

# **Serving God**

*David W. Gooding*

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## Seed Bed for Service

As I understand it from the briefing that has been given to me, these are not sessions for the preaching of the Word, though of course in all that we say and do it is assumed that the Word of God is the dominating factor in our background.

Rather, our sessions are in the nature of deliberations. We are like the board of some gigantic business, and ours is the noblest business on the face of the earth. We serve under the most worthy and wise director, our sovereign Lord, the Redeemer and Saviour of men and women. We are not here to occupy our time with exciting stories that move emotion and promote very little practical work thereafter. We are here to consult about the prosperity of the business we are in, to think about how we might develop it, to consider whether we are using our resources to the full extent and how we could provide more.

I wish for my part that the programme had allowed for comeback and discussion, because the topic will necessarily bear weightily upon the elders in each assembly. By the time I have finished I fear they might say: 'Look here, young Gooding! A third of what you have said was exceedingly good, but we already do it. Another third was a counsel of perfection and utterly unrelated to life. The final third was good but completely theoretical—how do you propose we should put it into practice?'

We have so many experienced missionaries here that I tremble in my shoes as I offer my meagre advice, but I would like to list for you some suggestions as to how a local church could and should act as a seed bed for missionary service, and cultivate practical interest in the Lord's work.

1. By instilling into the hearts of all the believers a sense of the glory of God and of the wealth and wonder of salvation, until the believers feel they cannot contain themselves but must go and tell somebody about it.

2. By breaking down the false distinction between the servants of the Lord, and the rest of us who aren't expected to be servants of the Lord. A moment's thought will show that every believer is expected to serve him in whatever he or she is called to do.

3. By realistically being informed of the world's spiritual needs in such a way as to promote a profound compassion for the millions of the lost, and then by realistically training and preparing to meet that need.

4. By a leadership that knows how imaginatively to suggest ways in which all believers can be involved in furthering the work of the Lord.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is dealt with at the beginning of the next talk.

So then, to come to my first point. *Elders, and preachers and teachers specially, can surely help by enabling us to sense the awesome glory of the God we serve and the immeasurable wealth of the gospel that has saved us.* The words *riches* and *wealth* appear very often in the writings of Paul. It seems to me it was the sense of wealth in his heart that sustained and motivated him in his arduous journeys.

In one sense I am the last person to speak on this topic. I was brought up in an assembly of godly men, and I reverence their memory. But a missionary meeting was an occurrence like the proverbial blue moon. I never came within inches of a missionary in all my youth. How then did I develop any interest in the Lord's work, either at home or abroad? There were probably all sorts of hidden influences from parents and elders who prayed (let me not underestimate it). But I suspect what sparked it was that there came a preacher to our assembly, and he expounded God's Word. Not by simply preaching sermons about it, but expounding it in such a way that, though I was still in my teens, I sensed that somehow the Bible itself had come alive and was speaking to my heart. At fourteen years old I witnessed that kind of preaching transform our local church. I watched the effect on my brothers and sisters, cousins and friends. There was no doubt that they were saved, but they were exceedingly worldly, with very little interest in the things of God or in his service. They seemed to regard the elders as rather pussyfooted relics from the past! I watched them gain what to me was an extraordinary interest in God's Word, which transformed their lives. Some of them became elders and preachers. The impression made on me has lasted a lifetime. It opened a gate into the treasure of God's Word, for which I take no credit and I freely confess to you that preaching is a thing that very often I would rather not do.

Why, then, do I preach and teach? Because, when God speaks to me in his Word and I hear his voice expounding the treasures of his wisdom, it so fills my heart that I must go and tell somebody. I get the feeling like those famous lepers outside besieged Samaria (2 Kings 7). They found treasure after treasure in the tents abandoned by the enemy, and they began to fill their empty pockets with the loot. Suddenly conscience began to work, and they said, 'We do not well. If we stuff all this treasure into our own pockets, and don't tell a starving city what we have found, some evil will befall us.' It was that kind of constraint that moved them.

I don't know how you have found it, but I have noticed that sometimes it is a little bit difficult for believers' children to come at this sense of wealth in the Word. Here is some old rascal, he has been in and out of prison, robbed the Bank of England and what have you! God saved him, and as the result of his conversion there is such a magnificent change. The glory of John 3:16 haunts him. He makes a marvellous evangelist. But there are many of us who didn't have such a lurid past to get converted from. Our worst crime before we got converted was stealing a bit of jam out of the pantry! We got saved because we heard the preachers telling about the horrors of hell. We didn't want to go there, so we trusted the Lord. But that was that! We had our ticket to glory, and thereafter the Bible was a set of rules that you kept (more or less).

That would hardly drive anybody to the ends of the earth to take a message of salvation, would it? And how will you help the likes of me, who did steal jam and one or two other things but I got converted at ten? What difference did it make? You will do it by causing me to see and to feel the wonder of the glory of God and the exceeding greatness of the wealth of

his holy Word, until my heart senses that if I don't go and tell somebody 'some evil will befall me'.

I was in another assembly, also led by good and godly men who were concerned to see that some of us got involved in the work of the Lord. So they were constantly asking us to witness for the Lord. In the end it got under my skin and only provoked resentment because I really hadn't got anything to witness about. The mainspring in witnessing for the Lord is to have something in your heart to talk about, some great wealth of a salvation!

So I commit to any elders that great and glorious task to feed the flock of God. To open up the glories of God and his Word to the hearts of the young, and to us all, that shall propel us according to our abilities and callings to go and tell others. Without it the call to missionary service can descend into being a call of mere works, and in the end it will run into the sand.

