

Christian Foundations

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Original Sin

I have entitled these ten lectures *Christian Foundations*, and I wish this evening to go right down to the basement of the Christian edifice to discuss with you a passage of Scripture that diagnoses the trouble with the human race. I take it that I'll not need to convince anyone here that there's something drastically wrong with humanity. Now and again, evidence comes across our paths that's overwhelming.

Someone handed me a book last night, and flipping over the pages I observed a remarkable footnote that pointed out that in the First World War, eight and a half million people lost their lives. In the Second World War, according to the figures given by the Swiss Red Cross, a total of fifty-two million people were fatally wounded. That omits another five million who were unaccounted for, and doesn't start to describe all the virtually indescribable suffering, mental and spiritual torment that came on those who survived. We who've lived through at least one of those wars will scarcely need any convincing that there's something wrong with the human race, and as we read our history books we find that history has been full of this kind of thing. Sometimes we may be blind to the fact because many generals of the past have been called *great*. In our school history books we were taught to believe that Alexander, who triumphed over such a large part of the then known world, was a great man. With his limited weapons he was doing what we've just seen done in the modern world with modern weapons.

Somebody will perhaps say to me, 'But, Mr Lecturer, have you not been dwelling too much upon the unhappy side of life? There have been these extraordinary times in history when men and women have murdered each other; but on the other hand is there not much evidence of real goodness in people's hearts? Would it not be true to say that the majority of people aren't such fiends as these awful times of history would suggest, but decent people full of goodness, love, and kindness to their fellow men?'

At once let me agree with you that this world has seen a tremendous amount of human goodness, and the Bible in all its realism doesn't hesitate to say the same thing. Men have paid the ultimate sacrifice and given their lives for their fellow men. The Bible reminds us that there's much to be seen of parental love and fellow feeling; but nevertheless it has some other observations to make, which immediately shatter any complacency that might arise in our hearts.

In fact, the Bible isn't in the habit of dwelling on the major catastrophes that show humanity at its worst. We might argue that these major catastrophes are merely exceptions to a general rule. History has witnessed terrible wars and outstandingly wicked crimes, but if

you were to take humanity one by one, taking the good as well as the bad, you'd find that the Bible says that all have sinned and do constantly come short of God's standards (Rom 3:23).

If I go into my orchard and find a tree full of apples, and I see maybe half a dozen that are completely rotten from the skin to the core, I say, 'Too bad', and I pick them and throw them away. I'm left with a tree still full of decent apples. I don't condemn the tree because, here and there, there are apples that are absolutely bad. But suppose I go into the orchard and here's a tree with a half-dozen apples that are absolutely putrid, so I pick them off and throw them away. Then I look again, and find one that's just half bad, and another that's half bad. When I look more closely, I find that every single apple, without exception, has some corruption in it. That would be far more serious than one or two apples that are completely bad. If I observed that tree over many years and found that there never was one apple completely free of corruption, but invariably every apple on the tree was corrupt in some measure, then I should begin to draw far reaching conclusions. The fact that those half-dozen apples were absolutely putrid isn't some strange chance, some curious exception. There must be something fundamentally wrong with the tree; some fundamental weakness that makes it impossible for the tree ever to produce an apple that's sound.

The Bible also makes this observation. It bids us to look at ourselves and our fellow men and women and asks us to consider if we have ever met a single person who has been absolutely free of sin. Have you ever met one, or heard of one? I submit to you that sin is such a universal disease that if anyone came to you and said that they'd found a person in your street who was sinless, you'd be utterly incredulous.

There's only been one man in all history that people at large have been prepared to believe was utterly sinless. That man was Jesus Christ. I ask us, therefore, to listen to what the Bible has to say as it diagnoses this trouble, and tells us its cause. If sin is universal in the human race, without exception, I submit to you that there must be a universal cause.

'Why should we trouble,' says someone, 'to fill our minds with such a gloomy topic as to try and account for this universal disease of sin?'

The answer is that, unless we find the true cause, all the maladies that we seek to apply would probably be in vain. If you go to the doctor with a sore throat and he treats your ailment as a common cold, when all the time it's the beginning of polio, the results for you could be fatal. Unhappily, down the centuries men and women have been inclined to think too lightly of this serious problem. In fact, God often reproached the Old Testament Prophets: 'They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, "Peace, peace", when there is no peace' (Jer 6:14). Their recipes for human improvement consequently were too shallow. If we would understand God's answer to this terrible malady of human sin, we must let him tell us the real cause.

When we begin to go deeper, we make another observation from Scripture that's exceedingly important. If we ask ourselves how it is that people become sinners, the Bible soon gives us to see that we don't become sinners by sinning. On the contrary, we sin because we're sinners. Let me try and explain that a little bit, lest you think I'm splitting hairs.

What's true of sin is true of apple trees. We go into my orchard once more and see a big tree full of apples—the fruit on the branches is an evidence that it is an apple tree. Then we move across, and I show you a little sliver of a thing, a few feet tall, with one or two wispy looking branches.

'That's an apple tree too,' I say.

'I doubt that,' you say, 'I don't see any apples on it.'

'Yes, it's an apple tree.'

'It can't be; there are no apples. Did it bear any last year?'

'No,' I say, 'not last year.'

'And none this year either?'

'No, none this year either; but it's an apple tree.'

'How can it be an apple tree if it hasn't yet borne any apples?'

'Well, obviously a tree doesn't become an apple tree by bearing apples. It's an apple tree already, even though as yet it's not borne any apples at all. It's an apple tree because inside that wood it has the nature of an apple tree. Maybe it hasn't had the chance to bear apples, and to show you what it really can do. Have patience, give it the right weather and the right climatic conditions, and you'll see. Because it's an apple tree, it will begin to bear fruit in the form of apples. It won't be any more an apple tree then, than it was before.'

Human nature is basically sinful

The same is true of human beings. For some people, it's obvious that they're sinners because they've done a long, long list of crimes. But they don't become sinners by doing those crimes; they were sinners before they started doing them. And if by great efforts of self-restraint they were to stop doing some of these outwardly wicked things, God's word tells us that they'd still be sinners. The trouble isn't merely in the outward acts; it lies deep in human nature. This is an exceedingly important thing to get hold of.

I say again, it's for lack of understanding this that many people have sought to cure their sins by methods that are far too shallow. Regrettably, some have thought that they've succeeded, when all the time they've left the ruin and trouble untouched. It was so with the Pharisees who lived in the time of our Lord Jesus. They observed that God's law says, 'You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery' (Exod 20:13–14), and by way of self-restraint many of these Pharisees could honestly say that they'd never done these things. In consequence, some of them secretly felt a little bit proud; at least a little bit complacent and satisfied. They felt that all the ugly outward fruits of sin had been cut off in their lives and they would soon qualify for God's heaven.

Our Lord had to remind them, 'For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matt 5:20). How was their righteousness not enough? 'Well,' said our Lord, 'maybe you haven't yet borne the fruit of murder, "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgement; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, "You fool!" will be liable to the hell of fire"' (v. 22). John reminds us, 'Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him' (1 John 3:15).

We need to listen well to the Saviour. I know it's a painful thing sometimes, when the doctor puts out his hand and touches a sore point that we would like to cover up. It reminds us that we're not so healthy as we might think we are. But it's a good thing, and healthy for us to remind ourselves that, even if we've removed all the outward evidence of sin, the fact remains that inside we're still sinners. The cutting off of the outward evidences will not make us fit for God's presence; something far deeper must happen.

I may have a crab apple tree in my garden, and I say to myself, 'Those crab apples taste awful; they're utterly useless.' How do I improve the tree? I say to myself, 'First, let me strip off all these crab apples, dig around the roots, put in some fertilizer, and then prune the tree carefully. I'll see that it gets all the sunshine it needs and give it another chance.' But the tree still bears crab apples because its inner nature is unchanged.

God always looks at the heart (1 Sam 16:7). That's why we shouldn't compare ourselves with other people. I picked up a book in Queen's library the other day. It was an official history of Hitler's extermination of the Jews. He and his helpers systematically and deliberately murdered six million Jews in one way or another.

You say, 'That's utterly ghastly. The man was rotten to the core.'

But wait a moment, there's maybe a Mr Smith up my street, and I don't like him. I don't know what it is, but I hate him. I'm not Hitler; I haven't got a whole army of storm troopers, nor a few secret factories where I could get rid of this Mr Smith on the quiet. Perhaps I've no facility for getting at the man other than when it comes his turn to apply for a job and I'm on the committee, I do everything I can to stop him getting it. Who's worse, Hitler or me? God says that, while it's important that we abstain from the outside works of sin, he always reads the heart and judges by its potential, not merely by what we actually do.

What's the cause?

Let me read a few excerpts from a paragraph in the New Testament that talks of this thing.

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come. . . . For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. (Rom 5:12–14, 19)

In plain, straightforward English that is God's account of the root of the trouble: 'By the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners.' As you know, the passage is referring to our ancestor, Adam, and here's the Bible coming up with its old-fashioned explanation of human troubles. All are sinners because the first man, Adam, disobeyed God. I'm well aware of the many objections that have been made to that account, but it's still the only satisfactory one. The normal objection comes in these terms:

'Does the Bible say I'm to be condemned, not because of what I've done personally, but because of what Adam did? Surely, that's grossly unfair that I'm condemned because of what someone else did?'

Allow me to point out that there are many fallacies in that objection. The one is that nobody will ever be condemned because of what Adam did. God will hold every man and woman responsible for their personal acts of sin. God will never condemn anybody because of what Adam did, but that doesn't eliminate the fact that we're born sinners because of what he did.

You say, 'That's not fair,'

Then I answer, 'But it doesn't alter the fact.'

A man might as well complain against the shape of his nose, and many of us have had good cause to do that. Why is my nose this shape? I inherited it from my ancestors. I may say that it's grossly unfair, but that doesn't alter the fact. Moreover, it's the only kind explanation. Men and women are sinners enough without your loading them with too much blame. God doesn't say that we've become sinners by our personal choice; that we engineered the root of the trouble ourselves. He says that we were born sinners and it wasn't our fault. Our God is kinder than some moderns with their explanations.

You say, 'But what evidence have you that such is the case?'

This particular passage quotes one piece. It says, 'sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned'. I must trouble you to get hold of the exact technical point here. 'Death spread to all'—not because all have personally sinned. That's not true. The baby who is born and only lives for half an hour hasn't personally sinned. Why, then, does it die? Death has passed upon all (KJV), because all were wrapped up in their first ancestor, Adam. When he sinned and disobeyed God, through him that infection was passed on to all his posterity.

God has a plan for our salvation

I haven't discussed this with you tonight to ask the deeper point of why God allowed sin, interesting as that would be; I've raised it in this first lecture so that I might begin to set the stage to discuss the great programme that God has for man's salvation. The Bible asks us to be realists, and we'll find that God is a realist. He who has told us bluntly the tremendous cause of the trouble has provided a salvation that's enough to grapple with this fundamental need.

In the course of these lectures I'll be saying many times what the Bible itself stresses so frequently, that salvation isn't by our human works. Very often, that seems very strange to many people. They say, 'But surely, if we're to be good Christians, we must do our very best?' People feel that is a difficulty because they really haven't considered what the basic trouble is. It's very unkind to teach people to work out salvation by their own efforts. You might as well stand by my crab apple tree and say, 'Crab apple, bear Blenheim Oranges—or at least try. Do your level best.' But what mockery that would be. That tree will never grow Blenheim

Oranges unless somebody is able to graft into it the kind of nature that grows Blenheim Oranges.¹

A completely new life is required

In a much more wonderful sense, that's precisely what God offers the human race. Not that they'll strive to cut off the outward fruits of sin, or attempt the impossible of changing their corrupt and fallen nature, but that they should allow God to graft into them a completely new life, with a new nature and a new power. God's answer to Adam's sin and the fall of the human race is to start a new race from a new man who shall spread his life through all the members of this new race.

It will be the purpose of most of the lectures in this series to consider the practical means by which that's accomplished. Let it suffice us tonight to notice that that's the basic scheme.

'If by one man's disobedience, the many became sinners, then, on the other hand, they become right,' says the Bible, 'not by their self-effort, but by the obedience of one.' This is a glorious thing. It tells us that, though we couldn't help being born sinners, we may be made right by a similar method; by allowing another man to transmit to us a life that in itself is sinless. Of course, this is as different from the gospel of doing your best as the heavens are higher than the earth.

This new man is our Lord Jesus Christ. The obedience that our verse refers to—'by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous'—is that one great act of obedience that he performed, when for our sakes he faced this vast force in God's universe that God calls *sin*, bearing its penalty for those who had failed. He triumphed himself personally, and took upon him the guilt of all who'll trust him. He suffered for it, and put it away. All that Christ did, and the power with which he did it, can be transmitted in its value to us men and women, so that a new life is grafted in.

I don't mean this in an empty imaginative sense; I mean it literally. I don't mean that when we trust the Saviour and receive him we become sinless—like the old crab apple that has Blenheims grafted on, we'll still produce crab apples here and there. But the Bible says that if anyone is in Christ Jesus, something wonderful happens. 'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come' (2 Cor 5:17). Something new is formed in that person's life, with all the marvel and wonder that pertains to a new life when it's born physically.

Admittedly, this new creation that's formed may be exceedingly small, but then life has a way of starting small. It's incredible that the vast complex of the human body should start from an infinitesimally small cell; so small that you'd need a very powerful microscope to detect it. Yet we know it's true, and that minute cell is equipped with all the possibilities of bringing forth a human being. If anyone comes to the Saviour for this new work, says the Bible, there is in that man or woman a new creation, small in its beginning, but eternal in its potentiality.

¹ Blenheim Orange is one of the most, possibly even the most, vigorous of all apple trees. It was first identified some time around 1740 in Woodstock, Oxfordshire. It takes its name from the nearby Blenheim Palace. (Gardenfocused.co.uk)

We'll be discussing the how and the where of these things in later evenings, so don't let me give you the impression first of all that it's difficult. The mechanics of human life are certainly complicated, but a new-born baby possesses all the qualities and powers to direct its development. In a few years' time, the first teeth will drop out and new teeth will come; the body will grow and certain chemicals will presently cease to be needed; nature will shut them off and supply other chemicals.

You say, 'It must be extraordinarily difficult to be a baby. How on earth does it know what to do at the right time?'

Well, of course, it doesn't worry its head. It got this marvellous life as a gift, and the life inside is just working itself out. I know it's a perfect miracle how it's all done; no less a miracle is God's great work of the new beginning that he offers to us all without exception. It's complicated in one sense, but utter simplicity. We're asked to come and take this implantation of new life as a free gift; it's as easy as that. Many times over the Bible stresses the fact that this new life that we get from this new head is a free gift and it's simple to obtain.

We have the choice to accept or refuse this new life

But there's one important difference between it and our physical life. We got our own physical life, our fallen nature, without any choice on our part and without any exercise of our will. But that is not so with this new life. It is altogether of a higher sort, and God allows us to choose whether we'll have it or not.

Therefore, as we come to the end of this lecture, let's gather up its practical implications. Shall we face the fact that God diagnoses our own personal trouble in this drastic fashion: that we're basically all corrupt and sinful; that we can't improve ourselves, and make ourselves fit for God's eternity by our self-effort? God is doing an exceedingly wonderful thing. He is starting again, and has already provided the head of a new race. This is Christ, who offers to each one of us his own spiritual life, so that if anyone is in Christ, there takes place this new creation.

It's true that I was born sinful, but has this other thing taken place in my life? Have I become what the Bible means by 'in Christ'? Or is that utterly mysterious and meaningless to me? A good lady said to me recently, 'You know, you sound so synthetic.' I dare say I did. Perhaps I sound like that to you. Being in Christ may sound a very curious notion, but then let's not empty Christianity of all its reality by refusing to give time and thought to its basic terms.

In Christ, there's no condemnation;

In Christ, all shall be made alive;

In Christ, there's a new creation.

Obviously, I must ask myself what does it mean to be *in Christ*? Am I in Christ, and has Christ imparted to me this new kind of life? If we can't answer that as we ought to, may God give us the grace to enquire just what the Bible means, and how it takes place. This is what we'll be discussing under the many titles of the lectures that are to come.

Shall we just take the whole thing to God in prayer.

