

# **Take Hold of Eternal Life**

*Major Themes in Paul's First Letter to Timothy*

*David Gooding*

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## [Introduction and Overview of the Epistle](#)

My first pleasant duty this morning is on behalf of you all to thank the organizers of this conference for their long weeks and months of preparation, rigorous thinking and attention to detail, and for all their kindness and care for us. We thank them in the name of the Lord. My second pleasant duty is to thank those same convenors for their grace in inviting me to lead these talks on Scripture and thus to have the pleasure of addressing you all. And my third pleasant duty is to thank them for giving me such a delightful book of Scripture to examine with you as the first letter that Paul wrote to Timothy.

Let's begin by reading some verses from that epistle.

I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen. (1:12–17)

I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display at the proper time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honour and eternal dominion. Amen. (6:13–16)

### **Helpful principles when studying Scripture**

#### **1. What does the particular book I am studying say about the divine persons?**

What does it tell us about the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit? For when all is said and done holy Scripture is not merely a collection of rules that must be obeyed, like our income tax schedules; nor are its histories merely records of antiquarian interest. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and in inspiring the prophets and the writers of holy Scripture, God was revealing himself.

God first breathed out the message to the writers of Scripture, and he waits to speak again into our hearts the words he originally inspired and so reveal himself to us in our day and generation.

#### *The character of God as King*

If we follow that approach in this epistle, we shall notice from those verses we read in the first chapter what a tremendous statement there is about God the Father. Paul bows his knees in worship, even as his hand holds the pen to write the words, 'To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever' (1:17).

Here God will make himself known as King and describe the glorious character of our King: his incomparable dignity and power. And as the King draws near to us in our studies these days he will talk about himself and about his kingly rule in our lives.

And if that is how the epistle begins, so it ends, as we noticed in our preliminary reading. Once more out from the invisible shadows the voice of God comes: 'he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords' (6:15). He is the only one ultimately to wield supreme power in our universe. He who dwells in light unapproachable is the King of those who act as kings, the Lord of those who attempt to lord it, and, the wonder of it, we may expect him to come and reveal himself to us as we sit here at these tables.

Notice again his character: he is the blessed and only Sovereign. He will talk to us about his power and his government, not only of our hearts but of the whole world and universe. He is the Lord of history. He was its beginning, the alpha; he is the goal to which it goes, the omega.

#### *How the Son interprets that character also*

And then, if we have looked to see what the book has to say about the Father, shall we not spare a moment to look to see what it has to say about the Son? That lovely verse in chapter 1, born out of Paul's personal experience of salvation—listen as he recommends it: 'The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost' (v. 15). How well Paul knew it by experience, 'I am the very first and worst of them.' So Paul speaks in chapter 1 about the purpose for which our Lord came into our world: he came to save sinners.

But as Paul comes to the end of the epistle in chapter 6, he talks about our blessed Lord Jesus as the one who 'before Pontius Pilate made the good confession' (v. 13). And you'll remember from your reading of the Gospel of John what our Lord's witness before Pilate consisted of.

'You are a king?' said Pilate (18:37).

For our Lord had said to him, 'My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world' (v. 36).

'You see, Pilate,' said he, 'my kingdom is not of this world and my servants do not fight.' (Or they shouldn't.) 'In the garden I allowed the Roman detachment to arrest me without my servants striking a blow. They do not fight with force of arms to promote my kingdom, or to establish it. "For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world"' (v. 37).

So now we have a second reason for our Lord's coming. Chapter 1 says that Christ Jesus came into the world *to save sinners*, and chapter 6 urges this deeper purpose for which he came into the world—*to bear witness to the truth*.

'What is truth?' Pilate asked. Before this conference ends we shall have to enquire about that. If that was our Lord's purpose for coming into the world—for which, as he stood before Pilate, he gave his very life, we who are his followers are charged to stand with him in the great battle of the universe to witness to the truth. Not only the truth about us as individuals but the truth behind this whole universe, where it comes from and what its purpose is.

There are many more things in this epistle about the divine persons. We must stop now and consider them again later.

## 2. Are there repeated themes?

Another thing to do, if you are beginning to study a book of Scripture, is to look at its repeated themes. If you get the impression in your early reading that a particular word is repeating itself, then a good concordance is a useful tool to have at your elbow. If it shows that a word is indeed a leading theme that keeps repeating itself, that's a word to get hold of and grasp.

If you do that for 1 Timothy, as also for 2 Timothy and Titus, you will find a word that is uncommon elsewhere in the New Testament. It is used only a few times before you come to these three epistles, but we shall meet it time and again in 1 Timothy. Translated into English, it is 'godliness'.

### *Godliness*

It's not so much a curious feeling that creeps up and down the spine; godliness, or at least the Greek word that is translated here, means 'to reverence well', and its noun means 'good reverence'. It is assumed in most places that the one who is revered is God, so godliness in the first and major instance is *respect and reverence for God*. God save us from frivolity and disrespect for the living God and fill our hearts with that sense of awe that pervades Paul's own writing here—the wonder, the holiness, the infinite love, the grace and longsuffering of the person and character of God. That is godliness.

Because the verb means simply 'to reverence well', it can also be used of our Christian attitude, and one of the prime beginnings of true godliness is reverence for our homes, our parents and loved ones.

### *Names and titles of God*

It is not surprising therefore that, when we read through all the chapters of 1 Timothy, we are introduced to the most beautiful array of descriptions, names and titles of God. To reverence God we must know him, so let me remind you of some of the names used of God in this letter.

*God our Saviour (1:1)*. We shall need to keep it in mind as we traverse these chapters and their rules and regulations, that it comes from a God who is our Saviour, and all are designed to promote his great salvation.

*God the Father (1:2)*. 'Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father.'

*The blessed God (1:11)*. When Paul begins to describe the gospel, he says it is 'the gospel of the glory of the blessed God'. At this point I have a difficult task to do. How do you translate

this particular word that is translated by 'blessed' in our English versions? The Greek word is *makários*, which you could translate as 'happy'. If you divest the word 'happy' of all its frivolous connotations, what a lovely title it is of God. *He's a happy God*. You shouldn't draw an image of God at all; but if you were tempted to, don't draw him with a long face whatever you do.

But it's more than just happy, because the English word 'happy' is so much dependent on circumstances, the ebb and flow of fortune. That doesn't affect God. Perhaps a better word would be 'bliss' — the God who enjoys supreme bliss. What a magnificent God, and through his gospel he calls us to share his glorious bliss.

When his Son was here on earth, Matthew used this same word many times in the Beatitudes to describe those who behave as they should in the kingdom of God's dear Son. 'Blessed are . . .' (5:2–11). It is by keeping his commandments and living as he would have us live that we come to share, as sons with a father, something of the character of God, and therefore of his blessedness.

As we study this epistle may it teach us a little bit about the blessedness of God and how we could share it and know a foretaste of the bliss of God even here on this troubled earth.

*King (1:17)*. And then of course, as we've already read at the end of chapter 1, we come to know God as King.

*The one God (2:5)*. This is an absolute foundation stone of God's self-revelation in the Old Testament Scriptures: 'Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one' (Deut 6:4). A protest against all idolatrous interpretations of the universe: there is one God. And of course we must stand for that truth and reflect it. This one God is God our Saviour, and let us not forget that either.

*The living God (3:15)*. Here we read about behaviour in the 'household of God, which is the church of the living God.' If you had gone into the house of stone that Solomon built for God in the Old Testament, you would have found artistic representations of life on its cedar-covered inside walls. Life in all its forms: palms, rosettes, cherubim with their wonderful mysterious life, man and ox and bird and lion. This is the living God who gives us his rules and regulations, which we are honour bound to obey. But he himself is not a list of rules and regulations; he's a living God who is ready to interpose whenever he pleases.

*Creator (4:4)*. Here Paul describes God as 'Creator', and bids us have a healthy respect and evaluation of the creation that God has made. When he made it he pronounced it 'good'. Though we now enjoy redemption, it doesn't mean that God has ceased to be Creator. One of the lessons that Israel had to be taught in the second half of the book of Isaiah was to come to realize that the one they have habitually called Jehovah is none other than the Creator of the vast universe.

I personally have to confess how easily I forget it. We talk about 'Jesus' — and what a lovely name it is — but half the time we forget that he is the one by whom the universe was made.

I was a backyard astronomer, who didn't get very far, and sometimes my spiritually-minded friends would enquire why I was spending so much time looking at the stars. What use was that? I think they'd forgotten who made them, and the exhortation through the Prophet Isaiah is to lift our eyes up from time to time and look at the stars (40:26). We should ask ourselves who brought these forth and who calls them all by name, and remember that

his pledge is to support little me in my few brief hours of living on this planet. And when I think that the Jesus who died for me at Calvary was the agent in this vast creation, how can I take it in that the Creator of the billions of galaxies, of a billion stars each, would die for me on a wooden cross at Calvary? As the hymn puts it,

O make me understand it!  
 Help me to take it in!  
 What it meant to Thee, the Holy One,  
 To bear away my sin.<sup>1</sup>

And this God is said to be the *Saviour*, the preserver in the lives of all; especially of those who share in salvation at the highest and deepest level possible, because they know him and have trusted his Son.

