trust Christ that he is not leading you astray. He says there is a heaven, and there is a hell. That is why he died: so that we might go to heaven, saved by his precious blood.

Reason 3: They said they were different

There were other people, and Paul will tell you why they weren't saved. When they heard the gospel they said, 'Ah, yes, Paul, well that might do very well for some people, you know, but we are different?'

'Oh,' says Paul, 'how's that?'

'Oh well,' they said, 'you see, we are Jews. Now, Paul, you are doing very good work, doubtless—all this evangelism—but we don't need it ourselves. You should go to the prostitutes and the drug addicts and all the others round the corner, and those hideous Gentiles. Those sinners of the Gentiles—they really could do with your gospel Paul! They do need cleaning up! Go there, to the seedy parts of London or to Paris or somewhere, but of course we don't need it. We've always been religious.'

Do you know, it is a very odd thing, but when Paul went to the prostitutes and the Gentiles and the people in the seedy parts of the big cities, do you know what they said? They said, 'We are different, you know?' They said, 'You know those Jews of yours, they like religion don't they? Well, we don't mind if they find religion helpful and a comfort. We don't mind them enjoying religion, but we don't need religion! We are different.'

Isn't it odd? And God looks at us straight and he says, 'You know, you are not different. No, no. You can be Jew or Gentile, Englishman or Irishman: you are not different, really.'

You may be modern and sophisticated or ancient, like me, and antiquated, but there's no difference in this: that we all have sinned in the past, and we still come short of God's requirements. There is no difference' (see Rom 3).

There is no difference in this: that we need to be saved. And, friend, thank God there is no difference in this either: that we all can be saved if we want to be, be you Jew or remotest tribesman, be you young or old. 'The same Lord is Lord over all, and is rich to all that call upon him: for, whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved' (vv. 12–13). There is no difference. You are not different, man! You are not different, woman! Thousands of people like you are being converted and saved, and you can be saved too. And it is a very silly excuse: you are not different.

Salvation is not difficult; the word is near

'Ah, but,' said some people to Paul, 'yes, Paul, maybe, but then this salvation is a difficult thing. You know, you must face the fact that you're very good at religion. Oh, we do admire your faith, Paul. You are ever so good at religion, but then we find it difficult, and this business of being saved is so mysterious and difficult.'

You say, 'What did you say to them, Paul?'

And Paul just grinned at them and he would say, 'Nonsense! Difficult? Of course it isn't. Being saved is not difficult. Let me tell you how easy it is. The word is near you. The word is in your very mouth. God couldn't do much more for you, could he? God has put the very word in your mouth. You have only got to speak it! The word is in your very hearts! All you've got to do is accept it. If you shall believe in your heart that God has raised the Lord Jesus from the dead—the one who died for you, now risen for you—and with your mouth you shall confess him as Lord, God himself says, "you will be saved"' (v. 13). There is no mystery. It's not difficult. You could do it now before this service is finished.

Reason 4: They said they've never heard

Well then why aren't people saved? And you turn round to me and you say, 'Mr Preacher, I'll tell you why I'm not saved.'

Oh, yes?

You say, 'Because you keep talking about believing the gospel. I don't know what you mean by "the gospel". I've never heard the gospel.'

Really? Well, that's a very good reason for not being saved. You've never heard the gospel, you don't really know what the gospel is? Well no wonder you are not saved then. Friend, would you let me take that excuse away forever? If you want to, you can hear it. In fact, let

me stop everything now, and let me talk to you who don't really know what the gospel is. Let me tell you.

God says we are sinners: 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way' (Isa 53:6). We have sinned. We come short of God's requirements. We deserve his eternal condemnation. Is that clear? Oh, friend, now let me tell you the gospel! Jesus Christ loves you. God loves you, and he commends his love to you in that while you were still a sinner, this very moment, while you were still a sinner Christ died for us. 'He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities' (v. 5). He bore our sins in his body on the cross (1 Pet 2:24). Now he is risen. And it means this: that if you will admit, seriously and solemnly before God, that you are like the rest of us are — a sinner deserving of God's just wrath and condemnation, knowing you cannot save yourself or merit salvation, if you would come to Jesus Christ tonight in true repentance and receive him as *your* Saviour, then God is prepared to pardon you right now, forgive you, give you the gift of eternal life now and promise you that you shall never perish. And the Saviour is prepared to come and live in your heart and life, and walk with you through the rest of life and home to God's heaven. The gospel: 'how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried and was raised again according to the Scriptures' (1 Cor 15:3-4). All you have to do is, in true repentance, giving up faith in all else, to receive Christ.

I didn't put it very well, did I? But you've heard now, haven't you? You're still not saved. Why not?

Reason 5: Believing is so difficult

You say, 'You don't understand, Mr Preacher; this believing business is very difficult.'

I remember years ago in my student days talking with the chaps over dinner one night, and various things came up, and we began to discuss spiritual things. One fellow lingered on, and when all the others were gone he leaned over the table to me, and he said, 'Do you know David, I pray for faith every night before I go to bed?'

It would have been unkind of me to say it, but I was tempted to say, 'Well, I would stop praying for faith if I were you!' For what would you think of me if I did something similar? I come down here tonight, and as you're going past, you are kind enough to stop and talk with me, and I say, 'And what might your name be?'

And you say, 'O'Flaherty.'

And as you say it a look comes over my face, and I say, 'O'Flaherty? Wish I could believe that. Difficult, you know. Half a minute, you wouldn't mind if I pray would you?' And I get down on my knees and say, 'Oh God, help me to believe this woman that her name is O'Flaherty.'

What would you do? Swipe me with your handbag or something? You would say, 'The infernal cheek of the man! I told him my name was O'Flaherty, and he dares to doubt it! Am I such a liar that he has to call on God Almighty to help him to believe what I say?'

And why do we treat God like that? Is it all that difficult to believe God? Is he such a notorious liar? What do you really think of God? Oh friend, if ever you are going to spend eternity in God's heaven, you will have to get this matter settled. If you can't believe God, you will not live in the same heaven as he lives in. Trying to live in a home with somebody that

you neither believe nor trust would be very difficult, wouldn't it? If you can't believe God you'll not live in his heaven with him.

Why should it be difficult to think that he means what he says when he has loved us so much as to give his Son to die for us, and calls on us to believe and assures us that the moment we trust the Saviour he will give us eternal life and we shall never perish? Why is it difficult to believe?

If you want to find it easy to believe then the way to do it is to take God's word in your hand and put your very finger on the verse, and read God's word. The Bible says that 'faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God' (10:17). 'He who has the Son of God, has eternal life' (see 1 John 5:12).

Reason 6: God wouldn't save them

You have got one more reason, have you, as to why people are not saved?

You say, 'I know why it is Mr Preacher. I've heard it said that God is only prepared to save some people and others he is not prepared to save. He has chosen a few to save them and he's consigned all the others to perdition, and it's no good if you're not one of the elect: you can't be saved. You might want to be saved, but God isn't prepared to save you.' And you say, 'I think that was the reason why those Jews didn't get converted, because God hadn't chosen them. God wasn't willing to save them. They wanted to be saved, but God wouldn't save them.'

Well friend, what a slander. What a slander. It is not true! The very opposite is true! Oh, listen to God speaking, breaking his heart as he speaks to Isaiah the prophet over those Jewish people. He says: 'All day long I have stretched forth my hands', like a father. Have you ever seen a father and a mother, and there's their little boy, and he's now learning to walk. And dad stretches out his hands ready to catch the child as he takes his few tottering steps! And here is God pleading with Israel to come, and not only standing there and saying it, but stretching out his hands until he can nearly touch them, and pleading with them to fall into his arms!

You say, 'It's a metaphor Mr Preacher.'

Of course it's a metaphor, but what a vivid metaphor for what God Almighty was doing at Calvary. You suppose that you want to be saved, and God wouldn't save you? Oh what a nonsense it is. Think again of what was happening at Calvary as men took God's Son and nailed him to that cross. Oh, how it stretched God! He stretched out his hands to reach men! And so it is now, I tell you in God's name, that God's very hands stretch out to where you sit tonight—his fingers almost touching. Oh, friend, you only have to fall into those arms, and say, 'God I'm a sinner; I need to be saved. God save me!' You fall into his arms, and at that very moment those arms will close around you, and nothing shall ever pluck you out of his hands thereafter.