Secondly, *I suggest that we need to break that false division among the people of God into two groups: servants of the Lord, and then the rest of us who are not really expected to serve him.* The biblical view is that we are all servants of the Lord. Indeed, the mark of a converted man or woman is that he or she has an interest in the spread of the gospel. Paul often reflects upon the converts he has made in different cities. Sitting in prison, as he recalls their faces and their experience, he begins to list the reasons why he thinks their conversion was genuine. If an apostle were to look at me and ask what evidence is there that I am genuine, I wonder what he would find. What would he be looking for? Paul had no doubt that the people at Philippi were genuine believers.

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. (Phil 1:3-5)

Isn't it an automatic reflex that I am concerned for the furtherance of the gospel that saved me? What kind of a salvation would it be if I were not concerned for its propagation? Lest we think that the love of Christ was some bubbling emotion for Paul, always coming to the boil in his heart, he lets us into a secret:

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. (2 Cor 5:14-15)

We may best illustrate this point by an Old Testament analogy. After the Passover in Israel it was required that all firstborn sons be completely devoted to the Lord. I can imagine one firstborn son, growing to the age of perception, arguing, 'Why should I be devoted to the Lord, and Thomas not be? It isn't fair!' And the answer would come back in the form of logic: 'If you had not been redeemed by the blood of that Passover lamb, you wouldn't have a life. The night that lamb died and you were saved by taking protection under its blood, you lost ownership of yourself. If you reject the call to be devoted to the Lord, go back and expose yourself to the wrath of the avenging angel!'

It is easily said, but it requires some rigorous logic to put it into effect in our lives. 'You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body' (1 Cor 6:19–20). That doesn't just apply to a small group of *servants of the Lord*. It applies to us all. It calls on me to ask myself, 'If the blessed Saviour said, "My dear child, what would you say your service for me is?" what would I say?' How can elders help us to respond in this regard?

You will remember that the Levites were eventually substituted for the firstborn, and they had to give themselves to the service of the Lord. At first I am sure it was an exciting thing to be a Levite. Fancy being allowed to handle the sacred vessels of the ministry, to put the curtains in place, and handle the cherubim! But it gets a little bit ordinary after you have put the tabernacle up some five thousand six hundred and seventy-five times!

What should keep them going? When they were inducted there was a great ceremony. They were brought to the altar and offered as a living sacrifice to God. How will any young person be induced to offer his or her life to the service of God? God had arranged another service at that time, called *the dedication of the altar*. The altar stood in the middle of the congregation. With the crowds looking on the elders of Israel brought their gifts for the dedication of the altar, showing what value they placed on this altar and what it meant to them. Then there was many a gasp of wonderment among the young, as the princes stepped forward and brought their silver and costly gifts and laid them at the foot of the altar. They saw what that altar meant to those princely men.

My dear elders, how will you help us to yield our bodies a living sacrifice in the service of the Lord? You will help us as we see the value you place upon the cross of Christ. We listen as you worship and watch your devotion, and ask ourselves, 'What makes my elders such devoted self-sacrificing men? The cross of Christ means so much to them. Why does it not mean so much to me?' And we begin to learn the secret.

If it is our task to train ourselves to believe that we are all servants of God, it will inevitably mean some good, practical teaching on the question of careers. The old commandment is ever new: 'Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.' It doesn't mean, give out some tracts before you go out to work in the morning and then you can do your own business! It means, rather, that our motive for going to daily work must be first that of serving the Lord, seeking his rule in our lives. Not merely going to work to make money, not even money to give to the Lord's servants. But going to work to seek the Lord's rule and government in the practical details of running the home, washing the dishes, totting up accounts on your computer and dealing with difficult men at work. In all these things we are seeking God's rule in our lives.

It was not only the slaves in the New Testament who were told that as they hoed the sugar beet on their farms they served the Lord Christ. It should be true of the lot of us. You do not have the choice between serving the Lord and entering a career. Whatever career we have, be it parenthood, grocery, medicine, it has got to be a serving of the Lord, or else we shall become Gentiles, like our unconverted neighbours next door!

Peter had to be taught that lesson before he went out into what is popularly called *full-time work*. He was a good fisherman. He was by the beach, washing and mending his nets, and a preacher came along. He asked Peter for the use of his boat as a pulpit.

Peter said, 'By all means!' He gladly allowed his boat to be used. He was a businessman and he would gladly lend a spare bit of equipment for the Lord's work.

Afterwards the preacher said, 'Peter, I would like you to let down your nets.'

Peter said, 'Well, Sir, you may be good at the preaching, but when it comes to fishing I am the expert and there are no fish about.'

'Well, Peter,' said the Lord, 'I would like you to let the nets down because I tell you to!' And for the first time in his life he went fishing, not because he expected a catch or profit in money terms; he went fishing just to please the Lord. What a lesson to learn, and what a lovely glow it sheds on life.

Obviously not all of us are going to be preachers or overseas missionaries. Most of us will stay at home. Indeed, you wouldn't get missionaries if you didn't have mothers. It takes a lot of changing of nappies to produce one missionary! But what a wonderful dignity it casts over daily work when we are doing it as a servant serving the Lord. In that frame of mind we are at the Lord's disposal more readily when he calls to further service.

Thirdly, *we ought realistically to be informing ourselves as to the need and preparing to meet it.* If you tell Christian folk that lots of people are living in squalid and fearful conditions in other lands it provokes a little generosity. If you can get a missionary along with some pictures of people suffering then it will provoke enormous generosity. As a mere Englishman, I can say that the Irish are very noble givers. But if we are concerned for people's physical need, wouldn't we be wise to inform ourselves realistically of their spiritual need? 'O yes,' you say, 'everyone will perish if they reject the Saviour!' But how can you say that glibly? Inform yourself of the vast and poignant need, not only of men and women in godless societies but of men and women under the darkness of evil religions.