*The God of the court of heaven.* When we come to chapter 5, we read there about God and Christ and the elect angels. Our eyes are lifted to the heavenly court where the judgments of God are issued, and we are reminded that that heavenly court is interested in the church. By observing the behaviour and conduct of the members of the church, the principalities and powers are being taught the variegated wisdom of God (Eph 3:10).

*The blessed and only Sovereign (6:15).* If we're going to be godly, and if godliness means reverence for God—always and again consulting God as to what God is like and how we may best respect his will and wishes and represent his person in this world—then by his grace we must come to know him.

A little two-year-old, who knows that fine specimen of humanity carrying him piggyback across the lounge floor and calls him Dad, has begun to learn something. He will have to grow up before he realizes that Dad is judge in the Supreme Court, and what that means; and when it is appropriate to call him 'Dad', and when it would be more appropriate to call him, 'Your Worship'.

Let us not be afraid of the lovely name 'Jesus', but be careful lest we forget who this Jesus is and lose some of the glory of salvation, and some of the dignity goes out of our behaviour.

### **3. Is there a pattern developing?**

As Paul puts before us what the situation is in each particular part, he gives instructions to Timothy about regulations for life in the assembly at Ephesus. Very often it's a question of problems and difficulties; things gone a bit askew. Instead of just marching forward immediately and dealing with the problem, Paul will first call Timothy's attention to God and portray some special characteristic of his that is particularly relevant to each situation.

Isn't that always the best way to consider things, even our problems? Not to philosophize over them ourselves to start with, but to *consider first the characteristic of God* that is pertinent to the particular situation.

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<sup>1</sup> K. A. M. Kelly (1869-1942), 'Give me a sight, O Saviour.'

Paul then proceeds to point out *how the Lord Jesus Christ has interpreted the character and attitude of God*. The interpretations that Christ gave of God's character in his daily life were perfect and marvellous and breathtakingly wonderful.

Then, having considered those things, Paul will point out *what our part is*: what duties we may have in true godliness, bringing the character of God and the example of Christ to bear upon the way we deal with our practical situations and problems.

### *Stewardship*

So, when we come to chapter 1 of this epistle we should notice another word that Paul uses. It comes in verse 4 where in the middle of the verse he talks about 'a dispensation of God' (RV). It's the Greek word *oikonomia*, which in English transliterates as 'economy', but it doesn't necessarily mean what the English word means by economy.

So, no extra charge now for teaching you a little Greek. It's quite simple really. The word means how you run a household, or at least that's originally what it meant. The *oikos* or the *oikia* being the house and the household, the question was how you would arrange it, organize it, run it, administer it. How would you run things? In the ancient world the king or the nobleman didn't run those big houses themselves, they appointed officers to do it. The chief officer was called a *steward*, the man who runs the place, or the master, and the Greek uses a word made up of these basic words. Paul is concerned here therefore with *God's way of running things*.

Many of you might have a translation of Scripture that does not contain the word 'dispensation' (RV), but 'edifying' (KJV). Those two words are very similar in Greek. Edification means literally the *building* of a house; dispensation in Greek means literally the *running* of a house. It's not a question really of the difference between my translation and yours; it is a question of the particular manuscript in the Greek that the translations have followed. I personally follow those manuscripts that I regard as best representing the original text.

God has ideas on how to run things, and the Epistle to the Ephesians talks to us about the way God is going to run this universe one of these days. God has a plan for what the English translations used to call 'the dispensation of the fulness of times' (Eph 1:10 KJV). Meaning, the way God is going to run things when his plans have reached their fulfilment.

I can't wait to see it, can you? This disordered world of ours, this universe, is it getting larger or is it getting smaller? Where is it going to? What's going to happen when the whole thing burns up? What next? God has magnificent plans for running the universe, its *economy*, and the scheme basically is that his dear Son, our blessed Lord, will be in charge of it all.

### **Our role in God's plans**

My dear brothers and sisters, there is more than a rumour in the New Testament that if we behave ourselves properly we shall be given a practical share in the running of the whole universe for God. Isn't that marvellous? Why do you think Christ is spending so much time and patience on getting his Body formed by baptism in the Holy Spirit, and then training us in these lowly tasks that we have to do here on earth? Why spend so much time on it? Because the Body of Christ is not simply a little organizational detail just for earth. It's Christ and his



Body that God in his purposes places above all principalities, mights, powers and dominions; a Body that he shall use to run the whole universe for God in those ages of unlimited bliss. Oh that I could be persuaded to take my spiritual education and practise it a bit more seriously now.

I see you have the same queen as we do. In my ignorance that sort of astonished me; I thought you had brought the constitution back to Canada, or something! I can tell you a thing or two about her Gracious Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. She has a lot of houses; more than I have, by a long way. I contribute to their upkeep, but that's a small point! She has to run these houses. She is the boss in charge, of course, but she doesn't do all the practical things. She doesn't queue up in the supermarket to get the week's groceries for Windsor Palace, for instance. She has her stewards to do that, and very important some of them are too.

God will sum up everything in Christ, but the amazing thing is that God's way of running things in the coming eternity will be through Christ and his people. It is here and now in our churches that we are being given real practical training, learning to be God's responsible servants to run things for him as he wants them run; and there are right ways and wrong ways of doing things.

#### *False teachers*

In fact, that is the reason Paul is writing to Timothy at all. The first pressing reason was that there were teachers and preachers in the church at Ephesus who had completely missed the mark and gone off on all sorts of funny tangents. Some of them into myths and endless genealogies, which promoted speculations instead of ministering to people's faith (1:4).

I'm not really qualified to say this, but let me advise preachers and teachers to be careful to notice that the prime object of ministry is to build up people's faith. Yes, we have to impart information; but may God help us to see to it that, by his grace and his Spirit, even the information produces faith. Life is a big battle, and the thing that our enemy will oppose and try to upset is primarily our faith. When troubles come, be they physical or intellectual, problems of every kind, his satanic majesty tries to break our faith in God's word and in God's character. 'Does the Lord really love me when he's allowed this to happen?' Oh, let those of us who try to preach or teach see to it that we get our purpose clear.

It's a *dispensation* that starts with our faith in God and moves to produce faith and draw out the faith of God's people, so that they may live and work with faith undimmed and undented. Instead of which the supposed teachers in Ephesus were relating all kinds of fables, and a lot of it was just nonsense. Speculative reasoning that left people not with faith but with questions.

Take, for instance, some of the learned rabbis discussing the tabernacle. They had rules of interpretation, according to which they came to the conclusion that the ark wasn't standing in the Most Holy Place—which is what Scripture says. They had marvellous reasons for thinking that the ark floated mid-air inside that cube that was the Most Holy Place, equidistant from floor and ceiling and walls, and they tried to prove it but couldn't. It was just sheer speculation.

Some people treat Scripture like that. They play crossword puzzles with it, so to speak, and have all sorts of theories that you couldn't possibly prove. The curious phenomenon is

that sometimes it's the very things that you couldn't prove which come to be the criterion of the truth.

They wanted to be teachers of the law and you can read our Lord's commentary on the things they got up to (Luke 13–14, for instance). There was the law of Sabbath, and they had interpreted it that you shouldn't walk too far outside your house on a Sabbath day. Only go 'a Sabbath day's journey'.<sup>2</sup> But the question arose, how far is a Sabbath day's journey? How would you measure it? One rabbi had a bright idea. If you got a bit of wire and attached it to the roof of your house and joined it to the roof of the next house, you could count it as one house. And if you joined all the houses down the street with the same piece of wire they would all be one house, which would let you go a few yards further on the Sabbath. Wouldn't you say that was a bright idea!

In the rabbinic schools there generally was a chief teacher, who was the authority. The students were allowed to ask questions, and the game was that if you could think up a big question that the leader couldn't answer, and you had the answer, then you became the chief rabbi. What did that produce? Well, not faith, but competition and pride, speculation and uncertainty.

What a problem it was in Ephesus to have people beginning to teach that kind of nonsense. They wanted to be teachers of the law but did not understand its primary purpose (1:6–7). Paul says that the law we Christians know is an excellent thing, 'the law is good' (Greek *kalos*, v. 8). Not just intrinsically good; God's law is positively excellent. Let's never speak disparagingly of God's law. Thank God for his law. It is against all that is unholy and untrue; it's the guarantee that heaven will never be spoiled by sin or any defilement. The law is against anything that would be against the gospel of the glory of the blessed God (v. 11).

Even preachers when they're preaching get tempted, and when Paul uses a phrase like 'the gospel of the glory of the blessed God' I'm tempted to stop him in his tracks and say, 'Paul, what do you mean?' If we search his writings he will tell us that we have miserably fallen short of the glory of God: 'for all have sinned, in the past, and do still come short of the glory of God' (Rom 3:23, own trans.). That will be true of me even by the time I'm ninety-nine and a half, if I get there. I'll still come short of his glory, but I trust I'll be a bit more like him than I was. We need to be saved; but how can we, who have fallen short of his glory, be saved?