So, friend, let me tell you kindly that if these have been your difficulties, God has got rid of them, hasn't he? You have no reason left for not being saved. If the reasons are gone, all you have got left is excuses. One day we shall stand before God. Oh, friend, if ever you should stand before him unsaved, whatever reason will you give God for not having been saved?

But surely none of us tonight is going to do such a thing, and if it is that any of us tonight are not yet saved or we are not certain about it, then surely we shall not give sleep to our eyes this night until we have got this thing settled. So when the others have gone, do remember you need not go away unsaved or unsure. And if you are unsaved or unsure then stay and talk to the elders of this church or some young friend that has brought you here, or if you can find the courage in your heart, come and talk to me. My bark is worse than my bite. And friend, I repeat, God help us all, you need not go away uncertain or unsaved.

God's Commitment to Israel's World-enriching Role

Let us begin our study by reading in the Epistle to the Romans once more, chapter 11 and verse 7.

What then? That which Israel seeks for, that he obtained not; but the election obtained it, and the rest were hardened: according as it is written, 'God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear, unto this very day.' And David says, 'Let their table be made a snare, and a trap, and a stumbling block, and a recompense unto them: let their eyes be darkened, that they may not see, and bow thou down their back always.' I say then, did they stumble that they might fall? God forbid: but by their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy. Now if their fall is the riches of the world, and their loss the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fullness? But I speak to you that are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I glorify my ministry: if by any means I may provoke to jealousy them that are my flesh, and may save some of them. For if the casting away of them is the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead? (vv. 7–15)

Verse 30:

For as you in time past were disobedient to God, but now have obtained mercy by their disobedience, even so have these also now been disobedient, that by the mercy shown to you they also may now obtain mercy. For God has shut up all unto disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all. O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements, and his ways past tracing out! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor? Or who has first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and unto him, are all things. To him be the glory for ever. Amen. (vv. 30–36)

Recalling the problem Paul faced and his answers to it

In these brief studies of the Epistle to the Romans on the past two Sunday mornings we have been thinking together of the sorrow and of the problem that constantly weighed on the heart of the Apostle Paul. His sorrow came because the majority of his Jewish fellow nationals had rejected the Lord Jesus and were persisting in their rejection of him. Therefore there came daily upon the heart of the apostle an incessant sorrow as he thought of what must inevitably be the outcome for the individuals who rejected Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.

The problem

In addition to the sorrow we discovered last week he had a problem. If God's plan involved the call of Abraham, the formation of the Jewish nation, the glorious revelation of God on Mount Sinai, the wonder of the building of the tabernacle, the incredible reality that the transcendent Lord should come and dwell among men in that tabernacle of the Jewish nation, the wonderful promises of God, and in addition God's divine purpose that through that weak little nation, Israel, one day the Lord Messiah and the Saviour of the world should be born, then there was an obvious problem, superficially taken. If that nation, Israel, which had been raised up of God as the beginnings of his programme of redemption was now found to be rejecting the very Messiah, telling themselves and telling the world that they did not need any such Messiah, that they did not need the atoning death of Jesus Christ, and telling the world that Jesus was not a Messiah but in fact a blasphemer and an imposter: if the very nation raised up of God to be the witness to God in this world, and in particular the witness to the Gentiles, was thus rejecting the Lord Jesus, there was a problem! That was, namely, to know what had become of God's great plan of redemption. For if the very plan of redemption had gone wrong and broken down, what hope could anybody have of any of God's promises for the future redemption of the world?

The first part of the answer

Last Sunday morning in our study, we concentrated on the answer to the problem, which I may briefly remind you went like this. God's plan certainly had not broken down. Evidence was that it was running true to type. For right from the very beginning of Abraham's posterity there had always been two groups that could be observed: some of Abraham's seed chosen of God to carry on the privileged role of witnesses to the coming Messiah, and others of Abraham's seed not so chosen, and often living in contradiction to God and to his plan. And therefore the fact was that in Paul's day there were still two groups that could be observed within Judaism: the one group faithful to the word of God, faithful to the Messiah, welcoming the Messiah with open arms and preaching him to the Gentiles. Another group of Abraham's seed was hostile to the Messiah and virtually apostate to God. This, though sorrowful, was nothing to be wondered at; Israel was running true to her history. The very fact that there was still a group faithful to God, loyal to the Messiah, and carrying on Israel's distinctive role of testimony to the Gentiles, was evidence enough that God's plan had not come to grief. God's plan was proceeding as always and would triumph.

The second part of the answer

Then last week we saw another part of the answer to the problem. We contemplated the fact that the majority of Israel rejecting the Messiah, and now hardening in their hearts and coming perilously near to apostasy and destruction, raised the question in Paul's mind: Whose fault was it? Was it that God in the arbitrary exercise of his divine authority had simply excluded the majority of Israel, willy-nilly, from his plans and purposes? And Paul gives a horrified answer: 'No, of course not!' to that question. Any one of them could have been a vessel of mercy in God's hand. 'All day long in fact,' said Paul, 'God stood stretching out his hands to

the nation, pleading with the nation to come, pleading with Jerusalem to allow her chicks to come and nestle under the wings of Messiah, and be saved! But Israel stood back and argued and were disobedient. They refused to be vessels of mercy. What they wanted to be was vessels that could parade their ability to keep God's law, parading their merit and strutting in front of the Gentiles as men and women that were of a superior race that had kept God's law, and saying, 'Thank God we aren't sinners like the Gentiles'.

If God would have accepted vessels like that, he would have had an abundance. But when God called for vessels of mercy: men and women that were broken, acknowledging the defeat of sin, acknowledging that their merit was altogether inadequate and could not save them; acknowledging that if ever they were to be saved they must come and be saved just like those sinners of the Gentiles, that was different. When God called for men and women who, being saved by the mercy of God and the merit of Messiah, would go out to the Gentiles confessing their own sin and pointing to the mercies of God through Jesus Christ, then Israel, as a whole, refused; they would not have the mercy. They would not have salvation by grace.

How can you be a vessel of mercy if you won't have mercy but cling to your merit? And so we saw the second part of the answer to the problem. Not only had God's plan not gone adrift, but it wasn't God's fault that the majority in Israel were not now vessels of mercy.

The added sorrow motivating Paul's writing

But if that solved Paul's problem, it didn't end his sorrow; nor should it end ours. Those Israelites who were living in opposition to God and in rejection of the Saviour were real men and women. They were Paul's fellow nationals; he loved every single one of them with a love so intense that, if it had been any use, he would have ceded his own salvation so that they might be saved (9:3).

Just think of them in their early days. Oh, what days there had been in Israel! The very glory of God had descended and come and dwelt in that tabernacle so that the priests could scarce stand for the wonder and the glory of it! God's great victories through Israel filled the world with the knowledge of the wonder of God! Oh, those lovely days when Aaron in his gorgeous robes took the golden vessels into the sanctuary; and those days when Elijah led the nation back in repentance to God. Oh, what stirring days they had been! And to see them now rejecting their Messiah and trembling on the very brink of apostasy and disaster: how could it do anything but fill Paul's heart with incessant sorrow?

It was not only unspeakably sad in itself. If I have discerned right the exhortations that Paul delivers in this chapter to his fellow Gentile believers in Rome, then the sorrow was in danger of being added to by thoughtless believers. For, as we know from their poets, like the poet Juvenal, Romans didn't really like Jews. They despised them and their little prayer houses. They despised the ritual of circumcision, which was to their Gentile way of thinking an absurdity and a disgrace. The Jews were odd fish in the eyes of Gentiles for keeping their Sabbath and all their laws and taboos as to what you could eat and what you couldn't eat. Gentiles in general, and Romans in particular, didn't like Jews. And of course some of the early Christians had been obliged to suffer when militant Jews had raised riots in this city and all round the Roman Empire, against the Christians, and tried to get the authorities to come

and ban Christianity. Many Gentiles would have suffered as a result. The danger would be that these Gentiles, upon getting converted and becoming Christians, would begin to feel themselves superior to the Jews and dismiss them as a complete failure and come to the view that God had abandoned them forever. Though Paul was an apostle to the Gentiles, the thought that any Christian would thus come to despise Israel would be grievous indeed. What would Paul have said if he'd lived to see Europe and Christendom with its theories of theology that there is no future for Israel? What would Paul have said if he'd lived to see Christendom become the leader in anti-Semitic persecution?