We thank thee, blessed God, for the foresight, for the exposure of sin and its cause, that we find in the Bible. We realize its painful truth in our own hearts. We pray that thou wilt give us the courage to face it. We praise thee for this thrilling provision that thou hast made for the redemption of humankind. Something big, something vast, which necessarily has the mystery of God about it, and yet is wonderfully real. We pray that thou wilt give us the wisdom to ask ourselves whether we have personally experienced this new thing. We pray that thou wilt help us to refuse to be content with anything less and we praise thee that thou hast made it so simple to receive. We pray thou wilt help us all to understand, so that at the end of these lectures we might all honestly be able to say that this miracle has in fact taken place within us. We ask these things through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Regeneration

Last evening, I attempted to trace what the Bible has to say about the nature of the trouble that afflicts the human heart. We saw how it lays emphasis, not merely on the multitude of wrongdoings that people do, but rather on the inner cause of those evil deeds. We saw that the Bible's claim is that human nature is inwardly and essentially fallen. Whether it brings forth evil fruits in actual wrong deeds and thoughts, or whether those fruits are for a time not apparent, it's still true that human nature is fallen. Therefore, it is insufficient to deal with the problem by trying to cut off the outward acts of sin.

At the end of the lecture we saw briefly that God's method of dealing with this trouble bears a strong similarity to the way it started—by the disobedience of the first parent of the human race, and ever since all who have come from him have been tainted with his fallen nature. God's way of putting this right was to start again with another founder of another race, our Lord Jesus Christ. The process of being *saved*, as the Bible would put it, is that this new man, this beginner of a new race, transmits his life to us. With his life comes the holiness, the power, the abilities and tastes of that life.

Our subject this evening follows on naturally from there, for I wish to discuss with you the question of *regeneration*, another name for that wonderful process by which God implants this new life in men and women. Regeneration, or *being born again*, is one of the most common truths of Christianity. I suppose all of us have heard it many times in a sermon in church or in Christian conversation, or read it in a gospel tract. Christianity preaches the necessity of regeneration—the fact that we must be born again. I don't wish to discuss the whole subject extensively, but rather to concentrate on the *how* of the matter, and to consider it from a practical point of view. If you'll allow me the term, I want to consider the *mechanics*: how it actually works, how it actually happens.

While this matter is a very well-known Christian teaching, it surprises many people to find that it isn't peculiar to Christianity. Both these ideas—that human nature is tainted at its very root, and that it needs to be born again—can be found long before Christianity in many other religions in the world. For instance, in the ancient Pythagoreans.

William H. Prescott, in his interesting work *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, published in 1843, reminds us with startling emphasis of what the early explorers found when they reached the land of Mexico, where, as far as we know, Christianity hadn't previously come. They found the people worshipping a number of gods and goddesses, and among them was the goddess of water, that rejoiced in the name of Chalchiuhtlicue—may she forgive me if I've mispronounced her name. Their worship showed that they realized humanity is tainted with sin, and every child born into this world is already tainted. Then their religion provided a way

of dealing with this. The midwives would take the children and perform over them a washing ceremony in the name of this goddess of water, and then they'd address this prayer to the infant. I ask you to bear in mind that these people were completely pagan; that is, not Christian:

'Oh my child, take and receive the water of the lord of the world. It is to wash and to purify. Whensoever thou comest, thou that art hurtful to this child, leave him and depart from him, for he now liveth anew and is born anew. Now is he purified and cleansed afresh, and our mother Chalchiuhtlicue bringeth him into the world.'

It may come as a startling revelation to many Christian people that in the pagan religions there are, and were, these ceremonies in which they claimed people were born again. Needless to say, we find ourselves very unsatisfied with the results. It's not unkindness, but sheer realism, when our verdict is that it was nothing more than superstition. Throughout the whole of that nation, there was very little evidence that their ceremony had achieved what it so loudly claimed.

As Christians we would reject such a thing; but let us examine all the more strictly the process that Christianity preaches. The criterion by which we must judge it isn't whether it sounds well in theory, but whether this matter of being born again actually and practically works.

The example of Nicodemus

There are other parts of Scripture in which the theory is preached, but there's that famous discourse between our Lord and the Jewish rabbi Nicodemus, in which the Bible gives us a close-up description of the process actually occurring. Let's look at the whole thing in slow motion and see the process going on. Our Lord himself, the head of this new race that God is creating, is actually implanting this new life and new nature in a man. I invite you for a moment to think about it from this practical angle, and we may care to ask ourselves how far our own experience of Christ has kept pace with what we'll see happening before our eyes.

We begin then with Nicodemus, this very learned rabbi. On Christ's own description, he was 'the teacher of Israel': apparently their leading professor of theology, a man well-versed in the religion that God had given to the ancient Jews. And yet he was a necessary candidate for this work of regeneration.

He comes to our Lord and makes what apparently he intended as a very large and generous admission: 'You are a teacher come from God, for no man can do these signs that you do unless God is with him' (John 3:2). For a man well on in middle life, holding the position he did, that was a great admission to a young man who was possibly very little more than thirty years old. But our Lord seemed to brush his compliment and confession aside, and said, 'Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God' (v. 3). There was an important practical reason for our Lord behaving so sharply to that sensitive man. Instead of making some commonplace remark and saying, 'Well, Nicodemus, I'm delighted to hear you say so,' he made just a straightforward startling statement, 'Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.'

Christ was more than a teacher

I'm going to submit to you that our Lord did that deliberately to shake Nicodemus to his very core, and show him the utter inadequacy of his conception of Christ and of the work he had come to do. I want to make that point strongly, for if ever there's a conception of Christ that needs to be shaken in people's minds, perhaps it's this one. There are multitudes who would gladly confess that Jesus Christ is one of the world's leading teachers. Perhaps they'd acknowledge him as the most exalted teacher of humanity, and they proceed from there. But the very truth of that statement hides them from what's vastly more important. For this work of implanting new life in people, we must brush aside the concept of Jesus Christ as teacher. He did come and teach; he taught us more than any man has ever taught.

Many people have the idea that Christ has come to teach us what things are good, and to do those good things, or at least strive to do them. They read the Sermon on the Mount that exhorts us to love our enemies, and where there is hatred to show loving kindness. They honestly try to do these things, hoping that by doing Christian acts they will turn themselves into respectable Christians. There never was a bigger fallacy. It's impossible to turn oneself into a Christian by doing Christian things.

Here I am putting the positive side of what we considered last night from a negative viewpoint. I made a statement which may have startled you: we do not become sinners by doing sinful things, any more than an apple tree becomes an apple tree by growing apples. It's the other way round: an apple tree grows apples because it's an apple tree. We do sinful things because we're basically sinful—it's that way round. When it comes to being a Christian, God's way round is that, first, he makes people Christians in the fuller sense; then, because they're Christians, those people do Christian things. It's not the other way round. As I've said, it's so easy for people to get the idea that Christ came as a teacher to show us good Christian deeds and encourage us to try and do them so that we might become Christians.

I fancy that was the idea Nicodemus had. He had long been a teacher of the Ten Commandments of Moses, and had honestly sought to do them. This new preacher taught the people the Sermon on the Mount, which showed a standard even higher than Moses's standard. The learned professor was convinced that this higher standard was utterly true, and doubtless there had arisen in his heart an intention that he would strive to reach it, if he could. If Christ had allowed him to go away with that idea, it would have been fatal to his spiritual life, so he cut right across it.

The necessity of the new birth

He said, 'Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God' (v. 3).

Wistfully, perhaps, Nicodemus replied, 'How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?' (v. 4).

We mustn't suppose that Nicodemus really thought that our Lord was referring to a physical birth. But many a person has felt that wistful urge—wouldn't it be a wonderful thing if we could start the process over again? Many of us have blotted our copybooks so well and truly in the past that, if it were possible to start again from Day One, we might welcome the opportunity to do better. Physical rebirth is impossible for us, but it's possible to start with an

absolutely new life that's not an improvement of what we did before, but something utterly new. Nicodemus's mind is being moved in the right direction and he's beginning to see that his own idea of striving to improve his life is completely misguided. The real scheme is a completely new start with a new life of a different kind.

Our Lord begins to explain, 'Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God' (v. 5).

Born of water

Nicodemus would have understood that. In the religion in which he was brought up they had water enough. They had the Old Testament, and it searched their consciences. That was what it was meant to do; it brought them to a sense of their sin. It was the habit of Jews to confess before God and their fellows that they were sinners and needed to be cleansed by being washed or baptized in one way or another.

That was what lay behind the great demands of John the Baptist, the prophet who was the forerunner of our Lord Jesus. He came preaching the *baptism of repentance*, and he found a surprisingly large number of people who owned up to the truth of his preaching. You know, however hard their exterior, there are many people who underneath are prepared to admit what in fact is true. Life has taught them that they're sinners and they need cleansing. They're repentant about sin and would like to be quit of it.

Born of the Spirit

But then our Lord's demand was this, 'Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.' That is exceedingly important. You see, it's not enough to repent and be sorry for sin; not enough even to agree with God that sin is wrong and that our lives need cleansing. We must take the next positive step of receiving the new life that Christ has to offer and be born of his Holy Spirit.

I may confess, ruefully, that my old car is no good. Two wheels are in the process of falling off, the clutch plates are worn and the petrol tank has holes in it. I may honestly express my opinion that, unless something is done, this old car will fall to pieces completely. But all that genuine sorrow is of very little use unless I take the next step. Abandoning this wreck that's now impossible to repair, I need to go to the car dealer and get a new car.

So it is with spiritual things. There are many men and women who confess constantly before God, and genuinely mean it, that they're miserable sinners; but they haven't gone that stage further and received from Christ this new spiritual life.

At this point in the discussion, Nicodemus professed his growing bewilderment. 'I don't know about this; how can these things be? This all sounds rather complicated. I don't understand' (see v. 9).

It's surprising how many people feel exactly as he did. Had Christ told him, 'Yes, Nicodemus, I am indeed a teacher come from God. You'll observe that my standards are higher than Moses's standards, and if ever you would enter God's kingdom you must now make an honest attempt to keep my standards,' Nicodemus would have found that concept quite easy. He may well have prayed to God to give him the strength to keep these new laws. But this was something so completely foreign to his whole outlook that he found it mystifying.

It's not understanding, but believing

If you were to say to me after this lecture that you found tonight's lecture impossibly complicated, and you didn't quite understand what I was getting at, I shouldn't be all that much surprised.

'How can these things be?' said the learned professor, 'I don't understand.'

I'll tell you the secret of his misunderstanding. It's the next step in this slow-motion picture, and it might even be next in someone's spiritual experience here this evening. That feeling of bewilderment that we get, when it all begins to seem so complicated, can be passed too, and we'll find, as Nicodemus did, that it's not complicated, but exceedingly simple. The answer isn't so much that he didn't understand, but he didn't honestly believe. Choosing his words deliberately, our Lord said, 'If I have told you earthly things and you do not *believe*'. He didn't say, 'If I've told you earthly things and you do not *understand*' (see v. 12).

If we believe, the matter is exceedingly simple. We hear our Lord say that all our own efforts to improve ourselves are misguided—and we accept that. We hear the further deduction that we're utterly helpless ourselves to improve the old wreck—and we say, 'Well, that's a drastic statement and it wounds my pride, but if Christ says it, then it's so.' And then we hear him say that God himself has done something for us to allow him to proceed with his scheme—something that he alone can do, and he undertakes to do it all.

I don't mean to suggest that we're irreverent, but it just means that we honestly say to God, 'Carry on, God, I want this new thing.' The difficulty isn't in the realm of understanding at all. And it should help us to notice that, because many of us hide ourselves behind this.

Someone came to me the other day. I don't know what kind of job he holds down in life, but certainly it would involve him using average intelligence.

He said, 'I'm not a Christian, I don't believe it's true. I don't think you have any evidence for Christianity.'

I said, 'That's interesting. What evidence have you read?'

'I haven't read any. I don't like reading,' he said.

Well, I didn't quite know what to say.

And then his wife joined in, 'I'd never become a Christian, if it meant a lot of reading. I don't read, I don't like it.'

There are many people who will hide behind that excuse, as though becoming a Christian involved such masses of reading of difficult philosophical stuff that the average person might be excused.

Observe that this learned professor made virtually the same excuse. 'I don't understand,' he says. We ought to be thankful that the Lord brushed that difficulty aside. It's not a difficulty of understanding at all; it's a moral difficulty of whether we're willing to believe.

Believe what?

First of all, as the slow-moving picture tells us next, it's a question of whether we're willing to believe a person. If I may paraphrase our Lord's words to Nicodemus, he said, 'When it comes to the truth on these spiritual matters, I have a monopoly. "No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man"' (v. 13). 'That's myself, Nicodemus. When it comes to saying how this new work of regeneration happens — what needs to be done,

and what men have to do—I have the utter monopoly. Before you hear what I say, you'll have to make your choice: are you willing to believe me when I say it?'

But somebody says, 'I'd fall out with that. I'm not going to believe anybody blindly like that. I'm going to reserve my opinion.'

That's an exceedingly important matter from this practical viewpoint. You see, we're not theorizing here about *religion*, and certainly we're not philosophizing. We're reading the Bible's own description of the process that takes place when God implants his life in somebody. It is an exceedingly important crisis in the matter, whether a person, faced with our Lord, is prepared to believe him implicitly, whatever he says.

You say, 'I think that's unreasonable. I'd like to see the results first and then I might believe.'

That's not so unreasonable as it sounds. Suppose we were able to bring someone to Armagh, who'd never seen an electric light, and had no knowledge of the process. We bring him into this hall in the dark, and say to him, 'Do you feel that little switch on the wall? If you press it, the whole room will be flooded with light.'

He shakes his head, 'That's very hard to believe; how could it possibly be?'

You say, 'It's electricity.'

He says, 'And what's electricity?'

'It's stuff that goes through wires,' you say.

'Has anybody seen this electricity?' he asks.

'No one's ever seen this electricity, no.'

'Well, how do you know it works?' he says.

'Well, it does, and we can prove it if you put your hand on those two live wires.'

He says, 'You're asking me to believe that I should feel something if I put my hand on these wires, and just because I believe, it will happen. That's only psychological. Can you prove to me that electricity exists? Prove it and then I'll believe.'

You say, 'I personally couldn't prove it; I'm not a scientist. I wouldn't know really what electricity is, and I don't think the scientists know.'

He says, 'This sounds very fanciful.'

You say, 'There's a way of finding out. Just pull that switch down and you'll see.'

He says, 'I'm afraid that if I were to take your word for it like that, I'd so get it into my mind that when I pull the switch down I'd believe that the room was flooded with light. This is auto-suggestion, isn't it?'

If only he would at least give us credit that we aren't deliberately trying to deceive him. We do know at least this much, that if he was prepared to take our word in faith and pull the switch down, he would have his evidence.

And so our Lord stood before Nicodemus, as he has stood before many people since then; men and women who are sensible enough to see that they've been born with a fallen nature and the end is evidently going to spell disaster. Perhaps they are beginning to realize that, in

spite of all their efforts, their improvement has been minimal, and unless something different happens they'll die as they were born.

He says, 'I am God's own Son; I have come down from heaven; I'm suggesting something to you that will bring you new life—are you prepared to take my word and act accordingly, and see if it happens?'

If in the spirit of that other man who said, 'Well, Lord, I do believe; at least I want to believe; help my unbelief!' (see Mark 9:24), our Lord would be prepared and able to go ahead with the process.

What does it mean to believe?

To help the rabbi, our Lord quoted that famous incident from chapter 21 of the historical book of Numbers. When the Israelites had sinned, and were being poisoned by serpents and dying of snake bites, they had no doubt that death was certain and would be rapid. They were miles out in the desert, where there were no physicians. The helplessness of the case scarcely needed emphasizing. Then God did a curious thing. He told Moses to make a serpent of copper and put it on a pole, and send messengers running throughout the camp to tell everybody who had been bitten by the snakes that they were to look to this pole. The promise was that as many as looked would live (vv. 8–9). That was a most curious message. He didn't even say that they were to touch the serpent, kiss it, bow down before it, say a few prayers to the serpent or to God; it was simply that they looked.

There was no magic or power of any sort whatsoever in the serpent, but God requires in the human heart a certain attitude before he can work. It is to look away completely from one's self, admit one's utter helplessness, and fasten our eyes on somebody else altogether. It is a trust that lets go of our own strength and commits everything to God's word and to God's Saviour. We're told that all who did that simple thing received new life.

The serpent in the wilderness lifted up

So our Lord drew the analogy to Nicodemus: 'And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life' (John 3:14–15). Notice how he didn't use the word *look*, but the word *believe*, for believing is a kind of looking.

Presently we shall see that there's much more power in our Saviour being lifted up on the cross, but first I want to drive home this point in the process—this willingness to own our helplessness and utter ruin because we're born of tainted stock; the impossibility of our improving ourselves; then our willingness to do what Christ says and turn our eyes away from anything that we can possibly do ourselves. Simple as that act is, some people find it almost impossibly hard. They cannot bring themselves to think that God is willing to save them by a process to which they themselves cannot contribute at all.