#### *The law cannot save anyone*

Paul points out that it's not by the law. The law can protest against any infringement of the glory, but it can never save those who have broken the law. For that we need the gospel of God, and what a glorious gospel it is. '[We are] justified by faith apart from works of the law' (Rom 3:28). And when we're justified by faith, we can boast—we can glory in the fact that we shall achieve, attain to, and enjoy the glory of God (Rom 5:1–2). Every believer will be there

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<sup>2</sup> The distance has been generally reckoned as 2000 cubits or approximately 2/3 of a mile. Acts 1:12, the only instance of its occurrence in the Bible, specifies its length as the distance from Mt. Olivet to Jerusalem. (From the Eastern gate of Jerusalem to the present site of the Church of the Ascension on Mt. Olivet is slightly over 1/2 a mile.) (<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/encyclopedia-of-the-bible/Sabbath-Days-Journey>).

when creation is delivered from her bondage to corruption and liberated to share in the glory of the children of God (Rom 8:21).

The law is against anything that would diminish that glory, but it can't save those who have broken the law. How would you turn a rebel into a child of God? It can't be by the law, can it? The law is not just advice. It doesn't come alongside us and say, 'Now, look here, this is a good way of living. You should try it, really have a go at it: "You should love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength"' (see Deut 6:4; Mark 12:30).

That's very good advice and we need its guidance. But the law isn't just advice; it is command plus penalty. You'd better start loving the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, for if you fail the law will curse you. The law doesn't just say, 'I wouldn't do that if I were you; that's not nice.' It says, 'Don't do that, for if you do I shall curse you.' How would you live a godly life if you were living under those terms, and the moment you made some desperate gaffe and broke the commandment the law cursed you?

#### *Paul's own conversion*

It isn't just the threat of the curses of the law that drives you now, is it? You love the Lord and want to please him. What has changed? Take Paul as the example. It was no good coming to him and saying, 'Paul, try to keep the law a bit better and you'll get saved.' He thought he'd kept the law to its last limit. To help blot out the name of Jesus from the earth, Saul of Tarsus had been torturing believers until they blasphemed the name of the Lord Jesus. It wasn't the law that converted him.

What converted him? Listen to his worship:

I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen. (1:12-17)

What a king, who had had mercy on Saul of Tarsus. Would you have had mercy on him? If an impertinent mosquito were to alight on my forehead and start to bite me, I wouldn't hesitate to smash it into oblivion, and neither would you. Tell me, how did the King of all ages, the King of kings and Lord of lords, find it in his heart to put up with Saul of Tarsus, as he agreed with those who had taken a crown of thorns and rammed it on the head of God incarnate?

How did God break him? Well, he broke his enmity. What a marvellous story it is. Christ did the job of representing God to Saul of Tarsus, and that was amazing because Christ was the very one whom Paul was attacking and blaspheming and trying to eliminate. God gave to his dear Son the task of subduing that rebel and putting him into his service.

Excuse the term, what *courage* our blessed Lord Jesus had. If I'd pardoned Saul, I might have said, 'All right Saul, but you'll just get inside heaven and sit on one of the draughtiest seats.' In that moment Christ counted him faithful and trusted him, and put him into his service.

'I opposed him ignorantly in unbelief,' said Paul (v. 13). 'Now that he's changed my heart and judged me faithful, he has appointed me to serve his people in his church. He didn't just give me forgiveness, he overflowed me with grace and love that have their source in Christ. He did it so that I should be a beacon light, an example of the way God treats all who dare to repent and trust his dear Son' (vv. 14–16, own trans.).

So may we too discover something more of the grace of God ministered by Jesus Christ, and may it turn us around. God continue in these days of conference to reveal himself to us, that his revelation may leave its mark upon us that shall last from now to eternity.

## Government in the World and in the Church

Let's begin this morning by reading the early verses of 1 Timothy chapter 2.

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time. For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth. (1 Tim 2:1-7)

Turning on to chapter 3, let us read from verse 14 to the end.

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory. (vv. 14-16)

And may God give us good understanding of his holy word.

Yesterday in our first session we considered the phenomenon that one of the leading ideas in the first letter of Paul to Timothy is the concept of *godliness*. Upon analysis it proved to mean respect: proper, good respect and reverence. And normally in these contexts that respect and reverence is for God. Godliness therefore is not just a mood that comes over us from time to time, nor a particularly emotional experience. Godliness is a deep and deliberate set of the heart that turns constantly to God and pays him the due reverence and consideration in all circumstances.

Because the development of godliness is one of the main themes of 1 Timothy, this epistle lists many descriptions and titles of God. If we are to reverence him as godly people should, then we shall need to know him in all his character and his different capacities and operations, and that pattern develops as Paul speaks to Timothy. In each chapter he is concerned with a particular situation and how to deal with it; and the way he deals with the practical situations, difficulties and problems is to first focus attention on the living God. He enquires what God's character is, and how it should be and has been interpreted in this particular situation. Having

considered God's attitude and character, he turns to showing us how our blessed Lord has interpreted the character of God in that kind of situation; and with the example of our Lord before us he entreats men and women to play our part, our godly part, in interpreting the Christian gospel in our particular situations.

This morning we must try to cover the main ideas in chapters 2 and 3, necessarily passing over many of its details. Chapter 2 shows itself to be concerned with the men and women who are in government in the various countries of the world. Chapter 3 concerns itself with those who have responsibility in the churches, to guide—*govern* even, if I may use the word, and to shepherd the people of God. In chapter 2 when we read of our Lord, we are told of his death: how he gave himself as a ransom for all (v. 6). In chapter 3 we shall be told once more about our blessed Lord; not this time about his death, but about his life and the principles by which he lived that life, as interpreting in human circumstances the living God who sent him.

### **Government in the world**

So then we ask ourselves what particularly is the background of the apostle's exhortations to Timothy in chapter 2? Paul had left Timothy in Ephesus, and Ephesus, you should know, was a very different city from Jerusalem. When the apostles began to preach in Jerusalem they could count on the majority of the people they talked to as having believed the Old Testament, as we call it (though they didn't call it that), to be God's word. They accepted its authority and believed that there was just one God. Their nation had stood for it for centuries. Of course many of them didn't know what salvation was, in the sense that we would understand it, and therefore they needed to be shown their need to be saved, to be forgiven, and that it was through Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection.

If I may speak for it, though I wasn't around quite then, Victorian England, and for a good many years following, was like that. You could normally suppose that seventy-five percent of any congregation did believe. Even though they were not converted people they did believe that there was one God, and Jesus Christ was the Son of God. They believed the Bible was the word of God, even though many of them knew nothing about salvation. That was the background of preaching then.

But today, generally speaking, even in England, if it is a real gospel meeting you cannot suppose that the people you are addressing believe there is a God at all. They certainly don't believe the Bible is the word of God and that Jesus is the Son of God. In this they resemble Ephesus more than ancient Jerusalem. I cannot speak for Canada, but if we are to be effective in our witness for God in our day and generation we must surely be aware that it is a different world out there than the one we were brought up in. If we are going to be effective in our evangelism for God, we must take our example from the way Paul went about his gospel preaching in the city of Ephesus, aided by Timothy.

Paul founded the assembly in Ephesus. There was already a Jewish synagogue, but they turned out to be hostile to the gospel, and therefore presently Paul separated the believers from the synagogue and they met elsewhere. They were not content, however, to preach the gospel inside the little place where they met, so Paul hired the school of Tyrannus, a public place, and there he expounded the gospel for three years consecutively. That was pioneering

evangelism. As he preached he would have been aware of the religious background of the city. It was a city given over to the worship of the goddess Diana, as the Romans called her. Her Greek name was Artemis, and she was a complex creature in the minds of people.

Her figurines show her as a many-breasted goddess, and yet somehow she managed to be a virgin as well. She was the protectress of women in childbirth and of the young, be they human or animal. She was in fact a deification of the deeply rooted human instinct of motherhood and new life. Our instinctive regard for these sacred things is healthy, but not if you deify it and in Ephesus they deified it and worshipped the human instinct. In the modern world Christmas is fast descending into paganism, where people forget that the baby is God incarnate, and Christmas is celebrated simply as the birth of a baby. How could anybody be so horrible as not to enjoy a baby—the cosy, nice baby? It's the deification of mere human instinct.

It was a religion that made much money from selling images of the goddess, and woe betide the apostles when they thrust their fists in the face of that paganism and preached the wonderful story of God's incarnate Son.

### **The universality and uniqueness of the Christian gospel**

What must we do therefore, if we would preach the gospel to our modern world? We must be convinced in our hearts of the universality of the Christian gospel. 'For there is one God,' says Paul to Timothy, 'and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus' (2:5). The universality of the way to God: not only one God, but one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.

In Britain these days we're told by many on all sides, and not least by our government, that you must not say anything offensive against any other religion for fear of their being offended and raising civil strife. That was a problem for Paul and Timothy in the Roman Empire. The Roman government was pretty tolerant of religion as such, but woe betide anybody preaching a religion that caused riots in the streets. It was the fact that, when Paul preached the unique claims of Christ and the oneness of God, riots very often did follow, though Paul himself never provoked them and the Christians did not fight. In our modern western civilizations we must be guarded in our language, but we shall have to learn to stand with wisdom and dare to proclaim there is just one God and one way to God. Perhaps in Europe more than you here in the new world, but we shall all have to learn to stand.