We know how to preach the gospel against the background of Victorian Christendom, where so many thousands were lost because they supposed salvation was by works. We know how to preach salvation by grace. But the world changes, and while that message still needs to be preached worldwide there are bigger contexts. Men and women are pious in Hinduism, Buddhism and Shintoism, and before you can tell them about the grace of God in Christ you will want to prove to them that there is a God. Haven't we got to educate people as to the spiritual needs of the world?

Perhaps not all are called to be missionaries, preachers or teachers. But Paul exhorts Timothy not only to teach the church in general but to teach certain people in particular. 'What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also' (2 Tim 2:2). If we are to produce another generation of responsible teachers, missionaries, pastors and preachers, have we not got to look to our teaching, its thoroughness and its speed? Sometimes I go to assemblies and I ask, 'What are you doing in your weekly Bible study?' They say, 'We have been five years in Romans, and we haven't got beyond chapter 6!' I think to myself, 'Your young people will be middle-aged before you have got up to Colossians or Revelation.'

If we believe the whole Bible is God's Word (and we would go to the stake for that belief), haven't we got to look to our methods and programmes of teaching to see that each generation covers it all? Or at least each generation covers the whole of the New Testament, especially

those who are going to be Timothys and effective preachers and missionaries and teachers themselves. We cannot afford to let our teaching be lackadaisical, with no set aims and objectives—and sometimes no results. We need to inform ourselves of God's Word, and if we are going to promote missionary interest we would need to inform ourselves also of those spiritual needs in this world to which the Bible is the answer.

While recently in Russia I was invited to talk on Christianity at a State-run school. After the session the deputy headmistress informed me that they had had a lot of unidentified flying objects in Russia. 'In one of them they told us that Buddhism was the true religion, not Christianity,' she said.

What would you have said to her? Would you have opened the Bible and said, 'Look here, my good woman, there is salvation in no other . . .'? I thought, 'I am the first Christian teacher she has ever had in the school.' (She had told me that she was interested in introducing all religions into the school.) If I said that, I might alienate her by appearing to be pig-headed. I said, 'Madam, how very interesting! We have not had any, so I can't tell you about UFOs or the people inside them. But if they told you that Buddhism is the true religion, do you know what Buddhism teaches?' Well, she didn't know so I proceeded to tell her. (It's the first time I had acted as a Buddhist missionary!)

'It teaches that if at last you escape the cycle of life so that you don't have to be reincarnated, you can go off into the beyond, and then you are available as a spirit to come and help people on earth. If that was a real UFO, and the inhabitants inside talked like you said they did, they could have been Buddhists. Or they could have been spirits, or maybe demons.'

I told her that I was in Japan recently talking to Buddhists. One dear lady had asked me, 'Why do you say that Jesus is the only Saviour?' My answer to her was this. 'In Buddhism there is no such thing as forgiveness, only your karma—an inescapable law of cause and effect. I am a sinner, and one of the first things I need is forgiveness. Jesus Christ is the only one who ever offered it to me.'

You say, 'We don't need to learn about these other religions!' My dear, good friends! In England—if not in Ireland—the schools are full of the teaching of comparative religion. In many cases teachers will give the children the impression that all religions are equally good, and Christianity is only one religion among many. Haven't we a duty to teach our children the facts, and why Christianity is true? We could do with some rigorous preparatory teaching lessons for young people so that they will be adequate preachers and teachers and missionaries one of these days.

Take my words as suggestions, and in your wisdom mull them over. I pray that some of them may be helpful and issue in increased efficiency in preparing ourselves and our churches for rigorous serving of the Lord at home and abroad.



## Rewards for Service

*Reading: 1 Corinthians 9:17–27*

The task now set before me is that I should remember with you the rewards that our blessed Master has set out before us. However, before I do that, I would like to talk about certain practical things.<sup>2</sup>

Earlier I made as a suggestion that one way an assembly could encourage people to be interested in the service of the Lord was to put before them some imaginative ideas of how people of various abilities could partake in the work of the Lord, not only in this country but also abroad. I would like to make a few observations on that score. As I do so, remember that I am not a real missionary; I am more like a wanderer! I do, by God's grace and generosity to me, visit missionaries and see the Lord's work in many countries. I testify that I am the one who profits, more than the missionaries. What an enriching experience it is to witness the work and the labour and the sacrifice of our brothers and sisters on the mission field. Some ideas have occurred to me now and again, and I relay them to you—not as rules to be followed generally by everybody but as ideas that might stick in a head or two, or a heart or two.

First of all, my appeal goes for the retired people to take up missionary work. I don't see why the young people should always be the object of our exhortations. I was in Tchabi in Zaire in February, and had the great pleasure of seeing the noble work that is being done there by Pearl Winterburn, a missionary from Canada. When she went there the place was accessible only in the dry season down a narrow track. In the wintertime you could not get there unless you flew in. An African evangelist had been there and folks had been converted. There was the beginning of an assembly—and that was that!

Nowadays when you fly in the first thing that strikes you is the beautiful runway (by African standards). Then what looks like a tower with the name Tchabi on the side. For a moment you might nearly think it was Heathrow! And then you would be impressed by the buildings: a large assembly hall, some nurses' homes where the nurses find practical training on the field, two places for schools, brick-making sheds, and solar panels to power the pump to bring water up from the stream below. A remarkable work by any standards; supervised and led on by this remarkable woman. She knows all about brick making, and what she doesn't know is not worth mentioning!

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<sup>2</sup> This is point 4 from the previous talk.