But until God brings us there, nothing can be done. As long as we are desperately trying to improve ourselves, we shall not be born again. It is when—maybe in utter desperation—we're prepared to listen to God, even though he appears to preach the impossible; when we look with implicit faith away from ourselves to our Lord Jesus Christ, and depend entirely on him, believing that he is prepared to do what he says he can do, God is free to act.

That incident of Moses making a serpent of copper and putting it on a pole, is full of instructive meaning. It was, of course, one of those many Old Testament parables by which God set the watermark of his inspiration in holy writ. The trouble was that the serpents were biting the people, injecting the poison, and causing death, but God wanted them to see that the cause of their trouble was now rendered harmless.

And the LORD said to Moses, 'Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.' So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. (Num 21:8-9)

What a parable that was; and it's a wonderful thing when the significance of Christ's death on the cross dawns on a person. He's maybe struggled for many years to improve himself, and at last has come to God's own view that he can't be improved, and he gives up struggling. Then he observes that at that cross God himself has done what is necessary to deal with this problem of sin. What a tremendous awakening in his soul; it brings about a release that is impossible to describe. He sees that what he could not possibly do, God has done.

Why Christ was lifted up

We saw last night that we didn't personally introduce sin into God's world. Before we'd done any act whatsoever, we had sinful natures. It surely would follow that the putting of it right will not be our business either. It would have been unfair for God to bring us into his world as sinners, and give us the impossible task of eradicating sin from our lives. But it's not so: God himself moved into our world to deal successfully with this cosmic problem. That's why Christ was 'lifted up'.

Sin and sins are the trouble: sin the root and sins the fruit. The Bible informs us that when Christ died on the cross, his death was aimed at both.

The root: 'For the death [Christ] died he died to sin, once for all' (Rom 6:10).

The fruit: 'Christ died for our sins' (1 Cor 15:3).

For everyone who dares to trust the Saviour, the guilt is removed. At the cross Christ has grappled with this great mysterious force that the Bible calls *sin*. It is that basic rebellious force that's beneath all human ill-doing, as the root is beneath the tree. We read, 'he died to sin' (Rom 6:10). He has now passed forever beyond its assault, and all his mighty worth and power are transmitted in the life that Christ gives to all who trust him.

It will be the purpose of many of our lectures in the coming evenings to describe in more detail what really did happen when Christ died, but we don't have to understand it in minute detail before we may be born again. We need only to turn our eyes to the Saviour because he died for our sins, and he died to sin.

Listen to God's word, 'Whoever believes in him [looks to him, abandons faith in everything else, and just pins everything on him] shall not perish—will never perish—will have everlasting life' (see John 3:16). Christ will implant in him that new life that the Bible calls *eternal life*.

Shall we now, as we conclude this lecture, in our prayer ask God that our experience may keep pace with what we've studied?

Shall we pray.

We praise thee, blessed God, in humble thankfulness that thou hast interposed in giving thy Son to that sacrifice upon the tree, to do for us fallen men and women what it was impossible that we should do for ourselves.

We pray that all those here present who have already received the eternal life which Christ died to give us, may be caused to take a firmer grip on it this evening. If some need to take these first steps because they've not yet received eternal life, we pray that thou wilt lovingly help them to look away from themselves, give up their struggles, and dare to believe him. Fastening their souls upon him who was crucified, may they find that thou dost really give eternal life to those who trust thy Son. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Justification

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: 'Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get." But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.' (Luke 18:9-14)

To discuss the technical term *justification*, we shall take as our springboard this parable which our Lord Jesus himself told, and there are three things that we ought to notice.

1. The first is an elementary observation: our Lord himself used the term. He said that the man went down to his house justified. Justify and justification are legal terms, and it's important for us to notice that our Lord Jesus was indicating that *God is a judge, a God of law*, who will hold us morally responsible, and judge us accordingly.

There have been some students of the Bible who have denied this. They've contrasted the teaching of our Lord with the teaching of the Apostle Paul. Paul talks in legal terms, they say, representing God as a judge with a law that's holy and unbending. He speaks of our relationship to God as that of guilty prisoners before the bar, and God as our stern judge.

They say, 'It's a pity that Paul took that view.'

Then they claim that he was vastly different from our Lord Jesus. They say, 'The Lord Jesus had a far more kindly outlook. He didn't picture God as a judge, but as a very loving father who would run to the returning prodigal and receive him immediately without any fuss, legal battles, or stern presentations of the law.'

They say, 'Paul spurned the simple and loving picture of God that Christ gave.'

But when we examine the matter more closely, this parable amongst others clearly shows us that our Lord himself also pictured God as a judge, and our relationship to him as those who must face the bar of God's judgment, to be judged by the standard of his law.

2. The second thing we noticed from the parable is that, when our Lord said that this man went down to his house justified, it means that he was *declared to be right with God*.

I know you may tell me that it was only a parable, but our Lord always used true things in his parables; he never imagined things that don't really exist. It's exceedingly important, as well as a joyful and happy thing, to notice that our Lord said of one man that he went home

justified. He went home right with God, and presumably he knew it. I say that it's a good thing to notice because, if it's been true of one man, it's evidently possible for any of us to go home knowing that we're right with God.

Lest you think I bring too much on a parable, that's what the whole of the Bible preaches. It dares to tell us that Abraham was right with God (see Rom 4:3). He was justified before God, and he knew it. This is the message that startled the Roman world in the days of the apostles. Paul came to Antioch in Pisidia, where he ended a most forceful sermon on the gospel in these words, 'Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is [justified] from everything from which you could not be [justified] by the law of Moses' (Acts 13:38–39).

It was like a bombshell to the people in that synagogue. Until then they had imagined the situation to be something like this. You did your best to keep God's law; when you failed you came along and confessed it and you were forgiven. When you failed again, you came back and confessed it and you were forgiven, and so on. You honestly sought by God's grace to do better next time, but the final result of all that procedure wouldn't be counted up and published until the great judgment day. Nobody could possibly be certain here and now that they were right with God, so it was a bombshell to them to learn that it's possible to know oneself right with God here in this life, long before the judgment takes place, and to remain so permanently and forever.

If this is true, it certainly is a wonderful doctrine, and the whole New Testament stands behind the message saying that it is true. I trust you see the point. What a happy thing it would be, if, through our study, we went home tonight unshakeably certain that we are right with God now, and right forever—it is possible.

3. Then there's a third thing we ought to notice. There was another man who went home, but *he wasn't right with God; he wasn't justified*. On the surface, we'd have said that he was the very kind of man who stood more chance of being right. He wasn't, perhaps, the kind of person that some preachers have made him out to be. He would enter the quiet of the temple and go over in his own heart what kind of chance he stood of getting to God's heaven.

He thought to himself, 'I fast twice in the week; I'm pretty decent with my goods, I give tithes of all that I get. Without any boasting, I honestly think I'm better than this tax collector, for instance. I'm not extortionate, I'm not a drunkard, I'm not immoral.'

In God's presence he went over his chances of one day getting to heaven, and at first sight they seem pretty reasonable. But our Lord said that, moral and good and religious as he seemed to be, he went home not justified, not right with God.

God himself must always remain just

The matter needs very careful attention, so I shall proceed this evening by taking a proposition from the Bible itself: '. . . so that [God] might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus' (Rom 3:26). I'd like us to study this process of being made right with God in view of this proposition that God lays down.

God is prepared to justify any man or woman, but when he has justified them God himself must remain *just*. When we think of God as judge, the Bible asks us consider him as absolutely

just, immovably righteous. Being inflexibly just isn't perhaps our favourite way of thinking about God. It isn't perhaps the quality we admire most in our friends.

We say, 'Let me introduce you to Mr Smith; he's a very nice man.'

We don't often find ourselves saying, 'Let me introduce you to Mr Brown; he's an exceedingly righteous man.'

Most of us like to think of God as a loving God, and so he is. But at the same time, the God before whose bar we must be judged is inflexibly just.

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty . . . (Exod 34:6-7)

He will by no means clear the guilty, which was something God forbade Israel's judges to do. He told them not to condemn the innocent, but with equal fervour he told them not to justify the guilty. This is something he himself will always observe. Yes, he is merciful, gracious, loving and kind, but he'll never clear the guilty. There's no passing over sin; no pretending that men and women are holy when they're not.

Consequently, Romans, the very book in the New Testament that's written to show how we may be right with God, spends its first two and a half chapters proving from every possible angle that people everywhere and without exception are wrong. It's a bitter pill to swallow, and still more difficult when it comes to our own hearts. Yet we must face it, for God is so loving that he would never tell a lie. He will be perfectly honest with us, and he tells us clearly that personally we all have come short.

In Romans 1 he points us to the heathen nations, who have come short of God's requirements. We say, 'We can see their appalling immorality, their cannibalism, and their sexual perversions. The awful diseases they suffer in their bodies are testimony that they've broken God's laws; they are reaping the wages of their sin.'

But then, observation tells us that there are many people who make no Christian profession at all, and yet they live decent lives. They roundly condemn the excesses, both of the heathen and of their own country men and women. You'll find them in their zeal helping others and promoting the common good. Yet, when God comes to sum them up, he says, 'Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgement on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practise the very same things' (Rom 2:1).

Have you ever looked on somebody, and said, 'That's not fair'? Have you ever read about an incident in a newspaper and said to yourself, 'That man was a rotter'? God's word says that, in doing that, we're condemning ourselves.

You say, 'How do you make that out?'

Because we do the very same things that we condemn in others.

But you say, 'I'd condemn a murderer, but I've never murdered.'

Maybe you haven't, but look at it God's way. God says that if you've ever hated anybody in your heart, you've murdered him. 'Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer' (1 John 3:15).

You say, 'I've never committed adultery.'

Maybe you haven't, but God says that if we've entertained the thought, in his sight we have as good as done the deed (see Matt 5:27–28).

You say, 'I've never bowed down to idols.'

Maybe you haven't, but have you ever coveted anything? The Bible says that to covet, to want more than my share, is idolatry (see Col 3:5).

We can see what's wrong in other people and condemn these excesses, but we're guilty of the same thing. The hardest people to convince of this are those who are religious. In the ancient world it was the Jew, and many of them took their religion very seriously. They were the nation to whom God gave the Old Testament. God gave them his law, and many were so keen on religion that they gave their lives to learning it. They knew a phenomenal amount about the Bible. They preached the Ten Commandments; they taught the people that they ought to keep them, but they themselves were the most difficult people to convince that they were sinners. They got it into their heads that, because they taught God's word, they were on his side. They were like the man who wrote an ode to virtue, and then thought that he'd discharged his responsibilities in that direction.²

Because they knew all about being good, and could teach the theory, they thought that was all that was required. It was especially hard for them to have God tear down that idea and show them that there's no favouritism with him. We may know the Bible from A to Z, but that doesn't spare us from God's sweeping condemnation that we too have sinned (see Rom 3:23). In that chapter that dwells so long in proving to us that all mankind of every description has sinned, it says, 'None is righteous, no, not one' Rom 3:10ff. It's one of those statements that provokes people.

They say, 'Well, it's grossly unfair that the Bible can possibly say that not one of us is good. It surely can't be true. What about the great pioneers of social welfare and the people who give their lives to healing lepers and looking after little children? What about those who live in unseen places, always sacrificing their own comfort for the good of others? Surely the Bible can't mean that no one is good: isn't there evidence of much goodness everywhere?'

Well, yes, but let's get it straight. In our human language, we use the term *good* in several different senses. For instance, very, very occasionally, when I've been playing the piano, people have said, 'That's very good.' Well, I suppose in some sort of context, it would be. Compared with a few people I know, my playing is good—very few. If somebody with a degree in music comes into the room, I don't attempt to play. Compared with that, my playing is exceedingly bad. If Mendelsohn or Beethoven were to come into the room, the person with the degree wouldn't dare to begin. We're all good at our various levels, and it depends at which level you're judging yourself.

The Pharisee's mistake

That was the fatal mistake the Pharisee made. In calculating his chances of reaching God's heaven, he decided that he was good; and in a sense he was very good. He fasted twice a

² Aristotle saluted Hermias's memory in 'Ode to Virtue', his only surviving poem, 341 BC (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

week, showing admirable self-control. He gave tithes of all he possessed. I know a good many people who don't do such admirable social work. He honestly tried to keep God's law the best he knew how. He decided that he was pretty good, but he was judging himself by comparison with his fellow men, instead of judging himself by God's absolute standard.

A young man came to our Lord Jesus once. 'Good Master,' he said, 'what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?' (Matt 19:16–22 KJV).

Said our Lord, 'Did you mean what you said just then, "Good Master"? There's none good, but one, that is God.'

In that absolute sense by which we shall be judged—the absolute standard of God's utter perfection, which is his law—no one is good. We need to face that because, if we're counting on getting to heaven by keeping his law, God has already delivered his verdict. There is none good, and no one shall ever be right with God by keeping the law.

The nature of God's judgment

Let's think for a moment how the judgment proceeds. It is on these terms. God looks at our lives as a whole, not in little pieces. Many folks have the idea that perhaps we have made mistakes in the past, but we come to God and confess these mistakes. Then we determine to do our best from now on, and we'll do enough good to outweigh the bad. But God judges our lives as a whole. The Bible is very clear here: '. . . it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgement' (Heb 9:27). That is, God doesn't set up his judgment on our lives every day of the week; there's to be one judgment, and at that one judgment our lives will be viewed as a whole. If there's then one speck in that life—just one speck—it will not pass the requirement of God's law.

Let's ask ourselves the question, how many sins does a man have to do to become a sinner? Adam's own history is that he had to do one sin, and that made him a sinner. God looks at our lives as a whole. Moreover, God's law is a whole. It's strange how many people get the wrong conception of God's law. They look at it as though it were a course at school—like the new GCEs, some papers are necessary, some are optional. In the old system, you had to pass all of so many subjects to get through; if you failed in one you didn't get the exam. Now they've altered things, and you can get through if you get a pass on one paper. You can get through on two, of course, if you're especially good. If you're an absolute wizard, you might get through on six. But the person who gets one has in some sense passed, and there are many people who think that God's law is like that. If you get sixty percent you're through. The real saints might score eighty-five, but the regular folks hope to score somewhere about fifty percent.

But God says no, his law is not like that. If you come offering God a performance of his law as your right to his heaven, he says the terms are that you keep the whole lot. If you fail in one point, you've failed. As one who comes under that same condemnation, I must agree with you that the standard is impossibly high; but by those standards God's condemnation of me as a sinner is perfectly just—it's nothing more than the truth.

God's way of making people right

Then how could it be that the man of whom our Lord spoke in the parable went home knowing he was right with God? That brings us to our next thing in the proposition. God is just and yet the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (see Rom 3:26). There's a way of making a person righteous without any pretence. Without abating his righteous standard, God has found a way of being able to declare that certain people are right with God, and are permanently accepted by him.

The grounds again are technical. You may find this lecture very technical, but I hope we take the things of God seriously enough to be prepared to think in technical terms. If you want to know how your car works, you'll have to learn a lot of technical terms about clutches, carburettors, crank shafts, differentials, and what have you. If we're honest about our eternal welfare, we'll bring all the strength we have to consider these technical matters.

God has found a way of declaring men and women right. It's not on the basis of works, nor in anything we do, for God could never pretend it was good enough. It's on the basis that his law has now been vindicated through the sacrifice of Christ. This is a well-known thing, but its marvel is immense. God in the person of his Son has suffered the penalty of his own law: 'He who did not spare his own Son but *gave him up* for us all . . .' (Rom 8:32). This is a vivid phrase; it's the word you'd use of a judge who has condemned a criminal for breaking the law. Having condemned him, he delivers him up to the sanctions of that law. The Bible is saying this in the sense that, not merely did God give him up to come and be born in Bethlehem, but he handed him over to the sanctions of the law.

The cross stands at the very centre of Christian preaching

Nor was Christ an unwilling victim. It was what moved the heart of Paul in such gratitude, that he said, 'I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal 2:20). The cross tells me of a God who is so holy, so exact, so insistent that right is done, that he will not clear the guilt; but also of a God who so loves guilty men and women, that he's prepared to suffer the penalties of his law for them.

If I commit a murder, and the law of the land condemns me to death, if somebody volunteers to die for me, I may go free.

You say, 'But it wouldn't be fair for an innocent third party to die for the guilty. It's surely impossible that God should let his own innocent Son suffer for me, the one who is guilty?'