A local church in Britain recently held a gospel mission. They had a banner outside their place saying 'Jesus is the way'. The town authorities contacted them and said that it was the last time they would be allowed to display such a banner, because their claim that Jesus is the only way to God was offensive to many of the town's inhabitants who belonged to other faiths.

We shall need to be convinced in heart of the uniqueness of Christ and the fact that there is just one God. It is interesting to observe that when Paul first brought Christianity to Greece the citizens of cities like Philippi and Thessalonica were incensed against it. They said it was an *Eastern* religion, and as Romans and Greeks they were not allowed to receive it. Nowadays when missionaries go from the new world to the old, they are accused of the very opposite. They are accused of bringing a *Western* religion that the easterners cannot be expected to receive, but what are we to do about these cultural differences?

## The character of God: 'There is one God'

To start with, let's think about the first proposition, 'there is one God'. This needn't be offensive; just to point out that the idea there is one God is exceedingly widespread, is it not? Judaism believes there is just one God, as does Islam. If you go to the philosophers of religion, and take a big leap back in time to philosophical Hinduism as expounded by Shankara, he taught that there is one supreme being. His idea of that one supreme being was defective, but he had no time for the multitudes and millions of gods and goddesses that pervaded the Hindu religion. Classical Buddhism didn't believe in God at all, but if you were to ask most forms of Buddhism today they will tell you there is one supreme being. The ancient Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle also said that the deity is one.

We are not preaching some little hole in the corner idea of God. It was originally universally acknowledged from Adam onwards that there was one God. Our dear brother David Long, for whom let our prayers be in his old age, provided me with all kinds of information of what they found as missionaries in Africa. Whereas the Africans worshipped demons and spirits and minor deities, they had some concept of the one supreme God but they didn't normally worship him. In India today there is very rarely a temple to the one supreme deity. Though they're supposed to believe in him, they're content with their lesser deities. We need not be ashamed of the gospel of Christ, nor be willing to compromise this basic truth revealed by God our Creator, 'there is one God'.

Why should anybody take offence at it, as though it were arrogant of us Christians to insist that it is so? Would it be arrogant of me to insist to some remote tribe somewhere that there's one sun up in the sky, and all of us are dependent on that one sun for our very life's maintenance and existence? It is the objective fact that there is only one sun up in the sky relevant to us. There are multitudes of other suns, but *vis-à-vis* our planet there's one sun and the laws of arithmetic, except when some merchants are bending them, are universally valid.

It is certainly not arrogance to insist what the Bible declares, 'there is one God'. The trouble of course is really with how people have interpreted that God. As Romans 1 says, 'Not liking to retain God in their knowledge, they have made Gods out of all kinds of things' (see v. 28, own trans.). Deifying the forces of nature, the storm god and the god of fertility, and the god of sex, like our modern world does, they have abandoned faith in the one true God and acknowledgment of him.

### *Postmodernism*

But there is another danger of which we should be aware in our modern world, and as parents you should be particularly alert. It is the opposition to the one true God that comes not merely from atheistic scientists but in the departments of English and literature in our universities and colleges. Nowadays it's called *postmodernism* and it's a far more serious opposition. It is a pseudo philosophy pretending to be literature, where children and young people and undergraduates are taught that the old stories about the universe that included God have all failed, so you are supposed to take that as a given without argument. When it comes to interpreting literature, there is no one true interpretation. As Jacques Derrida<sup>3</sup> put it, there

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<sup>3</sup> French philosopher (1930-2004).



can be no one true interpretation of any piece of literature because there is no *logos*. Meaning, there is no objective standard of rationality, for there is no objective *logos*.

Oh, but there is! John's Gospel begins with the assertion, 'In the beginning was the *logos*.' He is the source of all rationality and truth; the objective standard on which all rationality is ultimately based. There is an objective frame of reference. Yet your children are being taught that there is no single objective interpretation—it's anybody's choice what a piece of literature may mean. If that's your opinion of it then it's okay for you. You can regard it as true for you but you mustn't say it's true for me, for I might have another opinion. Which opinion is right? Well, none of them, or all of them—it doesn't matter. There is no objective criterion of rationality; there is no *logos*.

You mustn't be surprised then, when you get up to expound holy Scripture and you say, 'this is what Scripture means,' you will be met by the answer, 'but that's just your opinion! There is no objective truth or standard of truth, or of knowing truth.'

Recently a young gentleman was brought to my home. Now in his mid-twenties I suppose, in his teens he had professed salvation through Christ. He had gone out with a missionary team of other young people and some older ones to guide them, witnessing to the Lord. He came home and read philosophy and literature in one of our universities. As he sat in my room he told me that he believed nothing.

'All morality is socially determined,' he said.

I said, 'What about cannibalism then? Do you say that's okay? If they like to eat people, that's okay for them?'

'Yes, if their social situation allows it, who are we to say it's wrong?' said he.

I trust you perceive the implications, not just for literature but for people's attitude to holy Scripture. Of course, their position is false. You could ask the man who tells you that there is no objective truth, it's just your opinion and my opinion, 'Is that proposition absolutely true? If it is true, then your theory that everything is socially determined is not true; and if it isn't true, I don't need to listen to you anyway.'

You say, 'What has all that got to do with the preaching of the gospel?'

Well, my good Christian friends, you don't have to know all the latest twists and turns of modern philosophy. Get on with preaching the gospel because God's holy word brings with it its own internal truth, and the words spoken by him, who is the truth, carry their own conviction. But you may need to remove obstacles from the paths of your children and university students who are taught postmodernism nowadays that denies the very basis of our gospel preaching.

There is one God, one great objective *logos*.

### **The character of the Son: 'There is one mediator'**

Let no theological theory deprive us of the marvellous, limitless extent of the value of the death of Christ. He gave himself as a substitutionary ransom on behalf of all without exception. Why should anybody object to there being one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all?

Some years ago in Ukraine I was invited to go along to a state school to talk to the students about Christianity. This was just after the collapse of the soviet system and it was a novelty in

that school. I did my best, of course, but the students looked astonished. After the session the deputy headmistress came to me, and a gracious lady she was.

'Might I ask you a question?'

I said, 'Certainly madam.'

'What do you think of UFOs?'

I said, 'We haven't had any our way so I don't know what to think about them, and those that we thought were UFOs the government said they weren't. But I believe you've had a lot.'

'Oh yes,' she said. 'The recent lot that came, when the occupants of the spacecraft got out they told the locals that Buddhism was the true religion, not Christianity. So what do you say of that?'

'That's astonishing,' I said. 'For my part, I have a little difficulty with Buddhism because most forms of Buddhism teach that there is no such thing as forgiveness. Like Hinduism, Buddhism believes in the reincarnation of the soul, and teaches that you carry with you the burden of your wrongdoings from your previous incarnation, for which you must suffer. The only way to get rid of that guilt and burden is to suffer yourself, and if you have not suffered enough by the time you come to die, you'll have to be reborn once more. And so the cycle goes on.'

'I don't need to be told to be good,' I said, 'I know I ought to be. My problem is that I haven't been good. I'm looking for a forgiveness that will maintain my own standards so that I don't have to pretend that sin doesn't matter, and yet meets God's standards too. Neither Hinduism or Buddhism offers any such forgiveness. I know of only one in the whole world's history who does, and that is Jesus Christ our Lord. He's the only one who will come alongside you and say, "I am your Creator and I love you with all the Creator's love and I want you to be saved, for you have sinned like the rest and you can't pay the penalty of sin yourself. I can't forgive you without the penalty being paid, and I want to tell you that Jesus Christ my Son, God incarnate, died for you that you might be forgiven."'

Excuse the term, but there's no one else 'on the market'. I'm not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone that believes the glorious message of God's incarnate Son who gave himself a ransom for all. (See also Rom 1:16.)

#### *How do you know who the true God is?*

The story is told of Solomon when he first came to the throne and was famed for his wise decisions (see 1 Kgs 3:16-28). They brought a couple of prostitutes before him. These two women lived in a house together in the same room and they each had an infant. One night, one of them in her sleep rolled over on the top of her infant and smothered it. She woke up to find the baby dead. She quietly crept out of bed and across the floor to the woman in the other bed, removed the live baby from her, put her dead baby in its place and crept back into bed.

The other mother woke in the morning and discovered the child was dead, but then she looked at it, and said, 'that's not my child.' She went across the room, 'That's my baby,' she said. Well, there began a fight and much pulling of hair. So they brought the two women before Solomon, and one woman said this and the other woman said that. Both claimed to be the mother. Solomon eventually called for one of his officers and announced, 'I'm going to be

fair to both women, so take your sword and cut the baby in two. Give one half to the one woman and one half to the other.'

'Oh no, King,' said one. 'Let her have the baby.'

But the other woman said, 'Yes, do that.'

Which was the true mother? The true mother was the one who would do anything to save the child.

How would you know who the true God is? Forgive me if I put it crudely: he would do anything, to the point of giving his Son to die for you, rather than you perish. I'm not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for there is no other saviour like him: 'God our Saviour, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim 2:3-4).