But I found one of the secrets, in a merry-faced retired couple likewise from Canada. The good man was an expert in many trades, and what he did not already know he learned. His wife was a very capable housewife indeed. From time to time this couple obtain a six-month visa to go to Tchabi. So that Pearl Winterburn might proceed with the work of supervising that large mission station, the good man gives himself to the technical details that need to be done. It was he who installed the solar heating and the plant mechanism for the pumps. While he is busy at that his wife looks after the household, seeing after visiting missionaries and wanderers like myself, and a thousand and one other things. I never saw a happier couple in their retirement in all my life!

What a contribution it is, and I fell to thinking how many people there must be with all kinds of trades, who would like an interesting job to do in their retirement. Perhaps they could even retire early for the purpose. They could support themselves by their pensions and not be a burden to the missionaries, and make a lasting and solid contribution to the work of the Lord. What a delightful way of spending your retirement!

Talking about that, one can't help noticing in some countries—in Spain, Japan, China, for instance—what openings there are for young people who are prepared to make a career in teaching English as a foreign language. Of course, that is no new thing to say; and young people who have those qualifications will have thought of it before I did. God has been using it very widely in many countries. There were hundreds, if not thousands of young Christian people in China before the recent crackdown that were very carefully and wisely teaching English in Sunday schools, colleges and universities; but doing it so that they might witness for the Lord. When China opens again—as surely you believe it will, under God's goodness—there will be gigantic opportunities for young people that have prepared themselves for teaching English as a foreign language in the institutions of that country.

I think now of a good man who runs a language school in Valladolid in Spain. His first introduction to Spain was when he went with OM in the very difficult days when Franco still ruled. With tremendous courage he and other people in OM wrote tracts in Spanish, dared to take to the streets, preached to the people, and spent more than one night in the police station as a result. He came to the conclusion that he would like to live in Spain but not as a full-time missionary. As such he couldn't get into large sections of Spanish society, so he decided to set up a school. There are many schools in Spain for the teaching of English. Many of them are sheer moneymaking devices that do a very poor job and charge large fees. He decided to get a team of young Christian people round him. They now have a delightful school in that city. Some of the university lecturers, together with the wives of the managers of business, and professional people come to the school. Their secret is the good value they give for money and the top standards academically. They do it so that they may infiltrate that level of society in their country. The good man who leads the school has become an elder in a Spanish assembly in that city. At a time when that assembly was going through very difficult waters, by God's grace he was able to be one of the major helps to get it back on to an even keel. It is beginning to grow for the glory of God.

We have been reminded that there is going to be a united Europe some day, with all barriers down. Thinking of careers, why shouldn't we harness our careers to the spreading of the gospel? I don't know that there is a lot to be said for the overwhelming necessity of

becoming an accountant in Augher or Clougher, or Fivemiletown, if you could be an accountant in Sofia, Bucharest or Novosibirsk! Why shouldn't we be abroad in our careers? You say, 'But we can't do that: it would mean learning a language!' What do you suppose the missionaries have had to do?

We have the famous example of the woman, Lydia, in the Acts of the Apostles. She was in the clothing business, importing high-fashion material. Purple was very expensive gown shop material. When she got converted she put her business at the Lord's disposal for the furtherance of the gospel. When Paul first came to Corinth he was alone. He had to work all week to make ends meet, and he preached on the Sabbath. When the brethren came down from Macedonia he was able to give himself full time to the work of the Lord. Why? Because the Macedonians had sent a hefty gift. I suspect Lydia had made a contribution from her fashion shop! Why not?

Talking of careers leads me to have a word in the ear of some of my younger brothers and sisters, and some of their parents. To some it is given to be academics, and much thought goes into the decision. How should we advise our young people what careers to take up? Sometimes, I have to confess to you, I am eaten up with envy (which isn't a good Christian thing to be), as I see so many of our tip-top brains going into medicine. You say, 'That shows you are not a missionary! Look what a noble work the medical missionaries have done.' Yes, indeed they have. And who could not admire the sacrifice, when you think of the money they could have made if they had been at home, and what in fact they actually get. Not to mention the problems that will arise for the education of their children.

But there are great needs not only in academic circles (and not only in this country but in others) for experts in other fields. Why not a little physics? I know it is horribly difficult, but then it is vastly interesting. You say, 'What kind of a job could I get if I were a physicist?' Actually, I was thinking what you could do in the Lord's work if you were a physicist. What a voice you could have on the continent at the moment and in places like Russia if you were a biologist and a believer.

Our good friend—that famous son of Armagh, John Lennox—was recently in Russia, reading research papers in mathematics in the highest academies of the country. He got as many opportunities to talk about Christianity as he did about mathematics. I was hearing just the other afternoon from another servant of the Lord how one of their team had been openly invited by the university authorities in one place in Russia to visit them. And what did they want to know? Well not, first, how they can get their sins forgiven through the blood of Christ. They had not got so far yet as believing that there was a God. But what they wanted was someone to come and talk to them about what the Bible has to say on creation. Is what the Bible has to say credible in the light of modern science?

And as I look upon our young friends who have the opportunities of training before them, I ask you to take it to the Lord. There are big battlefields in our own country, let alone in atheist countries, where it is not always medicine that will be the battlefield for the minds of men and women. It will be men and women who are believers, and can talk with some authority in fields of biology and physics and cosmology that are needed. Why shouldn't we gear our missionary strategy to the realities of a big modern world?