My former colleague, Professor Smallwood of the university here, in her inaugural lecture pointed out that it wasn't the pagan Roman authorities that persecuted the Jews.⁴ Indeed, for many centuries the Romans, from Julius Caesar onward, passed special legislation to protect the Jews, much as the Romans didn't like them. But in their fair-mindedness they passed special legislation, and constantly renewed it, to protect the Jews. It was Christendom that persecuted the Jews. When at last the church joined up with the state and the so-called 'Christian church' used its influence with the state, little by little they brought in restrictive legislation and eventually outright persecution of the Jews, offering as an excuse that the Jews were God-murderers. And, oh for the sorry history! How shall we not hang our heads in shame this morning at being members of a Christendom that down the centuries, in all kinds of countries, has shed oceans of Jewish blood? Not only has this been a recent phenomenon in Europe, signs are now in some countries that anti-Semitism is rearing its ugly head once more. Imagine, if you would, how Paul would have felt if he saw such behaviour on the part of Christendom resulting from his preaching to the Gentiles.

The answer to Paul's added sorrow

How then will Paul assuage his sorrow? Let us briefly run over it here in chapter 11 as we watch Paul in this wonderful experience.

Assurance one: God has not thrown his people away

We watch Paul allowing God himself to come and pour balm into the sorrow of his heart. He does so first in answer to the question: 'Has God then cast away his people?' (see 11:1). Has he cast them off? Is the nation of Israel, as the nation of Israel, finished forever? And the answer is, of course, a divine and categorical: 'No, God has not cast off his people' (see v. 2). Only I ask you to notice what the verse is saying, and who is the 'Israel' that is being commented upon.

When Paul asks, 'Has God cast away his people whom he foreknew?' He is not talking, is he, of the elect—that election within the election—the godly of Israel: Martha, Mary, Lazarus, Simeon, Anna, Paul and those who, being the elect of God, are loyal to Messiah? To ask whether God had cast off that part of Israel would be a nonsensical question, would it not? Of course God hasn't cast off Martha and Mary and Simeon and Anna and all the rest of godly Israel! That isn't the question. The question is about the nation as a whole, the majority of

⁴ Edith Mary Smallwood, *From Pagan Protection to Christian Oppression*, New Lecture Series 117 (1979).

which exists now still in unbelief and rejection of the Messiah: 'Has God cast off that whole nation, which once he chose as the vehicle of his purpose?' And the answer is, 'No, of course not. There is a future for Israel qua Israel.'

How will Paul know? 'Well in the first place,' he says, 'ladies and gentlemen, I am an Israelite anyway' (v. 1).

So what?

'Ah,' says Paul, 'perhaps you haven't seen the implication of this fact that there is still in this day a remnant of Israel that is a believing remnant. Don't you perceive what the implication is?'

Evidence from the days of Elijah

To help us perceive it, Paul takes our minds back to a story in the Old Testament, at a critical time in Israel's existence, when the nation came as near total apostasy as it was possible for that nation to come (1 Kgs 18–19). It was in the time of Elijah, you'll remember. And Jezebel, with all of her colour scheme, had prevailed upon her husband, Ahab, to go over to the worship of Baal until it was a dangerous, and certainly an unpopular, thing to be a worshipper of the true God Jehovah. The whole nation, nearly, had gone over to the worship of Baal and all its silly idolatries.

We read that God had made his protest and his glorious gospel appeal to the nation, as in his name Elijah had assembled them to Mount Carmel and demonstrated who is the true God! 'The God that answers by fire, let him be God,' said Elijah. 'The one that is a real God is a God that can provide a real sacrifice, a God that can bring back the people's heart and convert them, and he has a sacrifice big enough to save them.'

That day God gave his great demonstration on Mount Carmel as the fire descended and accepted and consumed the sacrifice on behalf of Israel. And the nation's heart was, in part turned back to God. Ah, but not Jezebel. In spite of the demonstration of the fire from heaven upon the sacrifice, in spite of the demonstration of the abundant rain that came upon the thirsty and starved grass, Jezebel persisted in her deliberate defiance and would have had Elijah's head from his shoulders had Elijah not fled.

Leaving Carmel, he had gone to Horeb. Leaving the mountain of sacrifice and atonement, Elijah had gone to the mountain range of the law of Sinai and of Horeb. Taking his stand on the mountain of the law, he had implored the very judgments of God against their apostate nation and Jezebel in particular.

Now what can God do when people have wandered off into their idolatries? What can he do when he has offered them a sacrifice through which they may be reconciled? What can God do when he has given them an abundance of rain to soften their hearts as well as their ground and bring them a spiritual harvest, and in spite of it they reject him?

Now hear the heart of God, will you? His great prophet goes and stands on the mountain of the law and pleads the judgments of God against guilty Israel, and there comes the still, small voice. It is much misunderstood, for the still small voice didn't speak the words of Psalm 23. It announced the most devastating judgment that Israel to that date had ever seen; a judgment that fell upon Israel through Syria, through Hadad. In the days of Ahab's sons and

grandsons the whole of Ahab's house was wiped out (see 1 Kgs 19:15–17). You can't toy with God. If you won't have his salvation, then the nation must know his judgments are true.

But that's only part of the story! When Elijah, in his deep pessimism, started to bewail before God: 'O God, they've killed your prophets, and I, I only am left!'

'Oh, don't talk nonsense,' says God. 'You only are left? That's nonsense, Elijah! I have reserved seven thousand who have not and will not bow the knee to Baal, and already there is in Israel the community that shall spell the revival of Israel and her restoration' (see vv. 9–18).

Well, thank God it wasn't the end of Israel! Those seven thousand men (a round number to be sure) who hadn't bowed the knee were the earnest, the promise, the guarantee from God that that nation would have a future. And so indeed it did, as we know historically. Oh what great days of revival there came under Elijah, of revival under Hezekiah, of revival under Josiah! No, it wasn't the end, and the remnant of seven thousand were the earnest of greater things.

'Has God cast away his people, Israel?' asks Paul. They too have gone to their idolatries, thinking to be saved by the works of their own hand and their own merit. And God Almighty has staged before them such a thing that Mount Carmel fades, does it not? Here is Mount Calvary—when in the eyes of Israel and their hardened sin and rejection of his Son, in that very moment God sent down the fire from heaven that accepted the sacrifice, so that through him Israel might be brought back. Then there came that marvellous experience, that holy rain, that deluge as on the day of Pentecost the very windows of heaven were opened and the Holy Spirit was poured down, offering guilty Israel forgiveness of even this their trespass, and salvation by grace. And Israel won't have it. Oh, what shall become of them?

'Some of them, yes, have found salvation, but,' says Paul, with tears choking his voice and his pen spluttering on the page, 'the rest were hardened. Oh, for their pain and sorrow that must inevitably come!'

And then comes the assuagement of his sorrow. 'But, gentlemen,' he says, 'it is not the end. It is not the end for I too am an Israelite, and the God that has had mercy on me is by that very act giving us an earnest of what yet shall be—"the seven thousand" now that have not yielded to Baal, that have accepted the Messiah, these are but the firstfruits of a coming harvest. And if the firstfruit be holy,' says Paul (borrowing his language from the priests in the temple), 'if the firstfruit be holy, the whole lump is holy, and one day shall be God's' (see Rom 11:16).

Not only then are we to be sure that there will be a future for Israel as a whole, but 'all Israel shall be saved' (v. 26).

Assurance two: Israel has stumbled but not irrecoverably

Now will you see the wisdom of the ways of God, how he will bring salvation out of disaster. 'For the gospel,' says Paul, 'has come to the Gentiles through the Jews' disobedience'. Through their falling, through their stumbling, the gospel has come to the Gentiles and has proved the enrichment of the Gentiles, the riches of the world—the very reconciliation of the world! And it is doing that so that in the end, under God's good strategy, one day the Jews shall be moved

to jealousy, to see what they have missed, and God will use their very jealousy to bring them to repentance and to faith' (see 11:11–12).

But let it be clear in our minds what we mean when we read that Israel has 'stumbled', and thus the gospel has gone to the Gentiles. It isn't merely that when the apostles went forth (as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles) that the Jews rejected them and often stoned them so that the apostles then said, 'All right, if you won't have the gospel, we go to the Gentiles then.' That is true, but there is a deeper point at issue.