That's the marvel of what God has done. It isn't a question of a third party. God is one: there are not three gods, one called the Father, another called the Son, and another called the Holy Spirit. There is only one God, and Jesus Christ, one of the persons in that trinity, offers every sinner, if they will trust him, that he'll join himself to them until in God's sight they are really one. What Christ suffered on Calvary can justly be counted as having been suffered by them. That's love to its last extent, and it's what transpired at Calvary. Every man and woman who has learned to trust God's Son may know that Christ has joined himself to them. 'But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him' (1 Cor 6:17). Therefore, what happened to Christ happened to me. As a sinner, God's absolute holiness condemns me utterly, but he loves me and was prepared to suffer the sanctions of his law for me.

What are the terms of my acceptance?

Again, they are simple indeed.

Someone asks, 'If Christ has died for sinners, are you saying that all sinners everywhere are right with God?'

No, indeed not. We may not think of the atonement in such a crude way. It's not that Christ has paid the debt, and whether people will have it or not they are free of the judgment. The Bible does not say that God is just, and the justifier of *everybody*, but, '[he is] the justifier of *the one who has faith in Jesus*' (Rom 3:26). When a man believes in Jesus, God declares him righteous.

Do you get that? It's a difficult concept, maybe, but the Bible tries to help us by quoting the example of an actual man called Abraham.

The case of Abraham

'For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"' (Rom 4:3). Abraham was one of those of whom God said, 'that man there is right with me.'

If you asked God, 'On what grounds do you say he is right with you?', God's reply would be, 'In Abraham you see a man who has believed in me. I'm not looking at his outward work, I'm looking deep into his heart. He has learned to abandon faith in himself and stake all his faith in me. His heart is right.'

When a man or a woman comes to do like Abraham did, abandon all faith in themselves, and dare to pin their faith solely on God, God says that they are right with him. I'm grateful to say that God isn't playing at things, nor pretending. That man or woman is right, for being right with God is a matter of the heart. At the first level, it is not a matter of our works.

I wonder if I could possibly illustrate that to you. There were pirates in the good old days; big, burly fellows. They made a living on the high seas, and did some smuggling. Amongst themselves they were loyal, admirable fellows; brave, sometimes even kind to their captives. They had a sense of honour. There are things that they wouldn't permit in their fellows. Such was their keen interest in fairness that, if one of them robbed the common chest, they'd have his head off! They didn't believe in stealing among themselves. Within their own little circle, they were pretty decent chaps. But there was one fatal flaw: their attitude to the sovereign on the throne. All their goodness and kindness among themselves, their valour and their manliness, counted for nothing. In the last analysis, when they stood before the bar of their sovereign's law courts, their hearts weren't right.

There was another poor fellow who was a gardener in the royal palace. He was living with an inferiority complex, but in his heart of hearts he loved his sovereign and wanted his life to belong to his sovereign. He may not be so courageous a fellow as one of those pirates, but his heart was right.

And this is so with the person who believes the gospel. This is the thing that's at stake when a man or woman faces God—it's an issue of the heart. That's why I was so careful to labour

that first point. You see, it really does matter whether we agree with God in his condemnation of our sin. Like that Pharisee in the parable, so long as we stick to our guns and try to prove that we're pretty decent, God must condemn us.

There are people who do this kind of thing through pride of heart. They'll have nobody tell them that they aren't good, and in consequence their heart isn't right with God, for God says that they're sinners.

There are other people who take the attitude through a mistaken sense of their duty. They're trying to keep the Christian commandments, trying to show love, trying to show mercy, trying to do good, and it's a desperately difficult thing. All the while, God is saying, 'Look, I wish you'd drop that completely. Come to me and own the fact that you're impossibly bad, for if you would do that, I could begin. But so long as you struggle desperately to gain my favour by keeping my law, I must condemn you. I must tell you the truth: you fall short. Much as I love you, while you cling to that attitude and try to gain my favour by leading a Christian life, I can't do anything but condemn you.'

It is not by our works

The moment we're prepared to believe God, and admit what he says is true—that we're completely bad and utterly hopeless—God is prepared to give us his Son. If we trust his Son, God is prepared to put to our account all that Christ has done, and free and for nothing he will declare us to be right, now and eternally. It's a matter of the heart, and that's why the Bible stresses so frequently that we're justified by faith and not by the works of the law.

Somebody says, 'Mr Lecturer, you're not being fair. Isn't there a part in the Bible that says we are justified by works?' (See James 2:14–26.)

I was travelling down from Dublin to Cork in the summer, busying myself with academic subjects, and presently the gentleman sitting next to me looked over to my page. Coming a little closer, he asked, 'How is it that you're interested in the Biblical languages?'

I said, 'My dear sir, it's because I'm a Christian.'

And then I said, 'I'm one of those people who claim to be saved, to be right with God. I fancy you wouldn't call me the right sort of a Christian, would you?'

He smiled. He was a man, so he told me, who was hoping for salvation by devoting himself to a very strict way of life. He'd embraced poverty; he wasn't allowed to own anything. I saw him beside me in the train reading endless prayers. You could see him through and through as a kindly, loving, genial man, who would have delighted to help anybody.

He said to me, 'We must work, mustn't we, to earn our salvation? Didn't the Saviour himself say that the man who had a talent and didn't use it was cast out into the outer darkness, and that's the bad place, isn't it?' (See Matt 25:30.)

I said, 'Tell me then, my good friend, what's the real position? You say that you must work?'

'Yes,' he said, 'you must work according to your ability. If you've got ten talents, you must try and use all your ten talents. If you've only got one talent, God won't expect so much of you as he would of the man who had ten talents, but you'll have to use it or else you'll be cast into the outer darkness.'

I said, 'Tell me, the man who works with his ten talents, does he get salvation because he works?'

'Yes.'

'And the man who uses his one talent, does he get salvation because he works?'

'Yes.'

'So, there's really no difference between them, if they both have to work for it?'

'That's right,' he said, 'it's according to their ability.'

I said, 'What would you say of the man who didn't work at all?'

He said, 'He's out completely.'

I said, 'Half a moment, my friend, look at what the verse says.'

Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness. (Rom 4:4-5)

He said, 'I don't know what that means.'

'How sad,' I thought, 'such a lovely man, grinding his very life out to try and get saved, and he doesn't know what the verse means that says, "to the one who does not work, but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness."'

'I don't know what it means,' he said. 'If I could believe it, my life would be a lot easier.'

I thought, 'Yes, my dear friend, it would. What rest, what peace, what security, what comfort—in fact, what eternal salvation his would be, if he got hold of what God means when he says that it is to him who does not work, but believes . . . his faith is counted to him for being right with God.'

I haven't forgotten that part in the Bible that says we're justified by works, but it certainly doesn't contradict this statement. I haven't time to deal with it now, but I'll deal with it in another lecture, God willing.

Shall we take the matter to God in prayer.

Blessed God, we pray now for thy special help and for the encouragement of thy Holy Spirit to face what may seem to us as difficult things. As thy word takes from beneath our feet the things in which we may have trusted, we pray thou wilt give us the honesty and the grace to face what thy word says and confess ourselves to be impossible sinners. Then show us, we pray thee, what it is that Christ has done for us upon the cross. Show us so clearly that our hearts might go out to him, and we learn to believe in him, and come to the blessedness of those of whom thy word says, 'to the one who does not work, but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.' So lead us to thy peace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Forgiveness

And Jesus answering said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' And he answered, 'Say it, Teacher.'

'A certain money-lender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?' Simon answered, 'The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.' And he said to him, 'You have judged rightly.' Then turning towards the woman he said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.' And he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.' Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, 'Who is this, who even forgives sins?' And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.' (Luke 7:40–50)

There's scarcely a more beautiful subject in the whole of God's Bible than this matter of forgiveness. God labours long to assure our hearts of the boundless forgiveness that he's prepared to offer us; he piles up vivid metaphors and similes to help us grasp the extent of it.

His prophets declare that he hides the sins of those who repent in the thick cloud through which none can see (Isa 44:22); he casts their sins into the depths of the sea, down in those depths of water where nothing is ever perturbed or brought to the surface (Mic 7:18–19); he casts their sins behind his back (Isa 38:17).

Our Lord reminded us that the forgiveness God gives is free. In the parable we've just read, our Lord said that the debtors were forgiven when they'd nothing to pay with. The particular word he used to express forgiveness means that it was completely an act of *grace*. God made them a gift, so to speak, of their debts. The New Testament uses two words to describe forgiveness. There's this word that indicates it was a *gift*, an act of grace on God's part; something we don't deserve or can't buy. The other word indicates that it is a *release* from the guilt of sin that chains us on the inside.

Modern psychology shows the physical damage that unforgiven sin can do. Do you remember the occasion when the man was let down through the roof of the house on a bed (Luke 5:17–26)? There may well have been a link between some unforgiven sin and the paralysis from which he suffered. He was paralysed, but our Lord did not say first of all, 'Rise and walk,' but, 'Your sins are forgiven you.' His gracious but penetrating eye may have seen

through into the depths of the man's personality to a sense of guilt, submerged, maybe, but binding his physical frame in paralysis. Forgiveness casts off those shackles and sets a man and woman free.

We should not forget too that God has the ability not only to forgive, but to forget. We do not resemble him in that. Very often, when we've been deeply wounded and are prepared to forgive, we find it virtually impossible to forget. God assures the repentant heart that he not only forgives, but, using his omnipotent power, he deliberately forgets. Says he, 'I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more' (Heb 10:17).

In his allegory, *Pilgrim's Progress*, Bunyan painted this beautifully. When his pilgrim arrived at the heavenly city he was unable himself to forget the sins of his past. Timidly he enquired about them at the heavenly portal. The answer came, 'My son, I don't seem to have heard of them!'

God shows us the necessity of coming for personal forgiveness. He taught us to ask for it as frequently as we ask for our daily bread (Matt 6:11–12). It's one of the vital necessities of life. Our Lord solemnly warned the Pharisees who refused to believe him that, if they did not believe he was the Christ, they would die in their sin and it would be impossible for them to be where he was in the world to come (see John 8:21).

Difficulties that arise in connection with the subject of forgiveness

I want to study with you this beautiful subject of forgiveness, and try to deal with some of the difficulties that arise in the minds of many—more difficulties, perhaps, than one might suppose. Many people live through their lives without this sense of forgiveness, in spite of the fact that God has freely offered it. Our Lord asked if it was harder to say that the man's sins were forgiven, or to say, 'rise up and walk.' He indicated that some people would die without forgiveness.

I'm not thinking in particular of the difficulties that some feel, who have been taught that they have to make reparation for their sins—that is so far from Scripture that I need not trouble to deal with it. Nor do I intend to deal with the difficulties of those who say they can only obtain forgiveness through a human intermediary—they're not free themselves to come directly to God, but must come through the services, and sometimes the expensive services, of a human intermediary. I want to deal with those people who feel free to read God's word for themselves, and are quite at ease to have personal dealings with God.

The first difficulty: It's impossible for us to know that our sins have been forgiven

Believe it or not, that is a statement some people are in the habit of making. I have a friend, who is now well on in middle life, a very active Christian worker among young people, and a hospital visitor. He came to know God's salvation as a lad. He had a school teacher who frequently stressed to the children that it was impossible for anyone to know that their sins were forgiven. One day, following the Scripture class, when the teacher had been more emphatic than usual on this, there came the weekly composition class. They were told to write an essay on what they'd like to be when they grew up and my friend wrote about David Livingstone.

He said, 'I'd like to be a missionary like David Livingstone, a man whose sins were forgiven and knew it.'

You may imagine the consternation it caused in the classroom. It's a view seriously held by many people like that teacher, though I must confess I find it difficult to know how anyone with an open Bible can possibly maintain it.

Let me cite just a few quotations, taken almost at random from Scripture.

1. John the Baptist was sent to give people the knowledge of salvation through the remission of sins. Not merely salvation, not merely forgiveness, but the knowledge of it:

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins. (Luke 1:76-77)

2. The Apostles were in the habit of *preaching* in these terms:

Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. (Acts 13:38-39)

The word means to preach as a herald preaches it: a public proclamation. God is anxious that people should know that there's forgiveness of sins, and he wants to give it the widest publicity. That, of course, was the nature of the dispute between our Lord and the Pharisees. They had the idea that we must wait until the final judgment for the verdict. The thing that most concerned them was to have a young preacher of some thirty years of age going around the countryside telling people outright, 'Your sins are forgiven.' They thought it savoured of presumption and bordered on blasphemy. And yet, when Christ spoke those words to a person, there was no doubt in their mind about it.

In fact, the joy of forgiveness is that we know it. David is quoted in the New Testament to this effect, 'Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin' (Rom 4:7-8). David's future was clear: he lived in the certainty that God would never count his sin against him, and it made that stately king burst out in joyful happiness.

When we consider the forgiveness that God has given us, and the knowledge and certainty of it, I sometimes wish our Christianity were not quite so stately and we had more room for the spontaneous. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that it wouldn't be forgiveness unless we could know it. Would you call it forgiveness if, in your heart, you forgave someone who'd sinned against you, but you said to yourself, 'I shan't let him know'? To leave the fetters of his guilt in place, and make him think he's still chained, is the very opposite of forgiveness. The very word itself demands that the person who's forgiven shall know it.

The second difficulty: Isn't forgiveness accompanied by some kind of feeling or holy elation?

In many people's minds there's this lingering idea, so they look inside themselves to find a suitable emotion or feeling that could give them the courage to believe they've been forgiven. This is specially so of people who have been taught that the way we get forgiveness is to love God. The more we love God, the sooner we are forgiven.

I'd like to demonstrate the true interpretation of the portion of Scripture upon which that erroneous notion is built. A moment ago I read the story of the woman whom Christ forgave in Simon's house and then the subsequent parable that our Lord preached to Simon.

It ends with those words, 'Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much' (Luke 7:47). On the basis of these words it's been systematically taught in some quarters that the woman's sins were forgiven because she loved much. Then a little loose theology will tack on that another verse, out of its context, 'love covers a multitude of sins' (1 Pet 4:8). From that meagre theory it is said that if we well and truly love God, it will cover up our little peccadilloes, and a good many others too. Of course, that is absolutely immoral. God can't excuse anything because we love him. Sin is just as serious in those who love God as it is in those who are his enemies. It is not true that our love for God merits his forgiveness.

The parable of the Two Debtors

We must, of course, take the thing in its context. Let me argue it from the parable that our Lord spoke. There were two debtors, the one owed much, the other owed little. When they had nothing to pay with, they were bankrupt, and their creditor forgave them both. Did he forgive them because they loved him? Certainly not. The point of the parable is as our Lord expounded it.

'Tell me, Simon, both men have been forgiven—which of them loved his creditor more?'

Said Simon, 'The man who has been forgiven more will love more.'

Do you see which way round it is? It wasn't that the man who loves more will be forgiven more, but the man who's been forgiven more, as a result, will love more. The forgiveness came when they were utterly bankrupt and had nothing to pay with. The love came, not in order to gain forgiveness; the love came as a result of the forgiveness.

Let's put the parable in the larger story. The parable was told to help Simon with his difficulties over this notorious woman. She'd come into the room and our Lord had permitted her to touch his feet, to pay him very close attention. Simon had always been very sceptical about this young preacher. While there was much in his teaching that Simon had to recognize was good, he was particularly concerned about this novel idea that people could know that their sins were forgiven, and he doubted this teacher who dared tell it to the people. He asked the Lord to lunch, and then watched this woman very closely, and watched the Lord.

He said to himself, 'If this Jesus is a prophet, he wouldn't let a sinful woman like that touch him.'

Our Lord's reply was, 'Simon, she isn't a sinner any longer. Her notoriously many sins have been forgiven.' We mustn't let the old English of our Authorized Bibles lead us astray here. He didn't use a present tense, 'are now, this moment, forgiven.' He used a perfect tense. Said he, 'Simon, this woman's many sins *have been forgiven*.' He didn't elaborate on when they

had been forgiven. Simon would have been disposed to challenge the statement, 'How do you know her sins have been forgiven?' With such an unbeliever as Simon, it would have been useless for Christ to have said, 'Because I'm telling you so.' Simon didn't believe our Lord's authority, and therefore our Lord was obliged to appeal to evidence to show she'd been forgiven. How could Simon know the woman has been forgiven?

Said our Lord, 'Look at her love, and that will show you that she's been forgiven. You've admitted that when a man who's been burdened with a big debt that he cannot pay is released from the burden and forgiven, he begins to love his creditor. On that same evidence, I hold this woman's love up before you as proof that she's been forgiven.'

Observe which way round it is—the love follows the forgiveness. Let our faith grasp that. We don't need to go hunting around inside our hearts to work up some love for God, or any holy emotion whatsoever, as being something necessary to make us sure God has forgiven us. But rather, in our bankruptcy, to lay hold upon the forgiveness God provides, and the knowledge that we're forgiven will work in us the gratitude which God looks for.