When I was in Japan I asked two Christians (one a missionary, one a local Japanese) what message I ought to take home. I said, 'Surely the time is past when you want missionaries?' The Japanese was the more insistent, and they are the more polite I know! No, they still wanted missionaries. I said to the missionary, 'Perhaps it would be a good thing if you had men and women who could occupy positions in business and teach the Word in their spare time.' He said that that would be an excellent thing. As you know, some of our missionaries are doing that to great effect in the universities in Japan. 'But,' he said, 'they would have to have the language.' It's no good going with a stuttering language that can't talk at a level that is acceptable to that modern, sophisticated nation. If it is not acceptable, it tends to devalue the gospel in their eyes. You'll need it if you are going into business, and it will take every hour of every day for two or three years to learn it. And how are you going to be maintained? If you were selling jam in Japan, you would pay for your representative to attend the very best language school. Why should we not do so, for we have more than jam to sell! Here it means a team-effort of men who are prepared to notice suitable young people and be prepared to sustain them and make an investment for the Lord's sake and for the future of his work.

Finally, I come to the old but not altogether dodderly! There are some countries and some places where missionaries would be much helped by a visit from senior, sensible Christians. They can sometimes be a fresh voice and break some of the irritations that come when missionaries are on a confined station and see and hear nobody but the other few missionaries. They can help relieve their tiredness.

Sometimes missionaries are in places where they can teach people only the very basics, but it is like a parent being with infants all day long and they never have the chance to talk about spiritual things with mature believers.

There is a great ministry for those that are capable of sound, serious, biblical teaching; even in countries that otherwise are advanced but because of the centuries of lack, and oppression in times past, there is need for people that can teach the wholesome, straightforward, bread-and-butter doctrines of the gospel. Sometimes that is easier for visitors than for foreigners living there.

*What then are our rewards for serving the Lord—present and future?* I can testify to one reward, and the truth of our Lord's words. He said, 'There is nobody that has left home, parents, children, for my sake, but what shall receive a hundred times in this present life—and in the life to come, eternal life' (see Matt 19:29). I stand before you a very wealthy man! I have mothers and fathers galore, brothers and sisters by the thousand. How lovely a thing the service of the Lord is, and the reality of the family of God round this wide world. When people abroad ask me why I live in Northern Ireland when I am an Englishman, I say, 'Where else would a sensible man live, when I have hundreds of friends there that are as near to me as my physical brothers and sisters?'

Then there is the actual reward of the job. Said our Lord to his disciples when he was seated on the well and the woman had gone away, and they came offering him food to eat: 'I have food to eat that you do not know about.' They asked if anybody had brought him some rations. 'No', he explained, 'my food is to do the will of him who sent me' (John 4:32–34). He was not saying that he earns his bread and butter by preaching the gospel. He said that

preaching the gospel and bringing salvation to a woman by a well was his food! He lived on it. We shall hardly do the work of the Lord, whatever it is, as we should, if it is not in some real sense our food. We shall scarce do it well if it is merely our profession. And certainly not well if it is only our hobby that we do if and when we have spare time.

Sometimes people ask me, 'What do you think my job for the Lord is?' I reply, 'What would you enjoy doing?' It is interesting to see the surprise that goes over their faces! Some people have the idea that if you are in the right job for the Lord the evidence for that is that you hate doing it. It is a sacrifice every time the clock ticks a second. Of course it isn't! What kind of a taskmaster do you think the Lord is? Yes there is toil, blood, sweat and tears in our work for the Lord. How could it be different—we follow the Saviour of Calvary. We are involved in a battle and in battles people get hurt. There is monotony and often you have to make yourself work even when you don't feel like it.

But don't you enjoy your work for the Lord? What a slander it would be upon God as the paymaster if you didn't enjoy it. Why, I have known men who have enjoyed gardening. How they do it, I don't know! God made the flowers so of course they ought to enjoy it (and so should I). I knew a church elder who cultivated his back garden to grow flowers so he could take them round some of the old people in his neighbourhood. And then as they were expressing their gratitude he would tell them about the blessed Lord who made the flowers. Why shouldn't we enjoy our work? What then is my reward? Just doing the work! If you doubt that, remember that in eternity the reward for working is to have more work to do.

Some people imagine that the reward for working for the Saviour here on earth is getting at last to heaven, sinking down into a heavenly divan and putting your feet up on a heavenly footstool, being attended by angels in white robes. But according to our Lord's parables the reward for using your one, five or ten talents, and doing it well, will be that instead of having to look after ten talents you will have to look after ten cities. Having one million pounds to look after here on earth would be a job that I shouldn't care for, the responsibility would keep me awake too many nights. If you don't want to work when you get to heaven, imagine having ten cities to look after! If you want to enjoy heaven to the maximum, remember you won't want to sit down too long. Nobody there gets tired! Some of the chief joys of heaven will be working for God in all the schemes that his divine ingenuity will then invent. And we prepare for it now by faithfully discharging our gifts.

Some people have said that it wouldn't be good for truly Christian people to work out of a motive for getting a reward. That would be an unworthy motive altogether! We should do like the cleric<sup>3</sup> reminds us, 'to fight and not to heed the wounds; to toil, and not to seek for rest; to labour, and not to ask for any reward, save that of knowing that we do Thy will.' And in a sense they are right. There's just enough truth in it so that you could justify it by certain lessons from the Bible! For instance those two good men, John and James, the sons of Zebedee. They came to the Lord and asked that they might sit the one on the right hand and the other on the left in his glory. Our Lord had to tell them that they didn't know what they were

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<sup>3</sup> Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556).

asking—could they pay the price for it? They said, ‘Lord, we don’t care what it costs, we are prepared for anything to get that position!’

I admire their ambition. What is your ambition? You say, ‘I would be content with a draughty little place just inside the door.’ There aren’t going to be any draughty little places! The trouble with John and James was that they were ambitious, and they were doing it for what reward they got out of it. There is nothing wrong in looking for reward, but they were looking for the wrong reward. They thought the reward was sitting on big thrones and being second and third in the kingdom. Our Lord had to correct them. What does it mean to be first? The one who is first is first because he serves the most people. Our Lord will be first because he serves most. He hasn’t done with his serving yet. He says, ‘If you are faithful to me now, when you get home I shall sit you down at my table and I shall gird myself and serve you’ (see Luke 12:35–37).