### **Our role in God's plans**

If that is God's attitude and the attitude of our blessed Lord towards mankind, how shall we Christian men and women fulfil our part in this? Generally speaking, we are to pray for the governments of the world, be they democratic or totalitarian, and democracy is not necessarily the best form of government that ever was invented. Why are we to pray for governments? So that, in God's mercy, men and women at large might have peaceful and quiet lives, godly and dignified in every way in conditions conducive to thinking about their eternal spiritual needs and the opportunity to be saved (2:2).

Particularly in the churches, the men are to pray publically, 'lifting holy hands without anger or quarrelling' (v. 8). It's not necessarily that we always adopt that gesture. Perhaps part of it is cultural. In my church very few lift their hands; in some churches all of them do. There's nothing against holding up your hands for God to see. They'd better be clean though, and if we're quarrelling amongst ourselves and refusing to have fellowship with our fellow believers, how do we expect God to treat our prayers sincerely when we are praying for all people?

And what can the women do? It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of the women's part in men and women being saved, for if I've got it anywhere near right, women are the keepers of a nation's morality. I cannot say what it is here in Canada, but I can tell you that in Europe we have a press that reduces the human female form to pornography in order to make millions of dollars. In our schools, children are very often taught that homosexuality is a proper form of human behaviour; and, in spite of our so-called sex education in schools, England has the highest statistics of teenage pregnancies anywhere in Europe. As for the multimillions of babies that have been aborted, there's a God in heaven who cares. Unfortunately, however, some of the women's programmes on BBC Radio 4 advocate sexual immorality and some of them are positively pornographic. Therefore the question of dress, even though you must allow a bachelor to speak, becomes very significant, doesn't it? Dressing respectably is not to deny beauty (v. 9). God dresses the lilies, and they are beautiful (Luke 12:27). Dress should guard modesty and that inner balance of healthy judgment that doesn't provide for evil desires in others.

Authoritative teaching in the church is not given to women (vv. 11-12). That is not a cultural thing. The reason Paul gives for it goes first back to the order of creation in the unfallen world, and then to what happened at the fall. Denying women authoritative teaching

in the church is obviously not meant to forbid what Timothy's mother and grandmother did for him (see 2 Tim 1:5). Surely not. What a foundation they laid as they taught him the Scriptures. Nor did it mean forbidding the Samaritan woman to go and witness to the townspeople, 'Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did' (John 4:29). Nor would it forbid what Anna did in the courts of the temple, speaking of Christ to those who were looking for the comfort of Jerusalem (see Luke 2:36–38). Let's keep a balanced view on the matter. We need all that Scripture permits against a world that daily is growing more corrupt.

And notice the final triumph: 'She will be saved through childbearing' (v. 15). That Scripture does not mean, surely, that no Christian woman will ever die in childbirth. Many have. What does it mean then? There are two possible explanations; both have some truth in them.

One is that it means she, and all women and all the rest of us, will be saved through the virgin birth of Christ. Although the woman was deceived by Satan and came under God's sentence of discipline as a result, God in his wisdom and marvellous foresight and mercy ordained that he himself would get inside the human race, using a woman. (At the end, inspired by the devil in the form of the final beast, a man will try to elevate himself and be God.) What a marvellous strategist God is. God's answer was for himself to become man. He overcame the devil by himself becoming man through a woman—'she shall be saved through childbearing'.

Attractive as that explanation is, it is not without its difficulties.

The phrase could refer to the discipline that God imposed both on Adam and on Eve when they sinned. Adam was not thrown out of his business as a farmer, but the earth was cursed and farming would be hard labour until he died. That very labour would be a salutary discipline. It is said that the devil finds work for idle hands to do, and men are sinners and need the discipline of doing their healthy jobs, which gives them less time for sinful occupations. Work produces character of determination and persistence and fairness, and so forth.

But under God, the very pains and sacrifices of womanhood and motherhood produce a character that is holy and on the way to being Christlike, if they find the Saviour and take the whole business of the rearing of family like Jacob's wives did. They take it to God in prayer and learn in the disciplines of the home and the sacredness of motherhood to develop a Christian character that shall shine for all eternity.

Let's catch the final emphasis: 'She will be *saved*' says Scripture. God will save us all in the fuller sense of the word; but he is also interested in saving us and our characters in the domesticities of life.

### **Government in the church**

I have little time and you have very little patience left for me to comment at any length on what Paul says about godliness at the end of chapter 3, but I am comforted to notice that a seminar in this conference is geared to talking about 'the mystery of godliness'. I advise you to attend it.

All I will say now is that, as he comes to the end of chapter 3, Paul is talking about how men ought to behave in the church of God. It is 'the church of the living God' (v. 15). In particular, he is talking about elders and deacons, and you will notice that he doesn't tell us at any length what the job is that elders and deacons do. In this chapter he is concerned simply with the character and lifestyle of the elders and the deacons. They have to be examples to show us what our lifestyle should be and they are stewards of the great mysteries of God. Therefore, Paul talks to them in particular about their lifestyle and sets before them not now the death of Christ, but, if I may use the term, the *lifestyle* of Christ.

### **The mystery of godliness**

In the six things that are said about Christ in verse 16, you will notice there is no mention of his death, nor his atoning suffering, and no explicit mention of his resurrection. For now the writer is not thinking about Christ in his death, he is thinking about Christ in his life and the principles by which he governed and led his life: the mystery of godliness. This is the secret that lies behind our godliness as we learn to imitate that holy person.

#### *'He was manifested in the flesh'*

The very phrase implies his deity. When you were born nobody thought you manifested anything in particular, for you had no pre-existence, did you? But when Christ was born there had been a pre-existence. He was God of very God; in the beginning he was with God (John 1:1-2). When he was born it was God manifested in flesh. Marvellous story. How would we have known what God is really like unless he had been manifested in the flesh in human terms that we can understand?

Godliness on our part will mean the same. Not that we had pre-existence, but true godliness is not manifested so much by theorists and preachers as by practitioners, when the principles of godliness are worked out in actual human flesh.

#### *'He was vindicated by the Spirit'*

At the end of that superbly godly life, the verdict of religion and politics upon him was that he deserved nothing but a cross. Where did his vindication come from? In the Prophet Isaiah he is heard proclaiming, 'He who vindicates me is near' (50:8), and before he suffered our Lord said that the Holy Spirit would come. He would convict the world of sin because they do not believe in him and of righteousness because he went to the Father (see John 16:7-10). The coming of the Holy Spirit demonstrated that Jesus Christ is true.

On the day that the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, Peter told the crowd that this outpouring of God's Spirit was the evidence 'that God had made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified' (Acts 2:36). Christ was vindicated and 'declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead' (Rom 1:4).

Where shall our vindication in this sense come from? You elders, have you taken a line in your church that you feel is the godly line, and you have your critics? What are you relying on for final vindication?

We must follow Paul's example, when he said:

For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgement before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God. (1 Cor 4:4–5)

Paul was content that the final court of appeal would be the judgment seat of Christ.

*'Seen by angels'*

Our Lord was seen by angels; what a wonder! Not that he saw angels or angels appeared to him, but angels watched him. What a lesson they learned. I try to imagine sometimes what Michael the archangel said to Gabriel when they saw him, Creator of all angels, made lower than they.

'Michael, why is the Lord of all, the Son of God, making himself lower than us?'

And what did Michael say to Gabriel when they saw the Son of God being taken and nailed to a tree? What was God saying and what were the angels to learn from it? Something perhaps that they'd never guessed to be in the character of God? I don't know that it would have helped Gabriel all that much, if it was explained to him that God was allowing his Son to be crucified for the sake of us sinners. But what a magnificent lesson the angels learned about God in it. And still in the church, as they observe our behaviour, they are being taught the manifold wisdom of God (Eph 3:10).

*'Proclaimed among the nations'*

Though he scarce left Palestine, God saw to it that that godly life had the maximum publicity. His name is preached worldwide and one day he shall be universally vindicated.

*'Believed on in the world'*

His life was not in vain, was it? Look at you here, a lot of old Gentiles! In 2004 that life still holds its power. If we honestly work for God in our little way, preach his word as best we know how and leave our example of teaching behind, many others may in God's grace come to believe because of what we have done and said.

*'Taken up in glory'*

Oh how the angels sang when the heavens were opened and the Son of God, who had been made a little lower than they, and human still, was received up with a welcome of glory. And God 'seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come' (Eph 1:20–21).

I'm almost afraid to say this in case you don't believe it. But you who believe in God through Jesus Christ our Lord and have been purged of your sin by his blood, it is said that you too are raised up with him and seated with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:6–7).

'We will also reign with him' (2 Tim 2:12). Do you believe it? I don't know what the angels are going to say about that, when we shall be placed above them. How shall we comprehend such mercy?

May God fill us with a sense of the wealth and the sheer riches of God's grace, so that we may go forth without compromise to proclaim him as our Saviour throughout the whole world.

## The Pursuit of Godliness

Let's begin our session this morning by reading again from the first letter of Paul to Timothy.