'Israel stumbled,' says Paul. Alas they did. They stumbled at the stone of stumbling: Jesus Christ our Lord (1 Cor 1:23). They thought they were going to welcome a Messiah who should make them the head of the nations, and then the Messiah came and began to talk to them about their sin, about the way they had come short, and for all their Pharisaism they had come short of the standard of God; they were miserable sinners. Israel didn't like it, and they objected, and they stumbled at the stone! They neither wanted his message that called them to repentance, nor would they have forgiveness at his hand. And religious though they were, they took him and nailed him to a tree. Oh, what a stumbling it was! How can you describe a nation chosen by God, so religious in its attitude and full of zeal for religion? How will you describe it that they should take God's own Son, their Saviour, and put him on a tree?

What a stumbling, and yet what a marvellous thing that it has been for us Gentiles, hasn't it? For from that moment there started out of Judaism an evangelization such as Judaism had never seen all down the centuries! It started out of Jerusalem—a little trickle first and then a river. It has come to be a vast ocean of evangelization. Why so? Because now at last with Messiah crucified, Judaism had a gospel message to preach! Before that day they preached law, and it was useful, but it didn't make them very good evangelists.

I have to confess that law wouldn't make me a very good evangelist either. You never need fear; I shall not come knocking on your door and, when you open it, there I will be standing with a Bible in my hand and saying, 'It's time you started to keep the law, you sinful Gentile, you!' I shan't come like that. Why not? Well, I shall be almightily afraid that when you have listened to me you'll point your finger at me and say, 'Who are you to tell me that I ought to keep the law and that I am a sinner? What about yourself, old fellow?'

Yes, but you might find me round your door one day, and when you open it, I come to tell you, 'I've got some news for you. I'm a sinner, you know, more than you think. I have news for you that God's own Son has come and died for me, and if he died for me he'd die for you. And if he'd saved me by the death of his Son, he'd save you! That's most certain.'

That was what lay behind the great evangelization that broke out of Jerusalem from the day of Pentecost onward so that the very murder of Jesus Christ becomes, in God's hand, the sacrifice of reconciliation.

Learning from Israel

I even find profit by looking at Israel. It is a hard thing to learn, isn't it, that religion itself can be anti-God? You see it in Israel: men and women intensely religious, like Saul of Tarsus, trying to raise up merit before God and in their very hearts are enemies of God and his Son. How this world has been shown the inadequacy of religion and, being shown it, has been pointed to him in whom alone there is salvation. And I thank my brother Jew.

There is a delightful man in this city who allows me to be his friend. He is a Jew, and sometimes he comes to me and he says, 'David, how will you explain it as a Christian? What about Hitler? Where was God? When Hitler was gassing six million of my fellow Jews, where was your God? And you taught your Sunday School children that it was the wicked Jews that crucified Jesus. You sowed the seeds of anti-Semitism in their hearts!'

And I have to say, 'Otto, my good friend, I apologize for Christendom. I hang my head with shame. But, I want you to know who it was that murdered Jesus Christ. It was my sin, Otto. It was I that crucified him.' And I say, 'Otto, yes, you too didn't you, in your sin? You crucified him.' And we stand, Jew and Gentile, at the foot of that cross, both of us guilty. 'Thank you Otto,' I say. 'Thank you for showing me who was really responsible for the death of Jesus. It was my unregenerate heart, as well as yours.'

Therefore as we hear these things, we shall heed Paul's warning to us Gentiles, shall we not? Don't you boast, will you? Don't you boast! Don't you even say, 'Well we hope one day lots of Jews will get converted and enter the church.' You've got it the wrong way round. The nation of Israel was witnessing to the true God when your ancestors were running around this country painted blue, bowing down to all sorts of animistic horrors. It is not you who bears the root; the root bears you (see vv. 17–18).

Don't let us boast, as Christendom, over the Jew. Count up how many spiritual treasures have come to you even through the word of God apart from the pen of Jews. 'And what's more,' says Paul, 'don't you get arrogant either. You say, "The wicked Jews were broken off. They once were a testimony for God in the world, a beautiful olive tree, and some of the branches were broken off that I may be incorporated in." You be careful' (see vv. 19–20).

Let's re-echo it. Be careful, Christendom. The Jewish nation down the centuries proved to be a mixed bag. There were those that were faithful to God, and there were those that were unfaithful. Christendom hasn't proved any better, has it? For there have been, at times and are now, men who in the name of the church and in the name of God deny the incarnation. They deny the virgin birth. They deny the literal resurrection. And one poor man who gets much time on BBC denies there is even a God, and he does it in the name of Christianity. And if, when Judaism was unfaithful to her Messiah, God put them aside and they ceased to be a testimony for God in the world, then be careful, Christendom, for you, if you go on in your modernism and your blatant unbelief and denial of the fundamentals of the faith, you too, Christendom, will be cut off! And God, for he can do it, will restore Israel to her position as the leading witness for God in the world.

Don't be conceited then, will you? Learn this: that if largely Gentile Christendom is allowed to be the major witness for God in the world, it is because Israel, as a whole, has been hardened. The nation misbehaved. That's no cause for us getting uppish and feeling proud. What is more, they are only hardened for a time. When the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, they shall be restored (vv. 20–24)! What days of rejoicing they will be!

Oh, what a God we have. This world is not going to peter out like some old firework that got too wet and didn't manage to burn and just went out with a whimper. If Israel's departure led to vast millions of Gentiles being converted—the very riches of the world—oh what shall it be when Israel is restored? Let it dwell on your imagination. It shall be a veritable life from

the dead! Our world has not yet even imperfectly seen what God Almighty in his mercy shall do.

You say, 'Why doesn't he do it now, if he's got a plan for it and he could do it? Why does he keep Israel waiting until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in?'

Alright, you do it better if you can, sir. You save Israel yourself if you can. Perhaps you haven't seen what the difficulty is. You can't save anybody until they have come to see themselves as sinners, to see themselves as unbelievers, to see themselves as disobedient. And Israel won't come there yet. She clings to her righteousness, and because she believes that there is one God, she classes herself as a believer, when all the time she isn't, is she? Israel is like Saul of Tarsus. He would have said he was a believer until he met Jesus Christ, and then he discovered that he was a horrible unbeliever.

For all I know there is somebody sitting here today, and you would class yourself as a believer. You believe that there is a God, but you are not saved yet. Why not? You are not prepared to admit that you are a sinner and disobedient and deserve to perish, and so you have never come to Jesus Christ personally to be forgiven and to be justified. You are not saved, and for all you call yourself a believer, you're lying absolutely in opposition to the purposes of God for salvation. You are disobedient. When will God save you? Well, he'll have to wait, won't he? He'll have to wait until he can bring you to realize your disobedience and sinnership! And the moment you come there and call upon Jesus Christ, in that moment, God will save you.

God's Discipline of Apostasy

On these three Sundays we have been thinking together from the letter of Paul to the Romans, and I thank you for your patience and your kind and close attention. Tonight we shall be concluding our studies and concentrating our thoughts on a phrase from chapter 11. But first of all I want to read you a very ancient story, the relevance of which you will, I hope, see thereafter.

First then, a very ancient story from the Old Testament. It is in the first book of Samuel and chapter 28. And we shall begin to read at verse 4.