I'd like to underline that before I proceed. We may be grateful to God that his forgiveness isn't a will o' the wisp emotion—neither ours nor his. It's something far more deliberate and determined than that. Forgiveness isn't a matter of my feelings at all. Even forgiveness between human beings isn't a matter of feelings on the part of the person who's forgiven.

I borrow my friend's car, go out and do a bit of reckless driving, and smash the thing up. My friend hears of the unfortunate accident, ponders the situation for a while and feels terribly indignant. Then his Christianity rises to the surface and in his heart he forgives me. All the while I'm lying in hospital and I haven't yet seen my friend. In addition to my aching bones, I'm stewing inside. Whatever will he say? What shall I say to him? I'm feeling terrible. If only I knew what he's feeling, what he's already said, and what's in his heart. But I haven't heard that yet; all I know are my feelings, which, of course, are strictly irrelevant. It's his feelings that are going to count. If only our emotions were rational, they'd cease plaguing us, but sometimes they're not so rational.

There are people who, perhaps earlier in life, have done some grievous sin, and it so shocked their sense of respect that they've never been able to remove the remorse from their consciences. As they feel again the pangs of remorse and shame, sometimes they confuse that with the knowledge of forgiveness, and imagine that if only they were truly forgiven they'd cease to have any feelings of remorse. They are confusing two different things. Our feelings are irrelevant. Once God has said 'I forgive you', we have the forgiveness, whatever our feelings.

The third difficulty: God can forgive things that are past, but how can he possibly forgive sins that are future?

This is perhaps the most common of all. People can readily believe that God has forgiven them up to the present, but for the rest of life they think they are on trial. They wouldn't dare to claim that their future is completely clear. As one woman expressed it to me, 'I believe I'm saved up to the moment, but what would happen if I did some grievous sin in the future?' In consequence they don't live at peace, but with a foreboding in their hearts. If you try to

persuade them that the forgiveness God gives is complete and covers the whole of a person's life, they'll argue, 'But surely that can't be so? How can God forgive sins that are still future?'

More thoughtful people see a moral difficulty here. They say, 'That can't be so. We can't possibly believe that we have forgiveness for the whole of life, otherwise it would quickly descend into that wicked state of affairs that existed in the Middle Ages.' In those days, people could buy *indulgences* for sins that they hadn't yet committed. Like the man who, intending to steal a watch, bought an indulgence and then proceeded to steal the priest's watch!

Some people say, 'If we knew that our sins were forgiven for the future, would it not lead us to live as we pleased? Surely that's immoral?'

I own that these are very real difficulties, but I want to proceed, first of all, by positively showing you that the forgiveness we receive when first we come to the Saviour as repentant sinners, are accepted, and we become children of God; it is a forgiveness that covers the whole of life—past, present and future.

I propose to read certain excerpts from Hebrews 10 that point out the difference between the old Jewish religion and Christianity.

As I read this description of Judaism, I think you'll find it describes the idea that most people have. When you see the difference between that and true Christianity, I trust my point will have been proved. Consider then what the Holy Spirit says about the law.

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshippers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. (vv. 1–3)

Let's pause for a moment to absorb what's being said. In Israel, the situation was this. They sinned on most days throughout the year, then came the great day of atonement. There was a solemn ceremony, with its sacrifices and confessions and words of absolution, and that was that for the year. Then the next year they went through the whole process again.

You say, 'That was quite right, because the next year they would have done some more sins. Isn't that what we have to do? We do a few sins, come and confess them and get forgiven. We do a few more sins, confess them and get forgiven. What's wrong with that?'

Notice that this is the very fault that the Holy Spirit finds in the system. He says, 'Look at its imperfection. If those worshippers had been cleansed once and for all, they would never again have had conscience of sins; they wouldn't have offered any more sacrifices, and the offerings would have ceased. But, of course, in Judaism the opposite was true; they kept on offering sacrifices every year. It wasn't a once and for all cleansing with them, but something that had to be repeated many times. In fact, it had to be done every day: 'And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins' (v. 11).

That was Judaism. Let's be bold enough to grasp the difference between that and Christianity. In contrast to those priests who stood constantly offering, we read of our Lord,

But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. (vv. 12–14)

That is a matter of history. He doesn't keep offering himself upon the cross—in spite of what some translators of the New Testament say. 'He sat down.' Why did he sit down? Because his sacrifice was finished.

You agree with me that he offered his sacrifice for your sins that are already past. Might I ask, then, whether his sacrifice accounted for your sins that are yet future? If it didn't, do you expect him to offer another sacrifice? If those sins haven't yet been accounted for, will our Lord have to get up and offer another sacrifice before you can be forgiven? But the Holy Spirit himself bears witness to the fact that now God is prepared to grant complete forgiveness of all sin—past, present and future.

And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, 'This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds', then he adds, 'I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.' Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin. (vv. 15–18)

When all sins have been forgiven, you don't need any more offering for sin. Is that enough, or must I add another Scripture? Writing to the believers at a place called Colosse, Paul said:

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. (Col 2:13–14)

Paul paints a very vivid metaphor. It will repay us if we can persuade our imaginations to picture what Paul is describing. It's as though the cross is standing there, and here's a long detailed list of all God's ordinances that we have broken. Because of Christ's work, God got a sponge and wiped the whole thing out, just as the ancient scribe would, when he wanted to erase what he had written from a parchment. Then he got that clean record of debt and hammered it to his cross as a public proclamation that the whole, long, dreadful account against us has been removed and obliterated. That's the image.

If any of us would lay claim to being forgiven, we must be sure that the sin for which we seek forgiveness was on that record that was then blotted out. Was it? If so, then I want to ask, how many of your sins were on it?

You say, 'My sins up to the present. I couldn't believe my sins in the future were recorded there.'

Let me ask you then, how many sins had you done when Christ nailed that proclamation to his cross? Were they not all future? We may not argue as though God is human and as limited as we are. We deal with the God of eternity, and his offering was made by the eternal

Spirit (see Heb 9:14). The offering that Christ gave at the cross reaches back in its value to the beginning of time, and it will stretch forward to the end.

Let me reinforce that fact by reminding you what we observed on a previous occasion. When it comes to our sins, God doesn't hold court once a day, once a week, or once a year. Scripture positively says that there is only one court, and it happens after death: 'it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgement' (Heb 9:27). You can't die twice, and the judgment isn't held until life is complete. *In the same way*, says Scripture, 'so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many . . .' (v. 28). His one offering avails for the whole of life, in view of the one final judgment. Therefore God can offer to the repentant sinner a forgiveness for the whole of life.

How glad you ought to be that I'm proving my point! Am I not proving it? How else could you understand the words of our Lord Jesus when he said, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgement, but has passed from death to life' (John 5:24)? How else would you understand the inspired statement at the commencement of Romans 8, 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (v. 1)? This, indeed, is a truly magnificent thing, but the gift that God offers is no less than this.

There are just two conditions: repentance and faith

1. *Repentance* is absolutely necessary: a *sine qua non*, as the lawyers would phrase it. There's no forgiveness without repentance. When John saw the Pharisees coming to his baptism, and knew the secrets of their hearts, said he, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?' (Matt 3:7). They gave evidence that they genuinely wanted to be quit of sin, but there's no forgiveness for people who want to carry on with sin.

Let's make it abundantly clear, God doesn't ask us to live our lives free of sin. That's a thing we couldn't do. But he does demand that we repent; that is, we agree with God that sin is wrong, his judgment of our sin is just, and we're willing to let Christ save us from sin. That will take a lifetime in which we may fall many times over. But God does demand that basic attitude of heart when we're willing to let Christ save us from sin for which we now seek forgiveness.

2. And then there's *faith*. It's not enough to be sorry for sin; we must come and lay claim to the forgiveness.

There's a story that I heard in my youth about a wicked landlord who decided to remit the rents of his tenants. I feel it illustrates the point so well. He made it public that if the tenants who couldn't pay their rent came at a set time on a certain day, he'd be in his office and would give them a receipt, free and for nothing, for their rent that was overdue. So he sat in his office and at long last a man plucked up his courage and came in.

'What do you want?' said his lordship.

'Please, your lordship, you said you'd remit our rents.'

'Of course, I will,' he said, and he signed the receipt.

The man went out, and his lordship went off. Then the others came. They hadn't believed him before, but when they came the door was locked. His lordship had gone; the time was up and there was no more remission.

Christ has died and God offers forgiveness. But our Lord himself warned that one day heaven's door would be shut, and there will be people outside who have eternally missed God's forgiveness (see Luke 13:25). They didn't really believe it was available; they didn't come personally and have dealings with him. They've missed it, and that forever.

Judging our own sin and forgiving others who have sinned against us

I must make one more point, as briefly as I can. I've argued here publicly that, when we come as bankrupt sinners to the Saviour, the forgiveness he offers is the forgiveness that covers the whole of life. True as it is, it wouldn't do for me to leave that statement without another to balance it and point out the other side.

Perhaps some of you will remind me of the parable in Matthew 18 that our Lord himself told. 'Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants' (v. 23). One servant had a very big debt and was threatened with imprisonment, but he fell on his knees imploring his master to forgive him. The master forgave the servant and he went back to work.

He had a fellow servant who owed him a trifling sum. He began to choke that servant, and demanded payment. When he asked for forgiveness, he refused to forgive him and put him in prison. When the other servants heard this they reported it to their master, who summoned servant number one and withdrew the forgiveness he'd given to him, and sent him to jail until he paid his own debt.

'There you are,' says somebody, 'that proves your earlier contention was completely wrong, Mr Lecturer.'

The responsibility of being a servant in God's kingdom

But I think not, though it's not my part to play down its serious and solemn message. You see, in the former instance, we were reading of God's offer to bankrupt sinners when they come for salvation. In this parable, we're reading about men who are servants in the kingdom of God. I must stress the difference here. Not all men and women are servants of God and in his kingdom. To think that is to make a basic fallacy which will cause confusion in many a Scripture. Our Lord positively said that you can't get into the kingdom of God unless first you are born again (John 3:3). When as sinners we're forgiven, then we may come into God's kingdom and serve him as servants. Here it is at a different level, and on different principles.

Let me illustrate it from common life. In some part of her dominions Her Majesty has some servants who have broken loose from her authority. They've rebelled against her, raised their own standard in defiance of her government, and they're enemies of the crown. When they're caught, it's a question now of whether Her Majesty will punish these rebels and enemies as

they deserve, or be reconciled to them, receive and forgive them. She receives them; they're forgiven and the enmity is gone.

That's altogether a different proposition from what happens when Prince Philip has promised to be in for tea at 4:30 and doesn't arrive until 6:30 because he's been playing polo for too long. With him, there never was a question of whether she should pardon him or condemn him to prison. Never the slightest hint, I hope, that this misdemeanour would lead to divorce or death. But it would be unmanly and wrong for Prince Philip to think he could come in without any sincere apology, and think his wife should carry on as before, all smiles and say nothing.

The challenge of being a child in God's family

When you're brought within the family and kingdom of God, as men and women who have professed to be repentant about sin, God will hold us to that. If we don't judge our sins, God will discipline us until we agree with him that sin is sin. Even if that discipline should be very severe and end in physical death, the Bible says that it will not suspend our salvation. The child of God who has to be disciplined, even to death itself, shall be saved and not condemned with the world. After all, he's a child of God.

If we are brought under discipline we may go to the Lord for forgiveness and, if he see fit, escape that discipline. But the condition of escaping it is that we forgive our fellow servants. If we don't forgive those who sin against us, there will be no release from the temporal discipline, in spite of our entreaties. God will take us 'through the mill' in life to teach us the seriousness of sin.

If we keep that distinction, all is clear. When we come as bankrupt sinners to the Saviour there's forgiveness throughout our whole life that will never be withdrawn. We must be on our guard, lest that forgiveness should lead us into careless living. God is determined to see that in his family we're taught through his kind but firm discipline to forsake sin in all its detail.

The lecture has ended and we shall go home. As we go, however, we ought to ask ourselves some practical questions.

To those who are Christians—who by repentance and faith have heard God's word of forgiveness, and can look eternity courageously in the face and know they're completely forgiven and there's no condemnation. 'In my daily life have I judged all known sin, so that I may be free of his discipline? Am I prepared to forgive everyone who repents of any injury they may have done to me?'

To those who are not Christians—who haven't yet got that far. 'Can I honestly look God and the future in the face, and say, "I'm forgiven, I have peace with God and I'll never come into judgment"?' Surely wisdom dictates that you don't leave this question unsettled, not even for another night? God offers absolute forgiveness, and to go to sleep carelessly without it would be to add to an already long list of sins, and one of the most dangerous for a human to commit.

Shall we take the matter to God in prayer.

We thank thee now, blessed God, that thy word is so clear and so definite that any may read and all may understand. We thank thee that, in thy proclamation of forgiveness, thy sincerity is evident. We thank thee for the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, for his ascension to thy right hand, and for the Holy Spirit's earnest testimony that his sacrifice is complete and sufficient.

We give grateful thanks for the peace of mind of those who have trusted thee. We pray that thou wilt give us, who are thy servants and in thy kingdom, honesty to judge ourselves in the practical details of daily living, and a willing heart to show to others the forgiveness that thou dost so constantly and liberally bestow on us.

In thy mercy, O Lord, look upon any of us here who've never yet come as bankrupt sinners, but maybe, like Simon of old, have hearts apparently busy serving thee, but unforgiven and therefore unloving. Speak to such and bring them speedily into the light of thy full, frank, and free forgiveness through that same Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Holiness

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another. (Gal 5:16–26)

I wish to aim this lecture at certain practical difficulties that people feel on hearing the doctrines of Christianity—difficulties which you may have felt yourselves, if you have followed closely what I have been trying to say in previous evenings. I have been stressing, perhaps *ad nauseam* as far as you are concerned, that salvation is not by our works but altogether by faith. I have stated, in the name of God and in the name of the Bible, that we shall be forgiven if we come to Christ in genuine repentance and faith. We may be right with God for the whole of our lives apart from any works of ours at all.

That raises an objection in people's minds: 'But you can't be a Christian without being good.'

And there is a very real sense, of course, in which they are absolutely correct. God's salvation is certainly not designed to save us from the unpleasant consequences of sinning, to allow us then to go on sinning with impunity. God has no salvation that permits men and women to go on sinning. In that sense, you cannot be a Christian without being good, but in many people's minds there are inadequate and positively wrong ideas on the method God has of making us good. Very often, it is to the despair of many people.

Some examples

I remember one woman. As I had urged upon her that she needed to be saved, and could be saved and forgiven completely by simple faith in Christ, she told me outright, 'You can't be a Christian without being good and I'm too much mixed up in things that are not good. I don't need anybody to tell me that those things are not Christian, but, to be honest, I like them. I can't bring myself to give them up, and I'm not going to be a hypocrite and dishonest and

pretend to come to God for forgiveness of my sin when I know right well that I haven't even got the inclination to give them up.'

In a very big sense, she is taking the right attitude. It is useless coming to Christ for salvation if we are not prepared to let him make us good. But while that is so, it is open to serious misunderstanding. Many people who feel that way, realize the stupidity and folly of saying, 'Then I'll not be a Christian.' To knowingly go on with sin is to court eternal disaster. Therefore they say to themselves, 'I must make an honest effort to be good.' More often than not, it lands them either in despair or in fear.

At one stage I did some work among Teddy Boys in the north-east of England. I remember one of them coming to me one night, when he had just enough drink to make him tell the truth.

He said, 'You know that we laugh, but underneath I know you're right. I go with my gang to Blackpool and we wait for the pubs to open at ten o'clock in the morning and we shall be blind drunk all day. It's like pouring money down the drain. I'd give anything to get out of it, but I can't. I'm afraid of the gang and what they'd do. My own father is a drunkard and I know the misery of my own home. I don't want to be like this, but I can't help it.'

The despair of the young man was pathetic.

There are other people, who may not be quite so far gone as he was. Their lives vacillate between hope and fear. They are honestly trying to do their very best to live decent lives, but now and again they come crashing down. Some days they hope they have been good enough to count themselves as Christian; other days they have to face the truth that the record's not been too good. They then hear a Christian preacher expounding the law of God, where nothing short of one hundred percent perfection is any good at all. It absolutely breaks them down and makes them feel afraid.

Then some people feel altogether indifferent. In their early days perhaps they tried to be decent—they had high ideals. They found that the more they tried the more their failures continued, so they've become blasé over the whole business. They try to forget it, put on a worldly face, and smother their consciences.