Here’s a farmer with a sty full of pigs. He comes with a pile of mush and the pigs are screaming and shouting as if they hadn’t had a meal for a week and as though the whole universe exists to feed them. The patient farmer slops the whole pile of mush into the trough, and they get at it like only pigs can! Who is bigger, the farmer or the pigs? You say, ‘The farmer, of course.’ But all he’s doing is serving pigs! You say, ‘That’s the sign of his bigness.’

In another parable there were men who went to work for their lord, not for the reward they got for it but for the sheer love of working. They were the men in the vineyard. The master went out early and hired certain men to work all day long. At intervals he hired more and at the last hour there were some men still standing.

‘Why aren’t you working?’ he said.

‘Nobody employed us.’

‘Would you like to work?’

‘We wish somebody would let us work!’ they replied.

‘You go and work in my vineyard, and at the end of the day I shall give you what reward is good.’

They went to work for the sheer delight of working. When it came to the pay hour the master gave one whole denarius to those that had worked only an hour. The others came, particularly those who had worked all day. They got out their pocket calculators to work out the amount they were going to get. ‘If they get a denarius for one hour’s work, we have worked twelve hours plus the heat of the day!’ They were rejoicing in what they were going to get, but when their turn came they only got one denarius. They kicked up a fuss. ‘But,’ said the master, ‘didn’t you bargain for it? I am perfectly just, I have kept my bargain.’

This teaches us that if we go in a bargaining spirit—so much work for so much reward—we shall get what we have earned and nothing more. The Lord will always be fair, and if we merely do it out of a sense of getting what we earned, that’s what we will get! There is a possibility of getting more than you earned. The other men had only worked an hour and they got a full denarius. To the critics our Lord said, ‘Is your eye evil because I am good?’ When he comes to his judgment seat the Lord reserves the right to give some more than they strictly earned. He reserves the right not merely to be just but positively good and generous.

What do we have to do to qualify? I confess to you that, when the Lord comes, if I get only what I have strictly earned how little it will be. If I want the Lord to have mercy on me and

give me more than I deserve, then perhaps I shall have to learn to work, 'not counting the cost, to fight and not to heed the wounds,' but to work for the sheer love of working for the Saviour.

'You heard what Onesiphorus did when he was in Rome,' says Paul, as he writes to Timothy. 'Everybody else who came to Rome didn't bother to come and visit me, but this good man sought me out and found me. Dangerous though it was for him, he came and identified himself with me. He went that extra mile. The Lord grant him to find mercy of the Lord in that day' (see 2 Tim 1:16–18). Not mercy in the sense of the forgiveness of sins—every believer has that, and we have it already. Why shall I need mercy in the coming day? I shall need mercy as I stand before the judgment seat of Christ to have my work assessed. God give us the heart of that dear man who went the extra mile, and went out of his way—cost what it may—to visit Paul in prison. He shall have mercy when it comes to the distribution of rewards.

When I was at school there was a policy among many of the boys in regard to the annual prize day. Fuddy-duddy men, generals and things, used to hop on to the platform and give prizes for diligent work at chemistry and French and other such subjects when we might have been out playing rugby or something. There were some boys who said that if some silly people wanted to go in for a prize, well let them! Fancy getting a little book for all those nights of study when you might have been out enjoying yourself! I understood the point. But it is not with a little book that the Lord proposes to reward his servants, it is an incorruptible crown. When the Lord gives you that crown it will last eternally; and if the Lord cannot give it to you, you won't have it for all eternity. Therefore, let us determine to fight, work and toil until the Master comes.

## The Importance of Serving God

*Reading: Matthew 10:14, 23, 28–42*

Wouldn't we like to stand with our missionary friends in their sometimes lonely harvest fields and feel the joy and the thrill of reaping the sheaves and bringing them home for the Master! We may get some of that joy by proxy as we listen to them and feel that we are in that same great army of the Lord.

Let us not give the impression that serving the Lord Jesus is a dull, sorrowful and always a sacrificial thing. Angels are not chosen or called to serve the Lord of glory in the spread of the gospel, but even angels' hearts ring with delight at the joy of sinners repenting. It will be one of the chief joys of heaven, and if we would like a little heaven on earth there is no harm in our enjoying some of it here.

For all that, nothing will be able to disguise the fact that we are engaged in very serious business. In these last twelve months the face of the whole world has been changed in a way that two years ago I suspect none of us ever dreamed.<sup>4</sup> Though we prayed very often, we didn't expect that anything like it would be seen in our lifetime, or that it could possibly happen so soon. With those changes have come unparalleled and staggeringly great opportunities. The blessed Lord, who has opened these doors in such a spectacular way and given us these opportunities, will be expecting us to make use of them to the full. If we were to let them idly pass by, it would be very difficult to account for our behaviour when at last we stand before the Lord. These days we have unimaginable opportunities to serve against the backdrop of a world that has changed completely.

You will not need me to remind you either, that in a few months' time the whole of the Middle East could be engulfed in a hideous war<sup>5</sup>, costing the lives of thousands of armed forces and of civilians in many countries. What the repercussions of that war would be, who can tell? Whether there is a war or not, the present situation has put a topic on the international agenda that must be faced urgently. That is the topic of Israel and her neighbours. We could scarce have thought of such a situation happening in our lifetime.

A few years ago whatever America did in the Middle East, Russia was obliged to do the very opposite, and vice-versa. But with the change, America and Russia stand, if not shoulder-

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<sup>4</sup> Significant world events in 1989–90 included the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, the breaching of the Berlin Wall, the start of anti-apartheid marches in South Africa, and in China the Tiananmen Square protests.