The Philistines assembled and came and set up camp at Shunem, while Saul gathered all the Israelites and set up camp at Gilboa. When Saul saw the Philistine army, he was afraid; terror filled his heart. He inquired of the LORD, but the LORD did not answer him by dreams or Urim or prophets. Saul then said to his attendants, 'Find me a woman who is a medium, so that I may go and enquire of her.' 'There is one in Endor,' they said. So Saul disguised himself, putting on other clothes, and at night he and two men went to the woman. 'Consult a spirit for me,' he said, 'and bring up for me the one I name.' But the woman said to him, 'Surely you know what Saul has done? He has cut off the mediums and the spiritists from the land. Why have you set a trap for my life to bring about my death?' Saul swore to her by the LORD, 'As surely as the LORD lives, you will not be punished for this.' Then the woman asked, 'Whom shall I bring up for you?' 'Bring up Samuel,' he said. When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out at the top of her voice and said to Saul, 'Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!' The king said to her, 'Don't be afraid. What do you see?' The woman said, 'I see a spirit coming up out of the ground.' 'What does he look like?' he asked. 'An old man wearing a robe is coming up,' she said. Then Saul knew it was Samuel, and he bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground. Samuel said to Saul, 'Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?' 'I am in great distress,' Saul said. 'The Philistines are fighting against me, and God has turned away from me. He no longer answers me, either by prophets or by dreams. So I have called on you to tell me what to do.' Samuel said, 'Why do you consult me, now that the LORD has turned away from you and become your enemy? The LORD has done what he predicted through me. The LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hands and given it to one of your neighbours — to David. Because you did not obey the LORD or carry out his fierce wrath against the Amalekites, the LORD has done this to you today. The LORD will hand over both Israel and you to the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The LORD will also hand over the army of Israel to the Philistines.' Immediately Saul fell full length on the ground, filled with fear because of Samuel's words. His strength was gone, for he had eaten nothing all that day

and night. When the woman came to Saul and saw that he was greatly shaken, she said, 'Look, your maidservant has obeyed you. I took my life in my hands and did what you told me to do. Now please listen to your servant and let me give you some food so that you may eat and have the strength to go on your way.' He refused and said, 'I will not eat.' But his men joined the woman in urging him, and he listened to them. He got up from the ground and sat on the couch. The woman had a fattened calf at the house, which she slaughtered at once. She took some flour, kneaded it and baked bread without yeast. Then she set it before Saul and his men, and they ate. That same night, they got up and left. (vv. 4-25 NIV)

Now, alongside of that very ancient story I will read to you a phrase or two from the Epistle to the Romans in the New Testament, beginning in chapter 11 and verse 7.

What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, as it is written: 'God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day.' And David says: 'May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling-block and a retribution for them.' (vv. 7-9 NIV)

God give us good understanding of these serious parts of his word.

The table of the Lord and the table of the lost

Tonight I would like to talk to you simply about two tables: the table of the Lord on the one hand, and the table of the lost on the other. Now, when I talk to you about the table of the Lord, you will understand that I don't mean it literally. I'm not talking of some literal table with four legs, still less of any altar in a church. The term *table* in the Bible is here a metaphor; and a delightful metaphor it is and easy to understand.

The table of the Lord

The table of the Lord talks to us of all those infinite delights that Jesus Christ our Lord has obtained for us by his wonderful sacrifice at Calvary. The table of the Lord: see how it groans with the very delights of God's blessing! Forgiveness of sins is there. Reconciliation and peace with God is there. Oh, what delightful gifts they are that those who eat at the table of the Lord enjoy, enjoying forgiveness of sins until they could nearly dance in their heart, like King David did when he got out his harp and harped away and sang to his heart's content: 'Oh, the blessedness of the man whose sins are forgiven, whose iniquity is covered against whom the Lord will not charge iniquity' (see Ps 32:1-2; Rom 4:7-8). The table of the Lord: filled with its delights for those who know what it is to be justified and to be right with God, and to have the assurance of God in their heart that they shall never come into condemnation. They have been accepted by God, and to the remotest bounds of eternity will be accepted. It speaks of the daily fellowship with Christ, the lovely and delightful companionship of God's Holy Spirit, the comfort of his holy word and its exhortation; the stimulation of the race of Christianity and at the end a whole eternity of God's heaven with all the glorious schemes that God has designed with which to fill eternity, to the constant delight and occupation of his people!

The table of the Lord: it was a metaphor that appealed very much to Jesus Christ our Lord. We find in the New Testament that as he was attempting to drive home to people the glory of God's salvation he frequently used this metaphor. He said, 'Being saved, entering the kingdom of God: it's like a banquet which a king made for his son' (see Matt 22:2). Mark the term. It's not some dinner, merely, serving life's sheer necessities, but all the wealth and excess you might think of a positive banquet! It's not just any ordinary banquet but a banquet which a king, with all his royal munificence, made for his son. Oh, tell me what shall it be when the redeemed of the Lord at last get home to God's heaven and God hangs his bunting round the universe! God isn't hard up for a few ideas as to how to make his universe gloriously wonderful! 'Salvation,' Christ says, 'will be like a veritable banquet, which the King of kings with all his infinite love and endless ingenuity, has made for his Son.'

And this is the added delight. The source that gives this all its piquancy is that, though we have wandered far from God and thought God an old killjoy, when we come back to Christ then the very Father himself not only runs and put his arms around our neck to welcome us but bids his servants get out the best robe and the fatted calf to stage a welcome home banquet with the veritable angels of God sheer dancing for joy, with the special joy that men and women who have once been lost have returned!

The table of the lost

On the other side is the table of the lost. You say, 'Have they their table?' They have, indeed. It is not without its joys. Certainly it has its pleasures and excitements. Many of the joys are the delightful, harmless, healthy joys that God Almighty prepared for his creatures. He is the God who has given us all things to enjoy. Yes, but the table of the lost, underneath it all is a sad, poignant hopelessness: men and women who in this life know neither their Saviour nor their God and for whom the tomorrow of eternity is black with unqualified disaster.

I would prefer tonight to talk to you still about the table of the Lord, but honesty with my passage demands rather that I talk about the table of the lost. One of the saddest things about that table is this: that its very joys become a snare comforting the people and delaying and blunting their perception that they hover on the edge of an eternity without hope.

The example of Saul

So that we may grasp it better, I ask you to think with me a while over that very ancient story about King Saul. We saw him in the chapter we read, seated at a table. What a sorry table it was in the hovel of a witch. A man in his day who had known the palace and all its luxuries, and all that life could give him by way of joy and satisfaction, and this night he is to be found in disguise, seated in the home of a spirit medium, doing his best to enjoy himself. And tomorrow—in his heart he knows it—tomorrow comes disaster.

You say, 'However did he get there?'

You do very well to ask. Let me try and tell you, if I may, long story though it is. How did King Saul of Judah and Israel end at last in a witch's hovel, trying to comfort himself at her table? It wasn't always so, was it?

The fallen hero king

Imagine King Saul, if you can, in his youthful days. Oh, what a fellow he was, head and shoulders above everybody else. God had blessed him with a magnificent physique. He'd have been a gold medallist in anybody's Olympics. He was the idol, moreover, of the younger set in Israel, because he was one of their chief heroes in single combat warfare. And the little girls came out when he came back from the battle, with their songs and their pop records, and Saul was all the rage! No rock and roll star could equal Saul. His career was meteoric and presently, proving himself to be the biggest warrior in the land and a favourite with the people, he was elected to the throne and sat there by God's own gift and appointment.

All went well until, foolishly, he sinned against the God who had appointed him, and sinned not once but, given the chance to recover himself and to go God's way, the second time he sinned worse and sinned deliberately in his folly against God (1 Sam 13–15). And then it all began to happen. He began to lose his grip. Now he found he had no courage left to meet the enemy, nor power to overcome his enemy. We read how, at one stage, the Philistines came up with their tremendous armies and presently to his dismay there stalked out into no man's land the great single combat warrior of the Philistines. His name was Goliath. And in the manner of the ancients he challenged Israel to find a hero to come out and meet him in single combat to settle the issue between the two armies. And everybody was looking for Saul! And Saul's knees were knocking; he was skulking in his tent. He daren't go. He had the horrible shame of all the people seeing that he couldn't face his enemy.

Oh what a poor thing human nature is at its best, isn't it? For all our many gifts, what is Saul's story but our story? You and I have enemies we can't meet and sins that have defeated us; and at the end the last enemy himself—death—makes a mockery of all our attainments and casts his grey shadow over the best of our pleasures. And how many there are this night, in their heart of hearts, skulking in their tent. They prefer not to think of funerals. They have no answer to death. They are doing their best to enjoy themselves, but underneath it all they are without God and therefore without hope! It is not the worst thing you can say of anybody I suppose, but it is the saddest. If life has been full of pain, that is terrible. But suppose life has been full of joy, as I hope it is for you. And yet beyond it? You have seen what life could give, but for the future, ultimately—no hope.

The saviour God sent Saul

But even as Saul hid in his tent, God didn't abandon the man but sent a saviour for him. His name was David. He came out and defeated the great old giant and cut off his head, and at first Saul was delighted (chs. 16–17). He had a reprieve from his enemy and was going to make David commander in chief or anything else he liked! And he promised to give David his daughter in marriage. He felt so relieved. And then? Then he saw it. I don't know what day it was, but one day it suddenly clicked, and he saw that if he owed his very life to this David, then eventually David would be king, and Saul would have to cease being king, and he didn't like that.