So I wish to aim my lecture at those very practical difficulties. I want to say very plainly that, while in that practical sense you cannot be a Christian without being good, God has a way not only of forgiving our sins, but a way of making us good.

I suppose in some sense I could explain it very simply—like the man who was endeavouring to lead his companion to Christ. He could see his need for forgiveness and was perturbed at the thought of eternal judgment if he wasn't forgiven. He wanted to become a Christian, but thought he couldn't live up to the required standard. He wasn't going to be a hypocrite and profess to receive the Saviour, if he wasn't sure he could live as a Christian ought to live.

His Christian friend thought he would try to illustrate it.

He said, 'Take my pencil and make it stand upright on the table. It can be done; have a try.'

The friend looked a little incredulous because the pencil had a pointed end. So he tried, and of course it fell. He put it up the other way, and it fell. There seemed to be no way of doing it at all. His friend took the pencil back.

'I'll show you an easy way,' he said, and stood the pencil up with his finger on the top.

'That's cheating,' said his friend, 'you're holding it!'

'That's the point! It can be made to stand if someone holds it.'

That is the Christian gospel. Our Lord is a realistic Saviour. He is prepared not merely to forgive our sins and blot out our past so that we can face the future at peace, but he is able to make us stand. His word abounds with promises and statements to that effect.

Or I could put it as another Christian worker did in a camp in Australia. There was a soldier who could scarcely speak a word without swearing; he was utterly foul-mouthed. He had become dissatisfied with his life and he told the padre, 'I think I'm going out of my mind.'

'Oh,' said the padre, 'what makes you think that?'

'Is it wrong to steal?' he said.

'Why do you ask that?' said the padre.

'I'm beginning to feel that it is wrong to steal. I used to steal everything I could get my hands on.'

He thought he was going out of his mind because he was beginning to get troubled about his way of living. He wondered if God could do anything for him. The padre tried to help, but how do you explain God's way of making a person practically holy? The man had worked in the forests in Australia, so the padre thought to himself what might be a helpful illustration.

He said, 'In the forests, men agree to clear an area, and if it's not cleared by a certain time they have to pay a fine. Suppose you had taken on an area; you saw that you were not going to get it finished in time and would be exposed to the penalty, what would you do?'

'If we can't cope with it ourselves, we sublet it to somebody else.'

'Then why don't you sublet your life to Christ?'

'Oh,' he said, 'I didn't know Christ did that kind of thing!'

But he does. Christ is not merely a Saviour in the sense that he forgives our sins, but a Saviour who can save us every day of the week, joining himself with us and making us strong enough to please God. If I wanted a simple explanation in one verse of the Bible, it would be: 'he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them' (Heb 7:25). While the Bible can be put simply, it also goes to great lengths in explaining this matter, for God wants us to be intelligent and to understand how it is that he works to save us in our daily living.

God's programme for making his people holy

First principle: God is prepared to take us just as we are

Many people go astray just there. They are waiting until their lives have improved enough for them to begin to think that they are now Christians, and consequently they live a life of drudgery. They have never seen that God is prepared to take them and receive them just as they are. Knowing all they have done and will ever do, he is prepared to take them just as they are. That is a marvellous thing, and it is the glory of God and his gospel. '[He] shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Rom 5:8).

That is the wonderful truth that Charlotte Elliott expressed in her famous hymn:

Just as I am, and waiting not
To rid my soul of one dark blot,
To thee, whose blood can cleanse each spot,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.³

The marvel of God's salvation is that, if a man or woman will come as a bankrupt sinner, God will not only receive them there and then, he promises never to cast them out (see John 6:37). He will cling to them when they grow tired or weary, however bad they prove to be. He knows them through and through, from the beginning to the end, and he loves them just as they are. He is willing to receive them, quite irrespective of their past behaviour and future progress. When men and women see that and come to the Saviour, the love of God begins to sink down into their hearts.

That's how the Holy Spirit does it. He begins to pervade their hearts with a sense of the eternal love of God that will never let them go. Because they are at ease and secure in God's love, they then have the courage to face their sins and shortcomings. You wouldn't confess your weaknesses to your enemy, would you? Or even to a critical friend? If you had a friend who would love you even when they knew the worst, then you might be bold enough to confess your weaknesses.

That's how God acts. He knows the worst; you can't tell him anything that would shock him or do anything that would surprise him. Yet he offers us his love, and offers to receive us if we'll come just as we are. I repeat, his acceptance does not depend on our progress afterwards. When he has received us and set us at ease in his presence he gives us his Holy Spirit, who will begin to wage a relentless war inside us against sin, and at the same time supply the desire and the power to please God.

Let me amplify that statement a little

You don't have to understand all this in great detail beforehand. All you have to do is come to the living Saviour and ask him to take over. But when you do come, he will go into further detail as you are able to understand it.

³ Charlotte Elliott (1789-1871), 'Just as I am, without one plea.'

Second principle: Christian living is not a question of law

I read you the words of Paul from Galatians 5:18: 'But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.' That simple sentence sums up this exceedingly important principle in Christian living. It may be a bit difficult to grasp, but think with me for a moment what the Bible means by *law*. What is it to be 'under the law'? Law lays down a commandment and attaches a penalty if the commandment is broken.

Let me illustrate it from everyday life

Here is young Tommy, much given to playing with matches. His father knows that if young Tommy puts his hand into a fire he will get burned as a consequence of his wrong act. But his father goes a stage further. He doesn't merely say, 'Tommy, I shouldn't play with that fire if I were you. If you do, you will probably get burned.' He lays down the law. He says, 'Tommy, if I find you playing with that fire I shall punish you.' That isn't a natural consequence of playing with fire—that's a legal consequence. It is the law, and if you break it you will get punished.

As I look back, there was a consequence of coming from the garden into the house. If you had been digging up vegetables and didn't wipe your shoes, you'd put mud on to the carpet and spoil it—that was the consequence. But there was a law, if you please. You were forbidden to come in without wiping your shoes, and if the law was broken there was a legal penalty appropriate to the misdemeanour.

I might say that that law doesn't exist in our family now. When I go home, I am not under such a law. My father would never dream of laying it down. Time for that has passed. If I want to, I can go out and get my shoes muddy and come back in and stand on the carpet. Why don't I do that? Because I don't want to! As a grown-up son, I share the same outlook as my father. He values the carpet, and so do I. I have something of his spirit inside me and I don't need the law. Even if I didn't have his spirit, the law wouldn't do much good because my father is not able to punish me now.

Trying to keep the law is slavery

You see, the principle of law isn't really good enough—telling people not to do something, for if they do they'll be punished. True Christianity is not a system of law. Does that surprise you? Did you think it was about being good, and trying to behave as a Christian ought to behave, and you were goaded in your efforts by the fact that one day there is going to be a judgment?

God's holy law says 'You shall not covet,' and you observed that the penalty of breaking one commandment is eternal death. Because you are afraid of that coming judgment you have struggled really hard and honestly to try and live as a good Christian ought to live. You've taken it seriously, and as a result your life has been an absolute slavery.

Perhaps you haven't taken it really seriously? You haven't yet seen how serious God's penalties are. I repeat, the commandment that says 'You shall not covet' has a penalty attached, which is eternal death. What slavery and absolute despair it would be, if I was trying to live as a Christian with that penalty over my head. I might as well give up before I started, because the fact is that I have already broken the commandment.

Third principle: The Holy Spirit gives us the desire and power to do God's will

The Bible clearly says that Christians are not under law like that. They do not go about trying to live as Christians ought to live because they are afraid of the penalty. God gives them his Spirit, and with his Holy Spirit comes the desire and the power to do the things that God likes. When the Bible says that, it is not talking about an unproved theory; millions of men and women have found it to be literal fact. With the coming of God's Holy Spirit into their lives, old desires are changed and new desires and powers spring up that were not there before.

I remember a young man in one of the universities in which I served. I was asking him what had led him to Christ; what first made him feel that he needed to be saved? The question was very pertinent because he was studying theology and had been about to enter Holy Orders, even though he frankly confessed that he was not saved.

I said, 'What made you first think that you were not right?'

He said, 'There's a group of students in this university composed of all sorts of people—medics and scientists and arts people—and they meet together every Saturday to study the Bible. I have found that a profound mystery. I can understand reading the Bible as a job you have to do in your studies, but it baffles me that anybody should study it and take it seriously in their spare time. And what was even more galling, I went along to some of the meetings and they obviously enjoy the stuff! I didn't enjoy it.'

He had tried to make himself love God a bit more and become a bit more keen. He went on a pilgrimage to Rome but gave up before he got there. He hitchhiked his way back over the continent, and in England he was given a ride in a car by a man who turned out to be a Baptist pastor, who asked him to lunch in a hotel.

'To my tremendous horror,' he said, 'he tipped the waiter with the Gospel of John! I thought that I would never get away from these people who seem, somehow, to love this Bible.'

He found the answer to it all when he too, as a bankrupt sinner, received not only forgiveness, but the Holy Spirit with all his new power and new life. He has new interests now, and he doesn't have to try to love the Bible; it comes naturally to him.

He had been honest to express what a good many people feel. There are many men and women, and they find this book absolute boredom. They can't love it; it's double-dutch, and yet it is God's word. If we don't love God's word, how shall we love God's heaven? How can we pretend to be Christians if we don't love his word and the God who wrote it? It's no good trying to make ourselves love it.

There will always be a battle between the flesh and the Spirit

I am not saying that men and women will never sin again when they come to Christ and receive the Holy Spirit. I am not saying that they will never know a wrong desire, or never enjoy doing something wrong again. The Bible is very real and down-to-earth. It says that, when a man or woman receives God's Holy Spirit, a battle starts within them that will never cease while this life on earth lasts. Our verse explicitly describes it in these terms: 'For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do' (Gal 5:17).

Those old desires are there still, and this new power begins to strive against the old. There will be times when the old gets the mastery, but the winning of the final war will always be on the side of God's Holy Spirit.

You say, 'If the Holy Spirit comes into a man when he is saved and he still sins, what about his sins? Does God shut a blind eye to them?'

No, indeed not. But do you not see the realism and the extent of God's salvation? Christ died on the cross to deliver us from the curse of his broken law. He has paid the expense of the whole thing, and now for the person who trusts Christ the penalty of God's law over his sins has been paid permanently.

Like a father teaching his son to work with very precious glass, he knows that if he gives the young man his beautiful cut-glass work to finish, the unskilled hands may smash the whole thing. The father is so keen to teach his son to do it properly that he's prepared to pay all the expenses for breakage; not intending to encourage his son to be careless, but that's the only way of doing it.

God has a marvellous salvation through the death of Christ on the cross for those who trust him. The penalty of all their sins is paid in full while they develop under the leading of God's Holy Spirit.

I pause, therefore, at this stage in the lecture, and suggest that we ask ourselves on what principle we are living. Are you living as a child of God? Have you received God's Holy Spirit? Or perhaps you don't know what that means. You know this is Christianity, but it is so easy to be content with something less.

John the Baptist

John the Baptist was a godly man, but he openly told the people that there were certain things that he could not do. He could exhort them to be good; he could preach God's commandments and show them that they were sinners; he could tell them to repent and say they were sorry; but he personally couldn't give them forgiveness, nor any power to behave differently. But he pointed them to our Lord Jesus, and said that they would find forgiveness in him, and that he could empower them with the Holy Spirit.

At one stage some people came to listen to John the Baptist, but they only got half of the message. When he preached against sin, they said, 'Yes, we ought to be better than we are—we need to make a really good effort.' When he pointed them to Christ, the great teacher who came to show us what God's law really is, they said, 'Yes, we'll do our very best now to keep it,' and they struggled hard. They lived in Ephesus, incidentally, and when Paul came to Ephesus, he noticed these people. They were well-intentioned, but Paul could see that they lacked the unmistakable hallmark of people who have really got God's salvation. There was something missing.

Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. And he said to them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' And they said, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.' And he said, 'Into what then were you baptized?' They said, 'Into John's baptism.' And Paul said, 'John baptized with the baptism of

repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.'

On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. (Acts 19:1-5)

I suppose he didn't like to challenge them outright, and say, 'Look here, are you really saved?' So he put the question another way around. He said, 'Tell me, did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' Their faces fell and they said, 'We don't quite know what you mean?' They hadn't got salvation at all; they were still merely trying their best to do their own thing.

I wonder what you would say if I asked you bluntly, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' We can afford to be utterly honest with that question, because the Holy Spirit is a gift. We don't get him by struggling or by trying to attain to a holy life. We get him when we come for the first time and receive the Saviour. When we open our hearts to the Saviour he comes in, and with him he brings this gift of the Holy Spirit.

I am not asking you whether you had any wonderful feelings when you trusted the Lord, and I urge you not to look for feelings or experiences of any kind whatsoever. God will not have us engage our minds with feelings and emotions. It is a fact that everyone who has come to the Saviour, and received him on his terms, has the Holy Spirit. Sooner or later he makes his presence felt, and their lives are changed. Are you a Christian on those terms?

God's terms illustrated by Christian baptism

Let me remind you again what those terms are, and for this I want to use the illustration of Christian baptism. I am well aware that in some places it is considered a controversial subject, but, whatever your view, please allow me to use it this evening. After all, it is an ordinance which Christ himself commanded, and I want to use it because it is such a beautiful illustration of the terms upon which God receives us and undertakes to make us holy. Of course, the ordinance in itself doesn't do anything. The water that is used is not holy, and has no magical element. It is a symbol.

This is the classical passage on the matter.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom 6:1-4)

It is pointing out that Christian baptism is a symbol, a picture, representing burial and resurrection. The question comes, however: 'Why do Christian people go through this symbol of being buried?' The answer is, 'Because they're dead.' In the ordinary physical world, we bury people when they're dead. We don't bury them to make them dead; we bury them because they are dead. So Christian people go through this symbolic act of being buried because God says that they are dead.

In what sense can they be regarded as dead?

Well, firstly, from the legal point of view. God hasn't abandoned the principles of his law; the law says we have sinned, and 'the wages of sin is death' (v. 23). The penalty must be paid, but

how can it be paid without the destruction of the sinner? The answer is that Christ paid the penalty: 'Christ died for our sins' (1 Cor 15:3).

But you say, 'How does that help me?'

Simply, when people receive the Saviour, they are no longer isolated units by themselves. They become one with the Lord Jesus, just as man and wife cease to be two separate people in the eyes of the law and become one flesh physically and in their outlook. At least, that is the ideal.

In a deeper sense, when men and women come to Christ, Christ receives them and they become one. Therefore, what happened to Christ can be regarded as having happened to them, because they are inseparably one with him. The law says that that person should die. Christ says, 'Just as I died, he is dead! When he trusts me, he and I become one, and I refuse to let him go.' That in itself is the glorious gospel message. It tells us that there is freedom from the penalty of the law, because it has been paid by another.

When some people see Christians being baptized, they say, 'You must think you're especially good, and better than everybody else, to go through that elaborate ceremony.'

The answer, of course, is that they don't think anything of the sort. On the contrary; their baptism is a declaration that they were incurably bad and could not be patched up. When they had done their best, they had to admit that God's law condemned them to eternal death. They acknowledged the fact and came to Christ. Being buried is an eloquent testimony to what they think of themselves. They are hopeless and would have been eternally condemned had it not been for the one who came and died for them.

As these are the conditions upon which Christ receives us, it's important that we start there. We can be utter realists and confess the very worst. We can honestly say, 'Lord, it's obvious to me that I can't improve; I'm condemned already. I can't eradicate the past and I've already done enough wrong to deserve eternal perdition.'

If we come to Christ on those terms he will take us just as we are, which is wonderful. He'll assure us that he has paid our penalty. The Christian person is not merely buried under the water, but raised again to walk in newness of life. This is not just a fond wish, but a thing that is going to be realized because it is Christ who has given them the new life that they never earned. We deserve the wages of sin, but Christ gives the gift of eternal life to those who trust him.

The continuing problem of the old self

There is something deeper still. When Christ died, we read that he died to sin (v. 10). As a man he eternally conquered sin and he passes on that victory to those who trust him. He asks every Christian to take his word for it that they are now dead to sin: 'So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus' (v. 11). What does that mean? For the Christian, our old self has been crucified (v. 6). Some Christian here may say, 'But that contradicts my experience; my old self is very much alive.'

It depends what you think the old self — 'the old man' — means. In the days before we were saved, our hearts were rebellious against God's law. Our fallen, corrupt, human nature set up endless strong habits in our personalities that we couldn't break. Someone who had the habit of drinking would find it hard to break it. When that person comes to Christ, mysterious as it

may sound, Christ says that the root of the trouble has been broken. The habit will probably beset him for many years to come, but Christ's word is still true that the root is broken. When we learn to take Christ at his word, we will find his word is true and the habit loses its grip.