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer. If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed. Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness. (4:1-7)

But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God. She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day. (5:4-5)

But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life. (6:11-12)

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life. (6:17-19)

### **Timothy's training and gift**

If we have carefully followed and noticed the many responsibilities, tasks and duties that Paul places upon Timothy in this letter, we can surely come to this practical conclusion: to do the work entrusted to him, Timothy would need a great deal of training. When I speak of training I am not forgetful of that other necessity, without which training is very little use: gift given by God. Timothy of course had a remarkable gift. Paul refers from time to time to the fact that he possessed this gift, but also to Timothy's weakness in this area. Being a diffident



personality, he didn't always exploit his gift or develop it and use it to the full. Those who are of sensitive disposition can have fellow feeling with Timothy, and we need to be encouraged to use the God-given gift. All of us have a gift of one kind or another by God's own good pleasure and decision, but having the gift we need training.

#### *Timothy's training at home*

When I speak of training I'm not so much thinking of Timothy's initial training, which he received through his dear mother and grandmother. It was training in holy Scripture: 'from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation' (2 Tim 3:15). In Judaism, according to the book of Deuteronomy where it is stated many times, it was not first and foremost the rabbis' responsibility to teach the children the Scriptures but the parents.

I personally thank God for a parent who understood that. I never went to Sunday school in all my life. What a serious lack I suffered. We lived too far from one, but my father took his parental responsibility very seriously to teach us from infancy God's holy word. I owe a colossal debt to that. 'You shall teach them as you come in, as you go out, as you sit down, as you get up,' said Deuteronomy to the parents (11:19, own trans.).

You see the *effect* of it, if I may put it that way, when our Lord came to manhood and faced the devil in the wilderness. When the devil attacked him Christ answered three times over by a quotation from the book of Deuteronomy. We may pause to ask ourselves the question, 'If the devil tempted us today would we know Deuteronomy well enough to quote it back to him?' Are you listening, young men and women? It was marvellous training then for Timothy from his parents, his grandmother and mother.

#### *Timothy's training through the Apostle Paul*

Nor when I talk of training am I thinking of the training he received when he worked with the Apostle Paul. That was superb training indeed, as he accompanied Paul and worked, as Paul describes it, 'as a son with a father' in Paul's pioneering evangelism and his systematic teaching of the word of God (Phil 2:22). Timothy would never forget the way he learned how to put the truth of the gospel across as he heard Paul, the senior missionary, do it in the school of Tyrannus or in the synagogue, suiting his message to the congregation. Not just coming out with old phraseology that didn't mean a lot to modern ears, but freshly-minted ways of talking the gospel naturally and suiting it to the congregation present, be it believers or atheists. It was marvellous training for Timothy.

#### *Timothy's training of himself*

Paul describes Timothy as still a young man. That's how the Greeks and Romans would have described him because among the Romans you were young until you were forty. He was probably midway between thirty and forty; not a youth as we would think. But now that he had these tremendous responsibilities he obviously wouldn't be able to cope with them unless he had a great deal of training. I'm thinking in this instance of what Paul is saying to him in 4:7—'train *yourself*', Timothy. The Greek word behind this is the word from which we get *gymnastics*, and all of us know that if you're going to be, say, a long-distance runner you have to have the ability for it, and more so if you're going to be a sprinter.

No one ever tried to train me to sprint, flat-footed duck that I am. What's the use beginning to train and have hopes for an Olympic medal for me? But suppose you had all the inner gift of being a runner and a sprinter, you still wouldn't get anywhere unless you trained. You might conceivably have an expert trainer in your youthful days. Such things are good, but I'm not talking about that either; I'm talking about the daily necessity for training ourselves. A girl who's going to win an Olympic medal at swimming has got to train herself. Every morning, six days a week maybe, she's got to get out of bed and into the swimming pool whether she enjoys it or doesn't enjoy it. It makes little difference, for it's not a question of being able to say 'I feel enthusiastic, I'm full of emotion and fire.' Be thankful if you are; but if you aren't, you still have to get on with the training.

May I talk to you young folks, because I'm an old-aged codger. If you are going to be godly in this world, you'll have to start training yourself: train yourself to *godliness*. I shan't wake up one of these mornings and say, 'I feel a bit funny this morning, I wonder what's happened to me. Oh, I can see what's happened, I've become godly overnight.' It's not done that way. Godliness is a matter of intention backed home by serious effort and practical exercise, that kind of training. Young folks, don't rely on anybody else to do it for you, will you? If you can get somebody to help you, get them. Grab them with both hands. But listen to Paul, 'Train *yourself*, Timothy. Work out a discipline for yourself.'

#### *Training develops gift*

What kind of training? That will depend in part upon your gift. There are some whom God would call to train in academic things, to get a knowledge of the languages of Scripture and the manuscripts that lie behind our New Testament. It's a grievous pity that so many evangelicals, who believe the Bible to be the word of God, have made themselves experts in physics and many other things, and very few of them are experts in those basic things that underlie holy Scripture. But it's not given to many. There will be some perhaps in each generation who, out of their devotion to God and his word, will train to equip themselves with the technicalities that lie behind Scripture.

By training we develop the gift that God has given us, be it for evangelism, for teaching the word of God, in our work for the poor, or whatever it is, starting with a discipline of prayer. I shall be using the word *discipline* again because I'm old-fashioned and it's a word I know well. I understand in modern English 'discipline' is often thought of by people as a kind of punishment, but that is not the basic meaning of the word. Discipline is *training*. It's often used in a spiritual context, as it is here: the training, the discipline that we have to impose upon ourselves.

### **The character and attitude of the Holy Spirit**

Chapter 4 is going to be about this matter of training and spiritual discipline. It is interesting to me, therefore, to find that the Holy Spirit is the first voice that speaks (v. 1). In earlier chapters we considered God's attitude to various situations; then we saw how the Lord Jesus interpreted and still interprets God's character; and then how we are to follow his example. But this time it is the Holy Spirit who comes to the fore and that is very gracious of him, so we are talking about what it means to be spiritual. I'm glad it's the Holy Spirit that says it.

Watch out for pseudo spiritual disciplines because one can be misled sometimes into false training.

Here are some examples:

in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods. (1 Tim 4:1–3)

Supposed spirituality has often got itself involved in these kinds of prohibitions and rigorous disciplines. The Holy Spirit warns that they are false.

You don't have to be unmarried to be spiritual—you don't get a ten percent advantage. Marriage is perfectly congruent. Oh, it's more than that—it's positively *helpful* to developing practical godliness in anybody. You will need a gift of God to be single, for it is not the normal way of living. Our Lord is the authority for saying that God gives some people the gift to remain single (Matt 19:11). Don't try to be single if you don't have the gift.

If you are going to be healthy in your spiritual discipline, first of all do remember the Creator. It's possible sometimes to get so spiritually-minded that we forget the Creator and his good creation. 'Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving' (v. 4).

God instituted marriage; let no one speak disparagingly of it. That would be an insult to the Creator who created it. We are to embrace his good things, the good things of created life, good food, good health. I don't know whether I have the chairman's permission to say it—good art, good literature, good music. These are our Creator's good things and we should not despise them. We shall need grace to use them, and sometimes we must be prepared to sacrifice even good things for the sake of bigger objectives. You'll never be asked by God to sacrifice bad things; you shouldn't be doing them anyway. He must call on you to sacrifice good things for the sake of bigger advantages like the salvation of the lost, the ministry of teaching and shepherding the people of God.

Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. (vv. 7–8)

'So then beware,' says the Holy Spirit, 'of false disciplines and training.' Bodily exercise is profitable and Paul isn't being narrow-minded when he says it's of some value. It can be very necessary and good and helpful. Don't spend too long with your nose in a book snuffing old stale air and not allowing yourself to get out sometimes. You'll go a little bit odd if you do that! In spite of the sacrifices that it might eventually call upon us to make, godliness gets the best out of this life. I urge you to believe that.

### **Eternal life is life to be lived**

How would you get the best out of this life? By being godly, because it is in this life that we have, I nearly said simultaneously, two kinds of life to live. We have natural life, of course, but as the people of God we have eternal life right now through faith in Christ. Eternal life is

not just a ticket that will get you into heaven and if you paid a lot for it you'll have the front seats. Eternal life is a *life*—you have to live it. You can't put it in a box and say 'I have eternal life, it's stored in the bank until the Lord comes.' Eternal life is a life. It consists in knowing God and Jesus Christ, whom God has sent, and disciplining ourselves to spend time and learn to explore and exploit the potentials here and now of eternal life; that is, to fill life with its best. Do believe that too. 'Lay hold on the life that is really life,' says Paul. Lay hold on eternal life. That is, don't just have life; develop it, explore and exploit it to the full.

*What does salvation mean in this context?*

And so Paul reminds Timothy that if he is going to engage in serious work for God—in this kind of training that will be his day-to-day necessity, then he must learn to trust God not merely as a Creator but as 'the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe' (v. 10). Some say that salvation in this verse is nothing less than salvation that includes forgiveness of sins and justification and eternal life and an assured inheritance in heaven. Nothing less than salvation in that full sense, and maybe they're right. If you take that view, then you will be inclined to think that the end of verse 10 means that, strictly speaking, God is the Saviour of those that believe, and some want to translate the Greek that way.

I personally don't think that's what it means. I think Paul is using the term 'salvation' here in a very wide sense. For instance, we know the exhortation 'work out your own salvation' (Phil 2:12). That doesn't mean we have to work *for* salvation; salvation is a gift. But once you have got salvation you'll need to work out its practical implications.