I don't know about you. I wasn't born in a palace, as you see, but I can well imagine that it must be a very difficult thing ceasing to be a king once you have been one. Don't you think?

Truth to tell I think perhaps that's why some of us tonight are not yet saved. We don't mind singing our Christmas carols about Jesus Christ, the babe born in Bethlehem, and come to bring us peace. But some of us have grown up big enough to have seen the point: 'If Jesus Christ died to be my Saviour and is risen again and now is urging upon me his salvation, then it will be on these terms: that I leave off being king myself, and I hand myself over to Jesus Christ as King.'

And frankly Saul wasn't prepared to do it. It wasn't long after that he determined that he must get rid of David then. David wouldn't give up his claim, and Saul was not prepared to accept him as king. What, in front of everybody? Leave off and admit himself to be a failure and climb down from his throne and take off his crown? Not Saul! And when his son, Jonathan, did that very thing, Saul was furious! For there came a day when the crown-prince that should be heir to the throne fell in love with David. It wasn't just mere sentiment either; it was a kind of a logic. And Jonathan the crown-prince said to himself: 'I didn't dare to go against the enemy, and I would be a dead man this very day if it had not been for David who subdued my foe.' And he deliberately took off his royal belt with all the emblazon of his crown prince status, and handed the whole thing over to David that David should be king.

When Saul heard it he was furious, as furious as I have known some parents to be when their teenage children have come home and said, 'Dad, tonight I gave my heart to the Saviour.' Dad in all his forty-five hardboiled years is furious: 'Fool of a child giving away your freedom like that!' And Saul determined to get rid of David. He commanded his officers to kill him. Jonathan came with his logic and pleaded with his father: 'Papa,' he said, 'this is nonsense, you know? Let me tell you, father. What on earth has David done against you? He put his life in his hand to save you. What have you got against him?'

Saul tried to get his daughter to betray David, and she wouldn't, for the girl had genuinely fallen in love with David. She loved him, and she said, 'Dad, he's my whole life and the light of my life; I love the man!' But neither Jonathan's logic nor Michal's love was enough, and Saul determined to remove this threat out of his life, for that's how he saw it (chs. 18–20).

He went to pursue after David and came upon him as David was standing with Samuel the prophet. And as the king, with murder in his heart, came near to David, the Bible tells us God's Holy Spirit came upon him and all that night he lay down—rigid (19:18–24). If ever God's Holy Spirit talked to a man and rebuked him for his folly and showed him where his true benefit lay, it was God's Holy Spirit talking to King Saul that night. In the morning King Saul got up, went home and determined still to destroy David.

I suspect you begin to see in your heart how this story is going, and I suspect you already see what kind of a parable God's Spirit is weaving. How many times God's Holy Spirit has come near us, has he not? In the sound and thunder of a sermon, in the quiet of your home, in the memory of a mother's prayers, God's Holy Spirit has got hold of you and shaken you and said, 'Man, woman, it is lunacy to resist Jesus Christ! What has he ever done against you? He not only put his life in his hand, he died for you at Calvary! This is your God! This is the very God of the universe talking to you! His very son died for you! What do you suppose God has got against you? It is lunacy not to receive the true king!'

And you know what I mean. You have felt it in your heart. Tell me this. You've gone on without being saved. Really? Where do you suppose it will lead you?

Even so, God did not abandon Saul. Oh, how patiently God waits. Let me tell you of the last two occasions they met.

The incident of the cave

Saul was now chasing David deliberately to try and get him, and finally to destroy him out of his life. Saul had gone down with his army into the desert, and David had seen him coming, and David had hidden himself (ch. 24).

So, can you see Saul? King, crown, military uniform, medals. Oh, what a brilliant, tremendous fellow he was! All the troops saluted as he went by.

I must tell you a little thing about Saul (don't think any the worse of him) but for all that he was a king, he was an ordinary mortal, and one morning he found he had to go to the toilet. Well, being king he wanted to do it with a certain decency. He couldn't do that in front of the troops, so he sought a cave to have the respectability, to hide his shame. He wasn't a 1986 shameless thing. He had a bit of decency left, and he went into the cave to cover his shame.

Unbeknown to him, David and his men were in the back of the cave, and in those humiliating moments they saw everything. Some of the soldiers said to David, 'Your majesty, let's kill him!'

'No, no, no,' said David. 'Kill him? No. God loves the man!' But then, very stealthily, David went up with his knife in his hand and, without Saul knowing, cut a bit off his trousers. Saul got up; adjusted his dress, crown, belt, and out he went. The troops all saluted and then, as he went by—oh! Part of the man's trousers were missing! What a fool he felt.

You say, 'Why did David do that to him—shaming a man like that in front of the troops and making an idiot and a fool of him?'

Well, listen to David as he went out of the cave and held up the bit of the old trousers: 'Saul,' he said, 'look here! Can't you see, man, I could have killed you just now? But Saul, I love you! Where have you got it into your head from that I'm your enemy? I could have killed you. Look at your trousers in my hand!'

It was true. David didn't want to shame the man, but how would he bring Saul to his senses unless he made him feel his weakness, I wonder? And Saul was weak. David had seen things that nobody else had seen. There was the morning when Saul was in his tent and old Goliath was out there on the plain and David had gone into Saul. He'd looked into the eyes of King Saul and seen a man scared to his roots! It's a sad thing to see a grown man afraid like that. David would have hidden it from the people, had Saul only had the sense to give in and accept David and let David be king. David would not only have saved him from his enemy, but he would have installed Saul as his commander in chief, and covered him with glory! But how could you get it home to him?

Oh friend, forgive my frankness won't you? How shall Christ persuade you to give in to him? I don't know what skeletons you have in your cupboard. I don't know what things there are in your history or your personality that you would be ashamed for anybody to see. I know my own shame. But I preach to you a Saviour who loves you! He wants to cover that shameful past. He wants to blot it out! He wants to clothe you with the glorious garments of salvation and make a veritable prince or princess of you for eternity! 'Come,' he says, 'come and buy from me white linen that you may be clothed, and the shame of your nakedness not appear'

(see Rev 3:18). That rotten old sin that has you ashamed of yourself at night time, that habit you can't kick—there is a Christ tonight who has forgiveness and covering.

Thou hidden source of calm repose,
 Thou all-sufficient love divine,
 My help and refuge from my foes,
 Secure I am, if Thou art mine:
 And lo, from sin, and grief, and shame,
 I hide me, Jesus, in Thy name.⁵

Tonight he offers us a salvation so big that, when accepted, we know the past blotted out and our shame covered. As another hymn writer put it:

Bold shall I stand in that great day [of God's final judgment],
 For who aught to my charge shall lay?
 While through thy blood absolved I am,
 From sin's tremendous curse and shame.⁶

The incident of the stockade wagons

Saul went on, and came again thereafter to make another attack on David (ch. 26). He sought him in the wilderness and couldn't find him. He came at last one dark evening as the night was settling in and, being a good soldier; he prepared to bivouac for the night. He had his men draw up the wagons to make a stockade so that he could protect himself and be safe and secure inside.

As he lay down at night he got his spear with its little spike in the butt end and pushed it into the ground so that if the enemy attacked in the night, and he woke up suddenly, he had only to grasp and there was his spear and he would be ready. And by his side there was his water jug, and his own rations. For the wilderness was a dangerous place and naturally he wanted all the security he could get.

So do you, don't you? Well, let me talk frankly. This world is a pretty dangerous place, isn't it? I'm not talking merely about the rat race (that's bad enough) but life itself. It has a way of smashing the things that we count dear and trampling on our feelings, and beyond it what of this vast universe around us? As one great astronomer put it, 'You only have to walk outdoors and above your head there stretches a chasm that is immeasurable.' And here we are like Saul tonight. We shall lie down. What can we do, we weak little human creatures? We'll have to go and put ourselves on a shelf in a dark room for eight hours to get over another day! We are poor little weak creatures. And you want to make the best of your life, and you are out to protect it, and you're afraid of Jesus Christ lest he come into your life and ruin it! And you love your life, of course you do! But there is no security against Jesus Christ, I can tell you!