Faith takes God at his word

The Israelites were a comparatively small force. At the conquest of Canaan, they faced a country full of strongholds in all directions.

God said to them, 'I have given you every city in this country. There will be a lot of fighting, and you will have to face those enemies individually, one by one. It may take you years to mop them up, but I am telling you that I have given you every one of them.'

When God said that, those enemy cities were doomed, but it took faith on the part of his people to prove that his word was true. Sometimes they got a bit scared and said, 'This city is too big; we can't face this one. We shall have to let it remain.' But if they only had the faith to take God at his word, that city too would have fallen.

That is God's programme. At the beginning of this lecture I purposely told it to you simply, in the middle in more detail, and finally in very great detail. I must speak to every need present, and I would like to end on a note of simplicity. Whether we understand all the detailed procedure or not, the fact is that the living Lord, who will bring it all into operation, stands ready to receive us here and now.

We don't have to understand it all before we find it works. When we ask him to come in, we shall find that he makes us good. Many people want to keep him outside the door of their lives until they have tidied up a bit and made themselves fit for him to come in. He will never come in on those terms. If our lives at this moment are sadly defeated and broken and we feel a definite need to get right with God, we needn't wait until we understand. If we are not saved, cannot honestly say that we have God's Holy Spirit, and are not certain what will happen at the judgment day, we need only to open our heart's door to him; he will come in and immediately begin his clearing-up operations.

Redemption

My topic this evening is to be *redemption*, and the part of holy Scripture that I wish to read is found in the Epistle to the Romans.

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!' The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, *the redemption of our bodies*. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Rom 8:12–25)

The word redemption in our English Bibles stands for a number of similar, but slightly different, ideas. It contains some that will cover again the ground that we thought over in detail last week, and lead us on to the considerations that we shall be discussing in the remaining lectures. The basic meaning is 'to deliver'.

Sometimes the idea is prominently and almost exclusively that of *delivering by power*. At other times the deliverance is affected by money, by *the paying of a price*. And incidentally, that meaning is to the fore in our English noun 'redemption', the act of buying back. Then sometimes the idea of deliverance sinks into the background and we're left with a concept of *a simple purchase*. When you go down the street and buy a commodity, I don't suppose you conceive of yourself as delivering and rescuing it—you are just paying the price and buying the thing because you want it for some particular reason. And so, in this excerpt from Romans, the word redemption leads on to the idea of *purchasing people for a certain purpose*. It is both *a deliverance from* something by one means and another, and *a buying for* something. We must try and combine those ideas in our thinking.

A deliverance from . . .

1. The power of Satan

Human beings are in some kind of bondage and need to be delivered. We know the wreckage sin has caused by the fall of the race and by our personal sinning. Redemption is the word that sums up God's activity in delivering us from its bondage, both by the putting forth of his power, and by the price he paid in the sacrifice of Christ.

We may well ask, 'What is the particular bondage?'

When the Apostle Paul was standing trial before King Agrippa and had opportunity to state the purpose and point of his Christian message, he used this summary of the activity of the gospel: 'to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me' (Acts 26:18). Basic to this matter of deliverance from darkness and the bondage in which we are held as men and women of a fallen race, is the power of Satan.

The Bible's account is that the human race started off with the knowledge of God. Finding that knowledge unpalatable, they gradually suppressed and forgot it, and sank level by level in their ignorance of what God is really like. A darkness which exercises power over people kept them from God in the bonds of their sin, in ignorance of the consequences of the fall. It is the tool, of course, which Satan uses.

We all know how Satan began his work by slandering God in the minds of our first parents. With that wrong concept of God, he began his ugly scheme of enslaving the human heart and spirit in its ignorance of what God is really like. In the heathen nations, the consequences were that they began to worship lesser powers, including the psychological and physical powers of their own bodies. They began to deify those feelings of power and pride and hate and revenge that can well up so strongly in the human heart. From that evolved a god of war, and they worshipped him. In admiring him, they became like him, sadistic and brutal. They worshipped sex and made altars and images, perverting God's gift and becoming filthy and outrageous. Then they started worshipping animals: wild beasts and some tame ones. Having lost contact with God and not really knowing what he is like, they began to fear creation around them and worshipped the sun and the moon and the stars. This all led them increasingly into bondage, and what a frightful bondage it must have been.

Beneath the surface of classical literature sometimes we can perceive the outlook of the common people in those ancient times. If the moon went into an eclipse, many of them would have gone out into the streets, beating their tins and pans to make a big noise to fight off the spirit that was in charge of this affair on the moon, offering sacrifices to avenge and appease it. They lived in fear and bondage.

2. The domain of darkness

What a blessing and a mercy it was when our Lord came. Says Paul, 'He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, *in whom we have*

redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation' (Col 1:13–15).

In his Son, who came to show us exactly what God is like, we have deliverance from all that heathenish fear and ignorance and the power of darkness. It is the wonderful fact that in Jesus Christ, 'all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell' (v. 19). If we want to know what the God behind our universe is like in terms that we humans can understand, we may find it in the person whom we call Jesus. He tells us that behind the vast mechanics of this universe, there is a God who is a person, and thank God he has proved that he is anxious to re-establish personal contact with us, his creatures. The story of redemption is in the bringing back of the creatures to know the God who made them, the forming of personal relations again, so that the power of darkness is broken and we come to live intelligently in light of the knowledge of the glory of God (see 2 Cor 4:6).

But you say, 'Yes, that is so important for the heathen; but we are not heathen.'

Perhaps not, but even in modern times we have had terrible exhibitions of what can happen to civilized nations that forget God. For instance, perhaps to a greater extent than many realize, Germany's intellectual and spiritual casting off of the true God of heaven. It tried to stamp out the nation of Israel that for centuries was his living representative on earth. It raised its voice loudly to say that the Old Testament is largely myth and legend. At the beginning of that intellectual movement there is ample record of the often-failing, wrong-headed, positively perverse, and often corrupt attempts of humankind to figure out God for themselves. Having cut loose from the God who has revealed himself in history, substituting an evolution of religion, doing their best to reason the miraculous element out of the Old Testament, and conceiving a hatred of the Jews who were the means by which those oracles were given, they put in their places the old war gods, Woden⁴ and company, and worshipped their military machine. The fearful bondage, sadism and misery that it produced beggar description, though perhaps we have already forgotten the more vivid detail.

To many a popular mind in these islands, somehow or other it is supposed that science has proved the Bible wrong. If it is wrong, then we have very little evidence for what God is like at all; we are back with the heathen. We live in a world where communism is gaining ground. I don't wish to be alarmist, but it is a fact. Communism is based on a philosophy that has no God. Paul stated by inspiration that the end of this age shall see a tremendous move away from God. There shall come an apostasy, 'a falling away' (KJV).

Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. (2 Thess 2:3–4)

This world shall yet see a brilliant genius on earth who will sit in the temple of God, claiming that he is God and forbidding all worship other than the worship of himself. That is not the New Testament's summing up of ancient history, but its forecast of what shall yet

⁴ From earliest times Odin [Woden] was a war god, and he appeared in heroic literature as the protector of heroes; also identified with Wednesday—Woden's day. (britannica.com)

happen. It is not my purpose to indulge in politics, nor do I hold a brief against communism, but I submit to you that there is only one safe bulwark against all this invasion of pure heathenism, and that is a personal and practical knowledge of God in our lives.

It is not enough that we believe there is a God. The demons believe there is a God, says the apostle James, and it doesn't do much good: 'You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!' (2:19). We must come to know God personally. That is the very kernel of God's salvation: 'And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent' (John 17:3). We must come to know God by personal experience; by a personal transaction with the living God.

That is the tragedy of much religion. As the world devotes itself to eating and drinking in Christ's presence, and attending the public reading of his word, it misses personal knowledge of a personal God. It was our Lord who said,

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.' (Matt 7:21-23)

The Lord doesn't mean that he didn't know they existed; he knows everybody who exists. He meant that he had never had anything to do with them personally, nor they with him. That personal link with God, which is salvation through Christ, was never forged with them. They knew a lot about God—they attended the holy ordinances, listened to his holy word—but they did not know him and he never knew them.

With our exalted western civilization we need to be reminded of this, lest we too drift into the growing shades of heathenism. The point of redemption is that Christ has come to show us exactly what God is like, and to forge again those personal links with God in individual people who will have it: regeneration, being saved, eternal life. We ought, therefore, to ask ourselves if we are redeemed, do we really know God: have we personal experience of him?

A student said to me recently, 'I believe in a God, but he might as well be the man on the moon for all I'm concerned. He's a vague being somewhere.'

So then, our Lord delivers us from the power of Satan and from the domain of darkness, and brings us to know God personally.

3. The slavery of sin

Do you remember the occasion when our Lord announced himself as the light of the world (John 8)? Certain Jews came along, who outwardly professed that they believed him.

'So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"' (v. 31).

'Free!' they said. 'What do you mean by *free*? We have never been enslaved to anyone—what are you inferring? We are free.'

Our Lord said, 'The freedom I was referring to is freedom from the slavery of sin. Everyone who keeps on committing sin as a habit of life is a slave of sin. There will come a time when God's house must be freed of all slaves' (see v. 35).

Unfortunately, but perhaps very true to life, those men, who a moment ago had professed to believe on him, became most indignant. Before they left our Lord had to remind them that they were of their father the devil (v. 44).

Let us be practically minded and not cast stones at these ancient people. Theirs is perhaps a more common reaction to our Lord's teachings than we care to think. We may believe in him and say he is the redeemer, but have we honestly observed the implications of that? His redemption is aimed at delivering us from the slavery of sin. In experiencing his gracious work, our first step will be to admit that we have in fact been slaves of sin. Will you grant me that?

It is a hard thing to face the truth that we are not free men and women. We find ourselves with habits and powers that we cannot break. 'For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing' (Rom 7:19). We are slaves—is it not so?

The Bible kindly advises us to be wary of the fact that sin is a deceitful thing. By long establishment in us it will colour our outlook and make us believe that we like the things that underneath we don't like, and feel that we don't want the things that deep down we do want. Surely, no man or woman would knowingly and deliberately with an open heart reject God or his Son? If Christ has provided salvation that we may have, and know we have it, what sane person would deliberately reject it? And yet, have you found that the gospel is popular? If you talk to people about this matter of being saved, do you find a very positive response? Is there not a certain antipathy in the human heart, when it comes to the practical point that we need to be saved from sin?

Christ offers us a very serious programme. It begins with regeneration that will continue through life. It is a salvage work that involves a practical process of being saved from sin. It means business, and it means cooperation and taking God and the Saviour seriously. That is the test of it all.

If we claim to believe in Christ as redeemer, then let us ask ourselves, 'Am I serious about it? Have I begun the course yet? Do I know that my sins have been forgiven and have I experienced that initial loosing of the chains? Do I personally know that I am right in my relationship with God, and that I shall never come into his judgment? Has Christ begun his work of redemption in me? If so, am I going on daily with him, letting him expose my sin to me, as I can bear it, and then deliver me from it? Is it real? This is what personal experience with God means, if it means anything.

4. The curse of the law

Then we read in the New Testament that there is a deliverance, a redemption, from the curse of the law.

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.' Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for 'The righteous shall live by faith.' But the law

is not of faith, rather 'The one who does them shall live by them.' Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.' (Gal 3:10–13)

When we face this question of sin, and it comes home to our hearts that our personalities have been bound by a power that we cannot break by our own strength, we very often tell ourselves that we must do better, take ourselves in hand, be more regular in Bible reading and prayer. Perhaps cut out a hobby or two and give ourselves more to Christian work. It is natural that we feel the need to do something. But, as we attempt to turn over a new leaf, we shouldn't forget that the debts on the first page have not been cancelled.

'Just a moment,' says God to someone who proposes to turn over a new leaf, 'we haven't yet settled your account so far.'

Here's a businessman, who foolishly wasn't insured and has had a series of disasters. He has lost his premises and is bankrupt to the tune of thirty thousand pounds. A kind friend says, 'Look here, old fellow, here's a fine new factory up the road. I'll give it to you and you can turn over a new leaf and start again.'

But if he were to start again in those premises just like that, the law would be on his track. He can't walk out of his debts just by turning over a new leaf and starting again. What about the debts? They would be like mighty chains, forever stopping him from turning over a new leaf and starting again, until the law in its mercy comes in and discharges the bankrupt.

This is an exceedingly important practical point. There are many honest folk who know they are sinners, and from time to time they make new resolutions. They are determined to start again, be more keen in the work of their church and say a few more prayers, but they are not beginning to touch the *root* of the matter. What about the past? We are not automatically forgiven; some righteous account has got to be given of our sins before we are free to start again.

Therefore, let us give attention for a moment to what God says. He says that we will never be set free by trying to keep the law from now on.

I say to the judge in the bankruptcy court, 'I'm determined never to get into debt again!'

He says, 'Well, you never should have got into debt before.'

He may well respect my good intentions, but that won't do anything to satisfy my creditors.

Determining to keep God's law won't wipe out the past, and then there is the most awkward observation that, however hard I try in the future, I shall still come short. God's law is an impossibly high standard; it demands a hundred percent. Ninety-nine percent won't do; it will bring down the curse of the law. We should have been in an impossible situation had it not been for this glorious redemption and the wonderfully gracious thing that Christ has done. He has redeemed us from the curse of the law and released us from those chains that threatened to bind us forever.

How did he do it? Was it by keeping the law for us, or by telling us how we may keep the law? No, it was by himself accepting our debts and becoming a curse for us (v. 13). That is the doctrine of his cross. Among many other things, that is its significance. He took the curse of a broken law that was on our heads and was made a curse for us. It is wonderful news, and we

would do well to shout for joy. It is possible for us to start up again as new men and women because Christ has taken over the debts and redeemed us from the curse of the law—that is, those who trust him. But more of that later.

5. The defeat of death

The Bible talks of redemption not merely in bringing us out of ignorance and the power of Satan, from the domain of darkness, from the slavery of sin, and from the curse of the law; God proposes to deliver us from the bondage of physical corruption and death (Rom 8:23). 'I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death' (Hos 13:14 KJV); 'He will swallow up death for ever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces' (Isa 25:8); 'Death is swallowed up in victory' (1 Cor 15:54).

The Bible says that death is not the normal thing. Because the flowers in our garden grow from seed into full flower and then by natural process fade and die, only to repeat the process next year, we may not argue that human growth, death and decay is a normal process. The Bible maintains it is not—'sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin' (Rom 5:12). I do not say that everybody's death is as a result of their personal sins, but the Bible maintains that sin has inflicted its evil power upon the human race as a whole and made it subject to death. I have no desire to be morbid, but sooner or later when life begins to go downhill we shall all find ourselves facing this problem. Is this all humanity was made for—death and corruption? Thank God, death is not the end. Christ has brought us light and victory, and God has a glorious destiny for those who trust the Saviour.

Death and the grave are the sorry result of sin and God does not propose to remove it immediately. Even for those who trust him and his Son, God leaves death in the meantime. Perhaps he is wise in doing so. Many would easily forget God completely if it were not for death. Like an erupting sore, death shows us that all is not well underneath; there is something basically wrong, and we need to be delivered and redeemed.

I remember, as a small boy, playing with marbles in a forbidden spot by the drawing room window. I had often been warned what might happen if my marble went in the wrong direction, and one day it did. The result was three or four angry spider web cracks right through the glass. Father came home, and after the brief transactions that took place over such things, I was forgiven. I can't say whether it was intentional or not, but the glass was left with its cracks for several months. I don't think my father wanted to be unkind. When visitors would come, they'd say, 'Oh, what a pity! You've broken that big pane of glass!' For months it stood. I was forgiven, but perhaps it served a good purpose and I didn't play there with marbles any more.

There is forgiveness now for all who would trust the Saviour, but death is all around us, reminding us that we need to be redeemed, and the redemption of our soul is a number one necessity.

This is a lecture and not a sermon, but I can scarcely refrain from pushing home this practical point. If any one of us cannot honestly say that we have had these personal dealings with the Saviour and the work of redemption has begun, let that ugly 'pane of glass' warn us

that we need to get started, lest death remove us and our state becomes eternally unchangeable.

I have dwelt long on deliverance *from*. Now I must say just a little on deliverance *to*.

A buying for . . .

Redemption delivers men and women from the ugly wreckage of human sin, and will one day deliver all who trust the Saviour from even the physical results of sin. When we are redeemed and all the damage has been undone, what shall we do?