And then there's salvation in another sense. As believers we are given the guidance of God's holy word as to how we should live. We cannot neglect that guidance and say, 'Yes, I have eternal life, I'm going to heaven, but I don't feel any particular pressure now to obey too strictly what the Lord has said.' If we disobey the Lord and go wandering off, we cannot be saved necessarily from the consequences. 'For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption' (Gal 6:8).

'Timothy,' says Paul, 'you'll need to save yourself, and you'll need to save those that hear you by reminding them of God's healthy truth and doctrine, and encouraging them to follow the Lord closely and to adhere to his word.'

*Paul's own pursuit of godliness*

There's more to it than that, isn't there? If you said to Paul, 'I enjoyed your preaching tonight, dear brother, but come and sit down here on my sofa and put your feet up. Let me talk to you. Could you possibly be doing too much? I mean all this travelling. That was a thrilling story you told us tonight of that shipwreck in the Mediterranean, hanging on to a bit of old plank and the water bubbling in your mouth, Paul. That was exciting, but too much of that kind of thing would be difficult, and you want to last out, not wear out! As for this getting beaten with rods, and stoned, and praying. Working with your own hands to pay the expenses for your team is a novel idea, but could you be doing too much? You don't look to me to be in good shape, Paul. No wonder some of your critics say you look very funny. How do you endure it?'

What do you think Paul would say? Let me quote him: 'For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, especially

of those who believe' (1 Tim 4:10). That was Paul's own practical inner experience. He trusted God as the one who not only saves him, in the sense of forgiving his sins, but the God who in his providences saves him.

Let us not go to the extremes. An army doesn't send soldiers into battle so that the soldiers can lay down their lives. Of course not. The government wants its soldiers to keep their lives as long as they possibly can. But a soldier mustn't complain if one night his socks get wet, and his Mum said he should never let his socks get wet because he could catch a cold. God wants tough servants. He wants sacrifice, not suicide. And when Paul was chained up and the Roman captain was about to beat him, Paul didn't say, 'Hallelujah, I have the opportunity of another beating. That will sound well in my next missionary report meeting.' No, he didn't. He said to the centurion who was standing nearby 'Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?' (Acts 22:25). Paul wasn't in for getting more beatings than he had to, but he was prepared to face it for the sake of the gospel if need be, because he had a living, vigorous faith that ultimately his life was in the hand of God.

And you elders who have to spend extra hours and emotional strain caring for the flock, you're a bit over sixty and your blood pressure is not too good—you likewise will need a deep-rooted faith. You don't wear it on your sleeve, but you have a faith in God who is your Saviour in a physical sense. He's the Saviour of all men, for his holy laws are directed towards our preservation.

#### *God feels our pain*

As I say that, I am not unaware of the vast disaster that the tsunami has caused, nor am I unaware of the voices that will come at me in atheistic countries, 'How can you believe that a God who is all loving and all wise lies behind this universe and its workings?' People who argue like that are not necessarily being difficult on purpose.

I sat at dinner with a very gracious Professor who was head at the time of a great psychiatric institution in Moscow. When questions of salvation and God arose, he smiled and said to me, 'But how can you possibly believe in a God of love, who allows so much human suffering?' He'd seen enough of it in his institution.

When we come through trial, we who know the good shepherd find it hard sometimes, and we have to say quietly, 'Why, God? Why me, and why so long?' Have compassion for those who don't know the shepherd and have suffered so much, and find it difficult when you tell them that God is a God of love. May God give us the wisdom to present the love and truth of God in such a way, and with such compassion as the Saviour showed. We mustn't say that people perish in a disaster because they are sinners above all sinners. 'I tell you,' said Christ, 'unless you repent, you will all likewise perish' (Luke 13:3, 5).

Yes, God is so loving that in the person of his Son he came to suffer for us more than any of us ever have suffered or all of us combined ever will. God feels our pain and suffered for us: 'In all their affliction he was afflicted' (Isa 63:9).

#### **Evidence of progress**

So Timothy is urged to discipline himself, not to neglect his gift, and what is more, to make *progress*.

Do not neglect the gift you have . . . Practise these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. (1 Tim 4:14–15)

Young folks do be warned, so that in future years you will say, ‘There once came to us an old, old critter who advised us, and now we can see what he was talking about.’ It’s marvellous in youth to begin to discover the riches of God’s word and I hope you have already begun it. Wonderful new findings, and you want to tell everybody about them.

It’s much more difficult to keep on pioneering in Scripture when you’re fifty plus. When you’re sixty or seventy the tendency is just to repeat the same old things, so that the congregation could almost tell you in advance what you’re going to say, instead of maintaining a fresh, pioneer attitude in Scripture. Thank God for all he’s taught us, but what great acreage there is yet to be explored. And what new relevancies of God’s word to our modern situation are there for seeing, when God shows us. So, let your progress be evident to all.

Somebody once told me that stars guide us by first of all moving themselves. A star that doesn’t move has the habit of falling down, you know; and if the elders in the church are likened to stars in the book of the Revelation they’d better keep moving. We follow those that keep moving, not away from the truth but further into the truth. Let your progress appear to all, and in so doing you’ll save yourself in the practical spiritual sense, and those that hear you. Oh, let those of us who teach remember it. We have to impart information as best God can help us, but merely passing on information is not the sum total. Even when you’re teaching the word of God, my dear brother, your aim is to save your fellow believer. In doing business for God, expounding Scripture is not just theory.

The medical student that is being taught the importance of precision theory is only doing it so that he can be better at his job. ‘You shall save those that hear you’ (see v. 16).

### **The pursuit of godliness in family life**

From these things Paul now turns in chapter 5 to the pursuit of godliness for the Lord’s people as a whole, not just for his particularly gifted servants. He talks about Timothy’s attitude to the older people and the younger people in the church. He fastens particularly upon the widows, and practically half of his exhortation now is given over to instructions as to how to treat the widows. Of course, widows were in special need in the ancient world. If they had no close relatives to support them and no public help from the government, they were in a difficult plight indeed. Therefore the early Christians showed their love for the Lord and for his people in their particular care for widows, just as the Jews did and still do.

In verse 4 Paul points out, ‘if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them [the children] first learn to show godliness to their own household.’ My translation says ‘show piety’ (RV). The interesting thing is that this is our word for godliness that Paul has been using all the way through Timothy. The Greek word is *efséveia* which means ‘to reverence well’, and the noun coming from it is ‘good reverence’. Normally it’s understood to be reverence for God. But now Paul tells them to learn to show reverence first towards their own family. Godliness begins at home, you know! You don’t have to go to some rainforest and face poisoned arrows and cannibals in order to develop godliness, you could develop it in that

more dangerous situation of home life. And godliness that is not godliness at home is a questionable godliness.

Christ will call upon us as his disciples to put him first beyond the dearest and nearest of our relatives, and many of our fellow believers in other countries are daily called upon to do it. How easy it has been for many of us to believe the Saviour, and how difficult for many others. Christ demands that we put him first, but when we do, one of the first things he will do is to tell us to look after our own family.

Some of our Lord's most withering criticisms were directed at the Pharisees. The law said 'Honour your father and your mother' (Exod 20:12), meaning not merely to respect them but to support them in their old age. The Pharisees had invented all kinds of pseudo-godliness, by which means you could evade that responsibility. You could profess to give your money to the temple, and say 'I'm sorry, but I have no money left to help you. I've given it to God.' And all the while there was a backdoor you could get it out and use it as capital for your investments. Our Lord's criticism was withering. One of the first things he will do when we put him first is to tell us to look after our family responsibilities. 'If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever' (5:8), for unbelievers will often show responsibility to their parents, particularly in their old age.

I am not unaware what a burden this could be. There are many dear women who would have loved to be a nurse on a foreign field, serving the Lord as a missionary, and found themselves stuck with an elderly parent with incipient Alzheimer's and kept for many years frustrated. What a burden that is. Let not the brothers forget it's not always good to be so busy preaching to other people, telling them that they should obey Scripture, that you have no time to look after your elderly parents and bear some of the burden of doing it.

But now Paul talks of widows and family affairs. Let me quote you an old English hymn. I'll try to explain its antiquated language.

The trivial round, the common task,  
will furnish all we need to ask,  
room to deny ourselves, a road  
to bring us daily nearer God.<sup>4</sup>

'The trivial round' — the daily round of duties;  
'the common task' — looking after ordinary day-to-day things in the home and elsewhere;  
'will furnish all we need to ask' — what kind of things? All we need to ask for the pursuance of godliness.

What kind of experiences are needed to train us in godliness? This hymn is saying 'the trivial round, the common task, will furnish all we need to ask' — for it provides room to deny ourselves.

Family life, if it's going to be successful, has a lot of room for that kind of thing.  
'Why didn't you clear up your bedroom?'

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<sup>4</sup> John Keble (1792-1866), 'New every morning is the love' (1822).

'I must go to my hockey' (or whatever it is), 'and it irks me to have to clean up my own bedroom.'

'Is that so?'