⁵ Charles Wesley (1707-1788), 'Thou Hidden Source of Calm Repose' (1749).

⁶ Nicolaus Zinzendorf (1700-1760), translated by John Wesley (1703-1791), 'Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness' (1739).

That night as Saul lay asleep with his stockade round him, David and his men came by, and they came into the stockade, and he took the water jug, and he took the spear and went off and stood upon a hill and called: 'Saul, Saul, what are you doing, old boy? You're asleep, aren't you, oblivious of your danger? Wake up man!'

And Saul got up out of his sleep, and in the morning light there he stood. The Bible pictures it: David stood on a hill, and Saul over here—a great space being between them. This was the last time they would ever meet. We watch that space. What will happen?

It hadn't always been like that. Once upon a time David was in the court singing his psalms and playing his old guitar, and writing Psalm 23 and singing the very hymns of Zion to Saul! But now there had come in this distance—a great space.

Is that true of some of us this very night? You, sir? You, madam? Once upon a time you were very near Jesus Christ, weren't you? You went to your Sunday school; your mother sang you the songs of the Bible. Ah, but you're a grown-up man of the world now! You're a woman of the world! Truth to tell there is a distance in your heart, isn't there? There is a big space between you and Christ. You are standing off tonight.

What shall I tell you? You are wanting to protect your life. You are afraid Jesus Christ will come in and rule it. Oh, but friend let me tell you first there is no security against Jesus Christ! He is your Lord Creator: he holds the very atoms, the very cells of your body, in his hand. The electrical circuits in your brain: he made them! There is no security against Jesus Christ.

Listen to David as he pleads: 'Saul, who on earth is it that has turned you against me? How did you get it into your head that I am your enemy?'

Oh, and I wonder what Jesus Christ would say to you tonight if he stood calling over the distance between him and you: 'Oh, my young friend, how did you get it into your head that I, Jesus Christ, am against you when I died for you?'

And Saul said, 'I've been a fool. I have been an utter fool.'

And we say, 'It's going to happen now! Oh, it is going to happen! Saul has at last seen he's a fool. He's going to get up! He's going to run across that space and fling his arms around David! Oh, it's going to be wonderful!'

And Saul said, 'I've been a fool.' Then he turned around, and he went away.⁷

Saul in the spirit medium's house

Saul went his way and David went his. That was the last Saul ever saw his saviour, David. It's sad, isn't it? Like every gospel preacher, I must say this could be the last time that anybody has to meet the Saviour. If you sense there is a gap between you and him, why not stand up and run across the gap? Come to Christ and say, 'I have played the fool so far in keeping my distance from you. Lord, have mercy! Forgive me. Save me and I will take you as my Lord.' Saul didn't do that.

We recall the situation he faced. The armies of the Philistines have gathered, and now it was clear there would be a battle. Saul, in his desperation, prayed to God, and God did not

⁷ The audio recording for this talk ends abruptly at this point. The concluding paragraphs below have been adapted from another of Dr Gooding's talks on the same theme, which correspond to his sermon notes from the present occasion. See Myrtlefield catalogue no: sam.002.

answer him. So, he went down to a witch to try and get some news: 'What's going to happen to me?' And the witch said, 'Who shall I bring up?'

He said, 'Bring up Samuel the prophet.'

When the figure of Samuel came up, he said to Saul, 'Why are you troubling me?'

'I want to know,' said Saul, 'what's going to happen? I've asked but God doesn't answer me anymore.'

That is a fearful thing, isn't it? The God of love waits for our repentance and faith in the Saviour. But the Saviour himself said it, the one who died for us says it: 'Do be sure to rise up and come in through the narrow gate into salvation' (see Matt 7:13). Why? Because the time will come when the master of the house will rise up and shut the door. It shall happen. God shall shut the door one day.

God had talked many, many times to Saul. He knew in his heart what he should do and could have been saved, but Saul went past the last appeal and God would not speak anymore. That silence is a kind of hell begun. To find oneself in eternity, and one's Creator has turned his back on us and doesn't speak anymore, will be an eternity of meaninglessness and pain.

There sat Saul, or there he lay on the floor prostrate. The witch came to him and said, 'Oh but cheer up. Have some food!'

Saul said, 'No. How can I have some food?'

'Oh, go on,' she said, 'I risked my life for you. Now get up.' And she spread her table and put the food on it, and Saul sat at the witch's table. Oh, did you ever see such a sorry sight in your life? He tried to get a little entertainment at such a table before he went out the next day into eternity, lost forever.

Oh, friend, whose table are you sitting at? Is it at the world's table as you try to entertain yourself throughout life's brief years? Or would you come home, like the prodigal came to the father in the parable to find welcome and the kiss of God's forgiveness, the embrace of his reconciliation and all the lovely joys that God puts on for those who receive his Son as Saviour?

So may God use this ancient parable, this ancient piece of history, to speak to our hearts. Let me just repeat it. If any of us senses that there is a space between us and God, between us and Christ, and we are not sure where we are headed to for tomorrow and the eternity that lies ahead, oh God grant us the grace and wisdom not to rest until we rise up as best we know how and come to the Saviour and close the gap and let him tell us how he will save us.

APPENDIXES

The Epistle to the Romans

I.	II.	III.	IV.
1:1–5:11	5:12–8:39	9:1–11:36	12:1–16:27
Wrath of God	Wreckage of Adam’s sin	Failure of Israel’s faith and service	Appeal for our spiritual service
Righteousness apart from the law	Righteous requirement of the law fulfilled in us	Christ is the end of the law for righteousness	Love is the fulfilment of the law
Christ died for us	We died with Christ	Jew/Gentile relations	Jew/Gentile relations
We shall be saved from the wrath of God	Saved in hope	All Israel shall be saved	Now is our salvation nearer
Hope of the glory of God	Them he also glorified; creation . . . delivered	Life from the dead	The day is at hand; Satan bruised
THE LOVE OF GOD	THE LOVE OF GOD	THE WISDOM OF GOD	THE ONLY WISE GOD
5:5–11	8:35–39	11:33–36	16:27

[The Argument of Romans 9](#)

I.	The Grievous State of the Majority of Paul's Kinsmen According to the Flesh in Paul's Day	9:1-3
<hr/>		
II.	The Majesty and Effectiveness of the Unique Role Given by God's Sovereign Choice to Israel, the Nation Physically Descended from Abraham	9:4-5
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><i>a.</i> The adoption as sons: cf. Deuteronomy 32:19-20.<i>b.</i> The GLORY: i.e. the presence of God.<i>c.</i> The covenants: Genesis 15:17; Exodus 24:7-8; Jeremiah 31:31-34.<i>d.</i> The giving of the law.<i>e.</i> The service of God.<i>f.</i> The promises.<i>g.</i> The fathers.<i>h.</i> The nation through which the Messiah should come, physically, who is simultaneously 'over all, God blessed for ever. Amen.'	
<hr/>		
III.	The Rejection of the Messiah by the Majority of Paul's Contemporary Israelites Does Not Mean That God's Word and Purpose for Israel Have Come to Nothing	9:6
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><i>a.</i> Isaiah prophesied that when God judged Israel, he would nevertheless leave a remnant (9:27-29, cf. Isa 10:22).<i>b.</i> There is such a remnant now (11:1-6).<i>c.</i> The gifts and calling of God regarding Israel are without repentance i.e. God has not, and will not, change his mind (11:29).<i>d.</i> Therefore one day all Israel shall be saved (11:26).	
<hr/>		
IV.	The Fact That Not All Abraham's Physical Descendants Are Chosen by God to Carry Israel's Unique Witness to God, is Illustrated by:	9:7-13
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><i>a. The Case of Isaac, not Ishmael</i> 9:7-9<ul style="list-style-type: none">(1) Ishmael was born out of Abraham's own initiative and attempt to fulfil God's promise by his own power;(2) Isaac was born by God's own miraculous power in fulfilment of his promise.<i>b. The Case of Jacob and Esau</i> 9:10-13<ul style="list-style-type: none">(1) The qualification of Jacob (Israel, Israelites), not Esau (Edomites), as the nation to carry the unique witness to God, was not based on his works, good or bad.(2) If God chose only sinlessly perfect people to be his witnesses, he would never have any.	
<hr/>		