<sup>5</sup> The First Gulf War began two months after this conference.



to-shoulder, broadly on the same side. And politicians of many countries, resisting Saddam Hussein's efforts to involve Israel at this stage, nevertheless are saying that when this present phase is over they must tackle the problem of Israel.

The last thing I would wish to be would be a prophecy-monger, but it seems to me we have moved a significant step forward towards that time about which the prophets spoke, when all the nations of the earth shall come against Jerusalem. Scripture assures us that they shall be dealt with by the coming of our blessed Lord Jesus in power and great glory.

The very mention of that event brings me to what must be my preoccupation this evening—to sketch in once more the great backdrop against which not only we in this advanced age have been called to serve, but God's servants all down the Christian centuries. It gives the energy, zeal and the godly sense of haste that nerves the muscles and drives the tired bones onward.

There are three great elements in that backdrop, as we learn from the briefing that our Lord gave his apostles when first they went out to preach.

1. The final judgment of men and the part that we must play in that.
2. The expectation of the coming of the Son of Man in power and great glory and the implications for us in our tactics and timetable for the accomplishment of the Lord's work.
3. The prospect of the coming great day of reward shining brightly, warming our hearts and cheering our spirits.

Our Lord sketched in this background for his apostles when they went on their first missionary journey through the villages and towns of Israel (Matt 10:5–15). They were told to go out in front of the Lord, to prepare the people for his coming and preach the gospel of the kingdom of God. Within the comparatively short time of a few months, or perhaps a year, they came back with tremendous excitement in their hearts to tell the Lord all the wonderful things that had happened and the tremendous thrill they had received from serving him.

It was therefore a very short-lived and restricted missionary journey. They were explicitly told that they were not to go even to the Samaritans, let alone to the Gentiles—simply to the cities of Israel. It was over in a few months; and yet *they were to go out and preach against the backdrop of all the solemnities of the final day of judgment.*

And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town. (vv.14–15)

See how the Lord Jesus reminded them of the gravity of the task they did. What they did and said—the very words that they preached—would one day be called in evidence in the august courtroom of the final judgment. Mark what he said. He didn't simply say, 'If anyone will not receive *my* word'; he said, 'If anyone will not receive *you* or listen to *your* word, it will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.'

We must not exaggerate. Our Lord was talking to men whom he had appointed to the special task of being apostles. They were sent out inspired by the Lord himself, and in the strict sense to receive an apostle is to receive the Lord Jesus. To receive what an inspired apostle says by word of his mouth or his written word is to receive the words of the Lord Jesus. We are not in the same rank. And yet there are many men and women, some in our own town, and the only word of Christ they will ever hear will be through our words from our lips! Their eternity may hang upon what they do with the words that we speak.

There is no such thing as 'giving a little word in the gospel'. Or if there is, I don't know what a big word would be! Our blessed Lord Jesus is to be the judge at the solemn great white throne. He has told us in language that we can bear and understand what some of the proceedings will be as the case of the people of Capernaum, for instance, comes up before the judge. Witnesses will be called. The Queen of Sheba will be asked to stand up in court and to speak before the judge of all the earth for these people of Capernaum and to witness what amount of evidence of God's light and truth she had.

The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. (Matt 12:42)

She will say, 'All I had was a faint rumour in my country that away in Israel there was a king appointed by God, and through his lips divine wisdom could be heard. I was so eager to hear that I came those sun-scorched miles through the desert to hear Solomon.' The judge shall draw the solemn consequences for the men of Capernaum. Preaching in their very streets was the Greater than Solomon, and they couldn't trouble themselves to cross the road to hear him.

On that great day there will maybe stand up a woman; and when the judge has to pronounce the words of departure he will have to say, 'You could have been saved, for you heard the gospel. Your next-door neighbour was a believer. Do you not remember the morning when you were hanging out the washing and you talked over the garden fence? Do you remember the words she spoke? You knew that you ought to believe then and be saved, but you steeled your heart against *my* words that your next-door neighbour spoke. And now it is forever too late.'

In those thousand-and-one ways that God uses us to convey his word, may we remember that we speak them against the backdrop of the final judgment. What a responsibility it brings—the thought that somebody's eternity might in some sense depend upon what I say. Suppose I was to say it in some unfriendly, bigoted kind of way so that my neighbour couldn't distinguish between the lovely message of the gospel I was trying to get across and my bitter speech? How shall I speak it well enough, as such great things hang upon what people do with the words of the gospel that I speak?

through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? (2 Cor 2:14–16)

God in his infinite mercy has overcome us. He has chained us to his chariot and is on his way to his great triumph, like a Roman general ascending to the Capitol in Rome. As the fragrance and the incense is burned around the successful general in his great procession, some of the fragrance attaches to us. As we go through the streets and lanes and homes of our cities and towns, to some we become a fragrance of Christ, the great author and giver of life. O that our lives might be drenched in the delightful perfume of the person of the Lord Jesus.