'room to deny ourselves, a road to bring us daily nearer God.' Well, now you've got an admirable opportunity to learn godliness, to deny yourself and do your duty in the family, to ease the burden on your mother, or cut the grass for your dad if he's overworked, and do it to the Lord.

Caring for other folks and denying myself to do it will bring me nearer to the heart of our blessed Lord, who denied himself the glories and the luxuries of heaven. He walked the earth penniless in order that he might help us.

And then Paul especially commends the elderly widows, over sixty. The early church apparently had a custom. They not only supported widows in general, they had a special category for widows over sixty who were officially in the church enrolment. These were widows who promised to serve Christ to the end of their lives; not to seek remarriage but to give themselves to spiritual work of counselling and training younger women, advising the young folks and looking after people in the name of the church.

'Now be careful,' says Paul to Timothy, 'don't enrol a widow who is under sixty years of age.'

'Why not?'

There may have been young widows in those days, and in their immediate grief they might have a spontaneous feeling that they'd like somehow to devote themselves to the Lord. They're still young, nature has its own calls, and they might find themselves ten years down the road wanting to marry and then having a conflict of conscience. Having vowed to serve the Lord as widows for the rest of their lives, what should they now do if they got an offer of marriage? Paul is down to earth with both feet on the ground. 'Don't encourage people to such devotion as they have not been gifted by God to perform.'

Let all of us be one hundred percent devoted to God, but some will not have the ability or the God-given gift to remain single and not seek further remarriage. It's probably God's will for them that, if they can, they get married and bear children, and 'run the house'. That term is interesting; he's talking to the wives, for it is they who run the house and that too is an area in which to express godliness.

To attempt levels of devotion that are beyond our God-given gift can be a dangerous thing, and these special widows were to be enrolled only if they had previously given themselves to these practical tasks of hospitality; washing the saints' feet, as the phrase goes, caring for the afflicted and devoting themselves to every good work (see 5:10). In their younger lives they had practised those glorious virtues that mark Christian women.

What opportunities there for godliness for a widow that is 'a widow indeed' (KJV); but in the ancient world that was a bleak situation to be in. 'She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God' (v. 5). Note the term 'her hope'. Not just her faith, her *hope*. What was it to face life as a widow with no hope for the future, as far as this life goes. But they learn, says Paul, to have their hope set on God. Thank God for godly widows and their intercessions and work for the rest of us.



## **What is the whole of life about?**

Now we come to the exhortations of the last chapter. Here Paul surveys not so much the day-to-day running of life but he faces the whole of life, life as a whole. Look what he says in 6:7: 'For we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world.' So, at the end of this conference, let us fall to contemplating ourselves. Do you remember when you were born? Of course you don't; I don't. Nobody consulted me as to whether I wanted to come or not. I woke up to find I was here! I rely upon the evidence of those who were present, and they tell me that I came into this world naked. I brought nothing in; one day I must leave it and I can be certain that I shall take nothing out.

That raises the question, what is life about—all my hurrying backwards and forwards and my energy and my ambitions and everything? What is it all about, when I must go and leave everything? That's a question to be faced. There were some around in Paul's day who thought that even religion, godliness, was a way of making money.

In its first editions the dear old King James Bible used to put it the other way round, thinking that making money is godliness. But that's nonsense: the Greek means it the other way round. These people imagined that godliness is a way of making money (v. 5). They've not all died out yet. Today some of them have a theory of 'seed money'. You send your money to the radio or television broadcasters, and that's 'planting a seed'. God will bless you; he'll make your money increase and you'll have the biggest car in America, the most beautiful wife and the most glorious house, proving that godliness is a way of making money. But that's sheer nonsense.

Ask Paul how much money he made out of it. He tells us that if we have food and clothes we will be content (v. 8). We do need those necessary things, and we who can work are responsible to work to get them, and to get them for other people as well. We don't despise these things: we are not so heavenly-minded that we are of no earthly good. We take our work seriously, and profit is inbuilt into the creation. The farmer sows one kernel, and it's pointless if there's no profit. If he only got back what he put in he'd soon be bankrupt and he'd starve to death. He needs the profit, doesn't he? He puts one kernel in and hopes to get thirty, or sixty, and sometimes one hundred percent profit.

But to what purpose eventually, when we can take nothing out? Why are we in this world? What is the prime purpose?

## **Why did the Lord Jesus come into the world?**

### *To save sinners*

Let us listen to our Lord Jesus. He came into this world and he went out of this world. What was his purpose in coming? Chapter 1 told us that he came into the world to save sinners (v. 15). His name be praised eternally that he made that his chief objective. I remind you that he worked at carpentry for thirty years, he wasn't only a preacher; but his prime purpose was not his carpentry. He came into the world to save sinners and it cost him his last breath. But think of the innumerable millions that he will reap from this world from that corn of wheat that came to die and fall into the ground. His dying has brought much fruit and we do well to follow him.

*To bear witness to the truth*

Chapter 6 will tell us of another thing he came to do. He came and bore before Pilate the good confession, of which Paul reminds Timothy now.

I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until [his] appearing. (6:13–14)

What was the good confession? Notice the difference this time: ‘For this purpose,’ said he to Pilate, ‘I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth’ (John 18:37). That’s why he came.

‘What is truth?’ asked Pilate.

We might ask the same question. What is truth? What is *the* truth? What’s the truth about this universe? Do they teach the ultimate truth about it in school? Dare they? Is it just a conglomeration of mindless atoms that without any purpose happened to collide, and eventually, without knowing it, produced you and your brain? And one day those very same atoms—viruses and who knows what, without two pennyworth of sense in their heads, will destroy you and what you’re pleased to call your rationality, and when they’ve destroyed it and made mincemeat of it, they won’t even know they’ve done it. Is that the truth about mankind? If so, you are a prisoner under the torture of being a rational creature but at the mercy of non-rational amoral forces. It’s a funny thing when eminent rational minds give themselves to prove that their rational minds are the products of mindless forces, which will one day destroy their rationality. Oh, what a triumph for rationality! If it’s true, there is no hope for the human race.

But the truth is that these worlds were made by the Word of God. We were made by Jesus Christ our Lord, and through him and for him (Col 1:16). Each human being is more significant than the whole universe put together. My brain is more significant than the sun up in the sky because I know the sun is there but the sun doesn’t know I’m here. It’s just a lot of gas; don’t judge its significance and importance by its size. One single person made in the image of God is more significant than all the impersonal forces in the universe. We were made for God and when we went astray God himself in the person of his Son came to redeem us, and one day we’re going to be like him and creation herself will be delivered from her bondage to corruption. That’s the truth about this universe and the truth about you.

What’s the truth about a rose? They are jolly nice; beautiful fragrance, lovely design—is that the ultimate truth about roses? No, it isn’t. They are very rare, you know. Our planet is the only one in the solar system we know of that can grow roses. Who made them? Whose idea are they? They’re God’s idea. Our blessed Lord was the architect, designer and producer, ‘who richly provides us with everything to enjoy’ (1 Tim 6:17).

What is the truth about you? How could I possibly express it? You’re not only made by God, but God’s own Son died for you rather than let you perish. That’s the truth.

Listen to our Lord before Pilate (John 19:1–16). The Jews eventually told Pilate that he said he was the Son of God and they demanded his death for blasphemy. Being a pagan, Pilate was aware of the old legends that now and again this earth could be visited by godlike men, ‘and he was afraid,’ says John (see v. 8). He took Christ inside again and said, ‘where are you

from?' Our Lord didn't answer him. 'You'd better start talking,' said Pilate. 'Don't you know I have the power to crucify you and the power to release you?'

Why didn't the Lord tell him there and then where he came from? I would have said, 'Lord, this Pilate deserves to be given a lesson. Why won't you put your glory on and let your deity shine?' Had he done so, it would have sizzled Pilate to an ember. Our Lord didn't explain where he came from. He said, 'Pilate, you talk of your power. You would have no power against me at all except it were given you from above.' God incarnate stood there in front of his creature, allowing him to use his free will and authority to judge his Creator unknowingly, and sentence him to the cross.

Do you believe it? Do you believe that was really God, the Creator of the universe in the person of his Son, standing before Pilate, putting himself into his hands and allowing the creature to crucify him? Is it true? Is that the truth about God?

If you want to know what God is like look at his Son standing before Pilate, allowing himself to be crucified for you. That's the truth; the ultimate truth about this universe is a person, and that person is God. And you know the truth, don't you? Thank God he's opened our eyes to see the truth: 'for . . . while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son' (Rom 5:10). This is the truth.

### **Our witness to the truth**

We have come into this world and we need food and clothes, but the big reason is so that we, like our blessed Lord, shall witness the good confession to God's truth in our own little way in the time that's given to us.

One day, God is going to put on a show throughout the universe, the likes of which has never been seen before, which the blessed and only Sovereign, who is invisible, shall stage at the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will then come in all the glory of his Father and of the holy angels. And when he comes, how glorious it will be; and how wonderful to be able to say that by God's grace when I was on earth I gave all I had to witness to him who died at Calvary to save sinners and to save me. It'll be a disappointment if I have to say, 'I wish I had told more people about him and lived in the good of it while I had the chance.'

May God bless his word to our hearts for his name's sake.

## 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.