V. God's Mercy On, and Perseverance With, Israel in Spite of Her Sins, and His Hardening of Pharaoh, Are Not Unjust nor Arbitrary **9:14-22**

a. The Case of Pharaoh

- (1) God foreknew that he would harden Pharaoh's heart (Exod 3:19; 7:3).
- (2) But only at (9:12) is it said that the Lord hardened his heart.
- (3) Pharaoh had demanded evidence. He was given abundant evidence. But when he rejected that evidence, God made him stand as a vessel of wrath.

b. The Case of Israel

- (1) Israel's frequent apostasies show her to be 'of the same lump' as Pharaoh.
 - (2) None has a claim on God's mercy.
 - (3) God's mercy on Israel arose out of his sovereign choice: 'I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy' (Exod 33:19).
 - (4) But it was not indiscriminate:
 1. At Sinai: some were slain (Exod 32:27-28, 35); some were pardoned (Exod 33-34). Why so?
 2. At Kadesh-Barnea (Num 14) a whole generation were sentenced to die in the desert. Only Joshua, Caleb, and those under twenty when they left Egypt were spared. Why so?
 3. Later God repudiated the ten tribes of Israel and said 'you are not my people' (Hos 1:9), but spared Judah. Why so?
-

VI. Israel's Restoration Must Be Totally by God's Grace and Mercy **9:23-33**

- a. On the same terms as the Gentiles (9:24).
 - b. Many Gentiles in Paul's day were justified by grace, through faith, and thus became vessels of mercy and glory (9:23, 30);
 - c. But Paul's Jewish contemporaries mostly refused to become vessels of mercy and insisted on trying to earn salvation by works.
-

[The Argument of Romans 10](#)

The Reasons Why So Many of Paul's Fellow-Jews Were Not Saved

-
- | | | |
|-----|--|----------|
| 1. | It wasn't that Paul had not prayed for them: he had. | 10:1 |
| 2. | It wasn't that they were irreligious: they had a zeal for God. | 10:2 |
| 3. | It was that, being ignorant of the true function of the law, they would not submit to God's way of justifying sinners, but insisted on their own way. | 10:3-5 |
| 4. | It was not that justification by faith is difficult to achieve. It is easy: the word is . . . in your mouth and heart. | 10:6-11 |
| 5. | It was not that God has favourites: <i>whoever</i> calls shall be saved. | 10:12-13 |
| 6. | For people to call on the name of the Lord, four conditions have to be met:
<i>a.</i> They have to believe in him;
<i>b.</i> For that to happen, they have to hear him;
<i>c.</i> For that to happen, there has to be a preacher;
<i>d.</i> For that to happen, the preacher has to be sent. | 10:14-15 |
| 7. | It wasn't that these conditions were not fulfilled. The trouble was that they would not obey the gospel. | 10:16 |
| 8. | It wasn't that they couldn't believe unless God first gave them the faith to believe with. Faith comes by hearing . . . the word of Christ. | 10:16-17 |
| 9. | It wasn't that they were so dead in trespasses and sins that they couldn't hear the word of Christ. They did hear. | 10:18 |
| 10. | It wasn't that Israel did not realize what was happening and what 'being saved' meant. Gentiles were getting saved in front of their very eyes, as the Old Testament had prophesied they would. | 10:19-20 |
| 11. | It wasn't that God had not elected them, and so they could not be saved. All day long God stood with outstretched arms pleading with them to come. But they refused him, contradicted him and rebelled against him. | 10:21 |
-

[The Argument of Romans 11](#)

God's Strategies for the Eventual Salvation of All Israel

I.	God Has Not Cast off His People, Has He? No!	11:1-6
	Evidence:	
	<i>a.</i> In Elijah's day God left himself a remnant to maintain Israel's witness to the true God.	
	<i>b.</i> In the same way now there is a remnant of Israel, chosen by God on the ground that they are prepared to accept salvation by grace and not by their own works.	
	<i>c.</i> God's judicial hardening of the rest of Israel is in accord with Old Testament prophecies (Isa 29:1; Deut 29:4; Ps 69:22-23).	

II.	Israel Have Not Stumbled and Fallen so as Never to Rise Again, Have They? No!	11:7-12
	<i>a.</i> In God's strategy, by Israel's fall, salvation has come to the Gentiles ON PURPOSE to provoke Israel to jealousy, and thus to repentance and restoration.	
	<i>b.</i> If their fall and loss has brought riches to the Gentiles, how much more shall their restoration bring!	

III.	Things That Gentile Believers Should Remember	11:13-24
	<i>a.</i> Paul glorifies his mission to the Gentiles, not because Gentiles are superior to Jews, but in an attempt to provoke unbelieving Jews to envy, and thus to salvation.	11:13-14
	<i>b.</i> For if the casting away of Israel has led to the reconciling of the world, their restoration will bring veritable life from the dead.	11:15
	<i>c.</i> The present remnant of Jewish believers is the firstfruits of the eventual conversion of all Israel. The firstfruits are holy: so will the full mass be.	11:16
	<i>d.</i> The patriarchs were the root, and they were holy. So are the branches (excepting, of course, those that had to be cut off).	11:16
	<i>e.</i> Gentile Christians have no ground for boasting that some natural branches were broken off and Gentiles grafted in, because:	
	(1) It is the patriarchal root that carries and nourishes the Gentile believers, and not the other way round.	11:17-18
	(2) Some Jewish branches were broken off because of unbelief: but the continuance of Gentile Christians in the olive tree is dependent on their continuing to believe.	11:19-22
	(3) If it has been possible to graft in wild branches (Gentile believers), it will certainly be possible for natural (Jewish branches), though now broken off, to be grafted back in again.	11:23-24

IV. The Mystery of Israel's Present Temporary Hardening, and Future Salvation 11:25-32

- a.* This temporary hardening will last only until 'the fullness of the Gentiles be come in' (cf. John 10:16). 11:25
- b.* All Israel shall be saved at the coming of the deliverer. 11:26
- c.* Israel will then enter into the good of the new covenant. 11:27
- d.* At present Israel is hostile to the gospel and therefore to Christians; but they are to be loved for God's unchangeable electing grace that chose their forefathers. 11:28-29
- e.* The fairness and balance of God's strategies: 11:30
- (1) Gentiles: in the past, disobedient to God;
- (2) Yet now, through Israel's disobedience, they have received mercy.
- So now Israelites: 11:31
- (1) They have now been guilty of the disobedience of unbelief;
- (2) But by the mercy shown to you, they also (being provoked by envy) may obtain mercy.
-

V. What God Has to Do to Get Gentiles and Jews Saved 11:32

- a.* No one can be brought to believe, in the full sense of that term, until they have been brought to realize that hitherto they have been unbelievers;
- b.* God has therefore shut up all to unbelief that he might have mercy on all;
- c.* It is hard enough for religious, but unsaved, Gentiles to realize and admit that they are guilty, sinners, and unbelievers. It is even harder for religious, but unsaved, Jews to realize, like Saul of Tarsus, that, in spite of their 'worship' of the one true God, they are, in the only sense that matters, unbelievers;
- d.* But God will wait until, under his disciplines, all Israel comes to that realization, repents, and is saved.
-

VI. Doxology to the Wisdom and Knowledge of God in Devising Ways of Achieving the Salvation of the Maximum Number of People 11:33-36

The Nine Plagues on Egypt

Exodus 7–10

1. In the morning . . . (7:15) WATER TO BLOOD Magicians did the same (7:22) <i>Pharaoh's heart was hardened</i> (7:22)	4. Early in the morning . . . (8:20) FLIES <i>Pharaoh hardened his heart</i> (8:32)	7. Early in the morning . . . (9:13) HAIL 'But . . . for this cause have I made you to stand, for to show you my power, and that my name may be declared throughout all the earth' (9:16).
2. (8:1) FROGS Magicians did the same (8:7) <i>Pharaoh hardened his heart</i> (8:15)	5. (9:1) MURRAIN <i>The heart of Pharaoh was stubborn</i> (9:7)	8. (10:1) LOCUSTS
3. (8:16) LICE Magicians could not: (8:18) Magicians: 'this is the finger of God' <i>Pharaoh's heart was hardened</i> (8:19)	6. (9:8) BOILS Magicians could not stand (9:11) <i>The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart</i> (9:12)	9. (10:21) DARKNESS

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.