Does not the solemnity of our task drive us again and again into the company and to the feet of the blessed Lord Jesus, so that something of his perfume and his grace might begin to envelop and to drench our lives? Then as we pass by, men might smell the aroma of life amidst the rotting stench of a morally dying world and thus be brought to salvation. But to some our preaching of Christ shall carry a smell of death. To reject him, what can it be but eternal death? Not annihilation, but eternal conscious turning-in of the soul against itself, shutting out the God of glory and his salvation, the consequences of which will be conscious torment. But God will be justified. He shall be able to say in that day, 'How often would I have gathered you! I sent Mr Smith, I sent a carpenter, I sent a fisherman, I sent a medical doctor, I sent a housewife, I sent a nurse—you could have been saved, but you would not.'<sup>6</sup>

*The second element in the backdrop was when our Lord Jesus advised them what their tactics and their timetable ought to be.*

When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. (Matt 10:23)

'Don't think that you are obliged to stick your toes in and remain in the first town, whatever happens. If they persecute you there and won't hear you, go to another. Because you haven't all the time in the world!' 'You will not have completed<sup>7</sup> the cities of Israel until the Son of Man has come.' The commentators find this verse very difficult to understand, so you will certainly excuse me when I fail to throw much light upon its detailed difficulties. 'You will not have completed the cities of Israel until the Son of Man comes.' *Comes*, in what sense? Some have said it was because they went in front of him, and he came after them at the end of their missionary journey. But others say, 'If that is so, why did our Lord use the exalted title, *the Son of Man*? Isn't that the title he uses when he speaks of himself coming in great power?'

'But how can that be?' say others. 'Would he say to the apostles as they stood in front of him, "You will not have gone over the cities of Israel until the second coming"?—surely they did?'

Some say it was a symbolic way of talking of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, when judgment fell upon Israel, not only for their rejection of the Saviour but for their rejection of the apostolic witness of the gospel.

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<sup>6</sup> See Matt 23:37.

<sup>7</sup> The original word is *completed* (as in KJV); there is no verb for *going through*.

Maybe they are right! Being old and old-fashioned I prefer the traditional explanation. When he talked about the coming of the Son of Man he was referring to his coming in power and great glory (Matt 24:30).

What does it mean then, to 'complete the city'? In terms of witnessing for the Lord Jesus the apostles certainly worked hard in the early days of the Acts and until AD 70; but even then, according to Scripture, with nearly forty years between the ascension and AD 70, they hadn't completed the cities of Israel. Indeed, have they been completed yet?

Incidentally, have our cities been completed? You say, 'The trouble is that you work hard for a whole generation, and when you think you have completed it another generation has come up so you haven't completed it! Three or four generations work hard and manage to have an evangelical revival, but give them five minutes and they've gone back to paganism! They need to be completed all over again. Those parts of the world that haven't heard the Word of God at all could hardly be called completed. The Lord is coming—shall we not scratch our heads, think hard in our hearts, and draw a sense of proportion and timetable?

'If they reject you here,' says our Lord, 'go somewhere else.' There is urgency in the task, and it will not all be completed before the coming of the Son of Man. I would like to be able to say to the Lord, 'I did as much as I could!' What should we say if he came and the task was incomplete, and we have to confess that it is incomplete because we dawdled and frittered away our time and had no sense of proportion of the need of this vast world? There is a task to be done. If it can't be finished, let it be done as best as it can be before the Lord Jesus comes.

Finally, *the third element in the great backdrop against which they were to preach was the lovely, bright, glorious prospect of the day of reward.* Let it shine brightly in our hearts. I never cease to be amazed at the wonderful strength of the hold that God has upon his people through the love of Jesus Christ our Lord. I often meet valiant men and women that God has, and hear of their sufferings and how they have triumphed through them and still believe in spite of all the fiery darts that the wicked one can hurl at them. Through their tears they say, 'In spite of what life can do I still believe, and I love the Saviour!'

Our Lord was nothing if he wasn't candid! He warned his apostles that there would be persecution. Even their families might bitterly disown them, and sometimes they would face death itself. There is no thought of featherbedding the servants of the Lord. He knew also the fears that torment so many of us. When we read the great exploits of the mighty apostle Paul, we shouldn't suppose that he was a man who never felt the tremor of fear in his heart. He was not like a concrete block! When he came to Macedonia, 'outside there were fightings and inside there were fears' (2 Cor 7:5). He will get a bigger reward for it, as he learned to cope with his fears and overcome them for the Lord's sake.

'Even the hairs of your head are all numbered' (Matt 10:30), but that doesn't mean you will never lose them! They are all numbered, even though most of them may be gone. If God observes the fall of a hair, then surely he knows when we fall in death. We are asked to trust him, to dare to believe that not only our souls but our very bodies are valuable to him. 'Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows' (v. 31). Let the gift of his Son to Calvary tell us exactly how much more. He knows how we have to wrestle with fear, but he reminds us of the issues at stake.

So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (vv. 32–33, 39)

Our blessed Lord knows by experience. Why did he ‘endure the cross and despise the shame’? It was ‘for the joy that was set before him’ (Heb 12:2). He measured what he must suffer and paid its price. How did we ever qualify to be a part of that joy? He was sustained in his own suffering by the thought of reward, and he urges us to consider his faithful promise that there will come a day when all we have done and suffered for him will be rewarded.

And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward. (Matt 10:42)

Even if it was only a cup of water given in the name of a disciple or a prophet, it shall receive its reward; but that does not mean all you have to do is to give a cup of water and you will get a reward! It means that when all you have to give is a cup of water, if you give it you will be rewarded. Giving a cup of water in Northern Ireland is rather easy. If you and your fellow worker had to cross the Sahara Desert to evangelise some part and you lost your way and were both dehydrated, with only one cup of water left (enough for one to survive on but not two)—would you find the courage to give the cup of water to the other man, if he could carry on the work of the Lord better than you?

Even if it is only a cup of water in Northern Ireland, let us see to it that we give it to the Lord in light of his reward.

Oh, how will recompense his smile,  
The sufferings of this ‘little while’.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> James G. Deck (1807–84), “‘A little while’, our Lord shall come.’

## 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. His international teaching ministry is marked by fresh and careful expositions of both testaments. He has published scholarly studies on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John 13–17, Acts, Hebrews and the New Testament's use of the Old Testament.