1. Serve God in the new heaven and new earth

The Bible points out that God has a purpose in human life and for his universe. We must rid ourselves of childish ideas of eternity and of heaven as a place where we all graciously retire and put our legs up on the sofa and don't do any more work. Heaven will be a place of ceaseless activity: 'his servants shall serve him' (Rev 22:3 KJV). In ways not given us now to understand we shall again be with God, eternally developing, enlarging and exploring his universe.

Not that we shall all end up as spiritual beings without any physical manifestations. There shall be a new heaven, but also a new earth. We read that creation shall be delivered from its bondage to corruption; the blight and the blast and the canker shall be removed from the lower grades of creation. That great event is waiting for the time when God's work in his redeemed people shall be ready for manifestation; when God's people, saved, forgiven, restored, shall reach their spiritual majority, and God shall be able to hand over to them in Christ the running of his vast universe. There is a great purpose in human redemption.

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (Rom 8:19–23)

We do not look forward to death by the universe shrivelling to nothing when heaven and earth shall pass away in great heat by some colossal atomic fission—'then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed' (2 Pet 3:10). We look beyond that to the glorious destiny God is determined to bring all whom Christ has redeemed.

But what about now?

2. Live according to God's plan

If we have never yet come to the Saviour and allowed him to begin saving us, we have been trespassing against God's purpose, perhaps unknowingly. That is the great charge that God

lays at our door. It's not that we've been outrageously immoral or hopelessly corrupt in our business dealings, but God's charge is that 'we have turned—every one—to his own way' (Isa 53:6). We have lived as decent respectable citizens, but without thinking of God's plan and purpose.

We have said to ourselves, 'But isn't it enough? What more could God expect of a man or woman than they should be decent?'

Oh, much more. He made us to fulfil his will, and if my life isn't going in the line of that will I'm living in contradiction to the very purpose of the one who made me. It is evident that such a process shall spell disaster.

Suppose you have a beautiful car, fresh from the works. It was made that someone might buy it and get behind the wheel and drive it. The car, with all its wonderful mechanism, is intended to serve the purpose of the driver. Then somehow or other the engine gets started and the car goes off on its own.

You say, 'Car! You're heading for disaster!'

'No I'm not. My engine's going very well, my plugs are good, the cylinders are yet untarnished and the gears don't even scrape.'

What would you say?

'Car, car! All is well at the moment, but it must end in disaster for you are not serving the purpose for which you were intended.'

The car says, 'Do you suppose I'm going to hand over my life for somebody else to drive me? I shall go where I please.'

That is not freedom; it will presently be utter ruin.

Says God, that is precisely what all of us have done. 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way' (Isa 53:6). We have trespassed against the great purpose of God in our lives. Redemption is the chance to come back. There is forgiveness for our trespasses.

There is more.

3. Our lives can be meaningful

Christ is willing to bring us back into the line of God's purpose and make our lives meaningful, both here and in eternity. But the Saviour himself warned that, if we die without being saved—without being forgiven, without being regenerate, without being personally reconciled to God, if we die in our own way—the end will be to be put on the scrap heap of eternity.

Redemption is real. We may judge its urgency by the price that was paid for the deliverance. 'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom [redemption] for many' (Matt 20:28). Christians celebrate it frequently at the Lord's Supper. The moment a man or woman comes in true repentance and hands over their life to Christ—personally bids the Saviour come in, and is born again—the Saviour comes in and a process begins that God himself has sworn to complete (see Phil 1:6).

Redemption is eternal (Heb 9:12). All of us who can honestly say that we have had those personal dealings with Christ, not only know him as a redeemer, but we have begun to experience his redemption in our personal lives. The prospect is exceedingly good and we may indeed shout with joy in our hearts.

But in cold logic, yet with all the human feeling I possess, I must tell you in the name of God and Christ that if a man or woman misses eternal redemption, by very definition the result is *eternal perdition* (see 2 Pet 3:7 KJV). There is no alternative.

May God give us the grace to face this great thing and not to give slumber to our eyes until we can honestly say that Christ has redeemed us personally and all is well.

Shall we pray.

Our gracious God, before we go we pause to thank thee again for the wonder of thy redemption: that thou art prepared to forgive the most blatant rebellion, deliver from weakness and folly and sin, to receive us just as we are—knowing all that we are—and extend to us a love that will not let us go and already has purchased for us an eternal redemption. For these great, marvellous things, we give thee grateful thanks.

We thank thee too for everyone whose experience goes to prove thy word, that being redeemed is a reality in life now, and it may be known. We thank thee for its blessedness and extent. We humbly pray that thou would encourage all who have so begun, that thy gracious work may proceed unimpeded.

Lord, if any of us here have not yet begun—are not forgiven, not regenerate, not redeemed, not saved, not really knowing; in ignorance still, not knowing God personally, nor Christ personally, not having thy Holy Spirit, and not really understanding the thing at all, but in uncertainty and doubt, with no certain outlook for the future—for these, Lord, we pray. It was for them that thou didst come, and it is for them that thy redemption has been procured. Show them their need, and how they might be saved. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The First Resurrection

We consider this evening the momentous subject of the first resurrection and I would like to read no less than four Scriptures.

Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgement. (John 5:28–29)

But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. (Acts 24:14–15)

I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor 15:50–57)

Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years. (Rev 20:4–6)

In our study of *redemption* we found that an integral part of it is our deliverance from death. We made the point that, for the moment, God's purpose to redeem us from death is in abeyance; or, at least, it is awaiting his foreordained time. It is not God's plan at the moment

to deliver every man and woman who receives the Saviour from dying. What he is doing is to deliver his people from the fear of dying—or from the fear of death.

Death and dying are not the same thing

I remember a good Christian woman, whose personal salvation could not be in any doubt, coming to me in great distress of mind.

She said, 'I think I'm not a Christian after all.'

'How is that?' I asked.

Said she, 'I was listening to a preacher on Sunday and he said that true believers in Christ do not fear death. I must admit that I do fear death, and if that is true, then I cannot be a true believer.'

The good woman was confusing two different things, *death* and *dying*. As far as I am aware, the Bible does not necessarily promise that we shall be delivered from the fear of dying. There is an automatic system built into us that gives us a natural fear.

Think how you'd feel if you were walking along the High Street and suddenly looked round to see a double-decker bus close on your heels. What is that curious sensation running up and down your spine that propels you on to the pavement as hard as you can go? It is an in-built system of preservation that makes us recoil from the thought of dying.

Freedom from the fear of death

The sting of death is sin

What the Bible does promise to deliver us from is the fear of death and its consequences. 'The sting of death,' says the Bible, 'is sin' (1 Cor 15:56). That's what ought to trouble the conscience. The sting of death is not the nasty process that we go through, which is dying; the sting of death is what lies beyond. We have sinned, and beyond death there is a judgment. It is a most horrible and hurtful sting when people pass into death without any personal certainty that their sins have been forgiven. In fact, the Saviour warned his contemporaries that if they did not believe in him they would die in their sins; and if they died in their sins, where he was, they could never come (John 8:21). That's the real sting in death.

The strength of sin is the law

The apostle observes further that the strength of sin is the law. He means that, when we contemplate this business of sin and ask ourselves how serious it is, we are not supposed to make the best of it and try to alleviate the situation. If we were to pretend that it isn't really so serious after all, then God's law comes along with its irreversible and irresistible pronouncements. 'The strength of sin is the law'—it is utterly unbending; 'The wages of sin is death' (Rom 6:23). Eternal death.

Christ most certainly delivers all who trust him from that awful sting that death holds, for the simple reason that he takes the sting away. On God's own authority they may know that the guilt of their sin has been removed for ever. God's law has been abundantly satisfied; the whole thing has been done honestly, justly, and righteously, so that the believer in our Lord Jesus may face God's law without a flicker of doubt or dismay, and pass into death unafraid.

In fact, our Lord said, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death' (John 8:51). He did not mean that people would not physically die, for many believers have died. Neither did he mean that all believers would be taken home to heaven in a split second, so that there's no time for them to feel or experience the process. I suppose the majority of believers do feel the process, and with some it's a long process—they do see the dying. But no believer in our Lord Jesus Christ ever sees death in its ultimate—the being separated from God permanently with that great gulf of separation eternally and irremovably fixed. No believer ever experiences that. The moment the process of dying is complete, the Bible tells us that the believer is with his Lord—he does not see death.

For him, and for his sake, the Lord 'tasted death' (see Heb 2:9). Not merely did he taste the dying—that was a gruelling experience—but he tasted death: what it means to be separated from God on the question of sin. 'He tasted death for everyone,' and God's good news is that if we will come to his Son and receive him as our Saviour, his work upon the cross, his bearing of our sins, his tasting death, will remove the sting and fear of death from us forever.

I would say to anyone who is a Christian, and you have been fearing death in this sense, you have no need, and the way to have that fear stopped is to open your eyes and look at the facts.

Quite some time ago my little nephew heard his mother, for the first time to his recollection, put on the Hoover, and he shouted the house down. His little imagination thought there was something terrible there, and his mother wisely comforted the lad. Then by degrees she persuaded him to come close to this horrible machine that was making the hideous din. At length he was persuaded to put his hand on it, and when it didn't bite or hurt he grew bold and lost his fear of it completely.

Let us face death squarely; let us see the worst it can do. It can shatter this outward tabernacle, the Bible says, but if that is dissolved we have a house, a permanent habitation, a building not made with hands, eternal in the heavens (see 2 Cor 5:1). But more important still, not even death itself can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (see Rom 8:38–39). Death may come upon us and find us with a free, purged, clear conscience, ready to meet God certain that our eternal destiny is well.

Freedom from the process of dying

God offers us freedom from the fear of death. But that is by no means all, for we move on now to the even more glorious thing. It is an essential part of the Christian hope that one day even the process of dying will be finished and shall never be experienced again. In the words of Scripture that we have read, 'we shall not all sleep' (1 Cor 15:51). There will be some Christians who shall not die physically.

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.

Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. (1 Thess 4:16–17)

In a word, we look for *the first resurrection*. Let me then just state the fact at this stage that there is to be a resurrection, and that resurrection will involve the changing and removal to heaven bodily of Christian people who are alive on earth when the resurrection takes place.

Let us notice that the New Testament affirms that there shall be a resurrection, both of the just and of the unjust. Whether saved or unsaved, if we have died we shall be raised. Our Lord Jesus himself clearly told us so:

Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgement. (John 5:28–29)

Two sets of distinctions

1. There shall be a resurrection, and the Bible makes a distinction between the resurrection of the *just* and the resurrection of the *unjust*. That is, under those two headings, it makes a distinction between those who shall be raised—just and unjust.
2. Then the Bible also makes a distinction as to the timing of those resurrections. We read that there is to be a first resurrection; simply put for the moment, the first resurrection distinguishes between those people who are raised then, and the rest of the dead who do not rise until some subsequent period. It will be upon those vital distinctions that I wish now to concentrate our attention.

Objections to belief in the resurrection

But first, as to this matter of resurrection, let us deal with some of the objections that have been raised. It is a witness to the perversity and wickedness of the human heart that, in the face of such a glorious prospect openly given to us by God, men and women have been found to do their very best to prove that the resurrection shall not be.

That is a curious thing, for let us consider the alternative. Utter annihilation, black darkness and nothingness. A few fleeting years with their troubles, bringing sickness for many, unhappiness, and sorrow. For multitudes, even in this modern age and particularly in other parts of the world, utterly helpless plight. It would be a cruel person who would wilfully want to prove that the Christian hope is groundless, and that there is no resurrection. Surely, if there was an occasion where wishful thinking could justify itself, we might well be allowed to indulge here. Would you not hope for it to be true?

I fancy that for some the real, basic reason for hoping that there will not be a resurrection is that in the human mind the resurrection is inseparably fixed with the question of meeting God, of being faced with his judgment, and there are people who would prefer that they didn't have to meet God. They would prefer to die like a dog, and their argumentation is motivated by the knowledge in their own hearts that they are not ready, and for them it would spell disaster. Rather than face God, they would prefer oblivion.

If you think like that, doubtless you will have all sorts of scientific reasons and logical proofs; but may I be so bold as to challenge you as to what is the motive behind your reasons? If you are afraid of a resurrection because of the question of sin, and the question of meeting God, then let me point out that you needn't be afraid. There is a salvation that could remove that fear and cause you to rejoice in the glad prospect of meeting him.

But it has not been merely enemies of God's word that have had objections. At all times there have been people with the Bible in their hands who have stoutly maintained that there shall be no resurrection. The Sadducees are a case in point. Many of them were very learned men in the Bible, yet they stoutly maintained that there is no resurrection. They believed in God, attended publicly to his worship, yet they declared that there was no resurrection, and when a man dies he's gone. They brought up their arguments—I shall deal with them in a moment.

You will say, 'They were Jews.'

Yes, they were; but in a Christian church in Corinth we read of people who likewise said there was no resurrection (see 1 Cor 15:12–19). They said that they did believe in Christ, but there was no resurrection. Their hope was in this life only. It is curious what things can be swallowed, and today it is the opinion of some Christian theologians that it is possible for people to be Christians and yet not to believe in a literal resurrection.

Objection 1

As one man put it: 'Our bodies are composed of many chemicals, and among them is phosphorous. When you consider the vast number of people who have ever lived, and the millions living at present, if you demand that every one of those is going to be literally raised, there wouldn't be enough phosphorous to go round. Therefore there cannot be a resurrection.'

How shallow that thinking is. Our Lord himself replied to the Sadducees: 'You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God' (Matt 22:29). If we believe in an almighty God, is it not evident that his intentions are never limited by a world shortage of phosphorous, or any other commodity? Who made the present phosphorous? If the God of heaven and earth decides to, he will raise people again. Jesus himself said, 'God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham' (Matt 3:9). He will raise people up by his own unlimited power, and we need not stop to enquire how he shall do it.

Some people think, if only they had their bodies cremated and their ashes scattered to the wind, it would be impossible for God to raise them again; but that too is a childish and absurd hope. If a body is put into the ground it will eventually disintegrate completely, but that is no difficulty to almighty God when he chooses to reconstitute it. He created the whole universe out of nothing, made man of dust from the ground (Gen 2:7). To suggest any physical difficulties against resurrection is to expose one's folly.

Objection 2

But then some have argued that there are other considerations that make resurrection unlikely. For example, what body will they come in?

I suppose behind that objection is the thought that our present bodies, constituted as they are for life in this world, would be unsuitable for us to inhabit in the world to come. Are they the same bodies that are going to be raised? Me with my crooked nose and my malfunctioning

body, a body that needs food to sustain it and must rid itself of its waste? Some feel that that's an impossible thought. They grant you that perhaps character might survive, but actually raising the body is impossible.

And yet the Bible insists that it is not merely a survival of our character, for that isn't resurrection at all. It is literally a *resurrection*, as the very term implies, a resurrection of the body. But then the Bible answers its objectors in detail.

But someone will ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?' You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. (1 Cor 15:35–38)

It uses the simple illustration of sowing wheat and the subsequent harvest that is reaped. If you sow a bare grain into the ground, eventually it disintegrates. Is it the same thing that comes up? No, it isn't. What you get back is not a bare grain but a green stalk, then a blade on the stalk, and then a beautiful ear full of many clusters of green kernels. It is utterly unlike that bare, half shrivelled-looking thing that went down.

So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, 'The first man Adam became a living being'; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. (1 Cor 15:42–50)

So different from our bodies as constituted now. The Bible tells us that there is a *soulish* body, such as we inhabit at the moment, the life of whose flesh is in the blood. But flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, and therefore these new bodies shall be different. They shall be what the Bible calls *spiritual* bodies (v. 44). That doesn't mean imaginative nothings, but real things: spiritual bodies. When our Lord arose, he said to his disciples, 'Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have' (Luke 24:39). He was not a disembodied spirit.

Notice that he did not say, 'a spirit does not have flesh and *blood*'; for 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God' (1 Cor 15:50). There is a very marked and fundamental difference between the body of a Christian that is put into the grave and the body that shall rise when the Lord comes. Like the bare grain, it goes into the ground and it's a different thing that comes out. Would I be correct in saying that there is no connection between the two? If that were so, then the farmer need not sow any barley or corn or wheat next year. 'No, that would never do,' you say, 'he must sow the grain to get the result.' So there is a vital connection. Scripture maintains that there shall be a resurrection of the body, and in that sense

there is a vital link between the body that goes in and the body that shall be. Obviously our bodies then shall not have the same needs as now; they shall be fitted to that spiritual realm which God designed for his redeemed to inhabit.

Objection 3

But then some have thought even further, and I remark again, how curious it is that men should have troubled themselves to think up all sorts of possible objections to this matter.

This time I refer to the difficulty the Sadducees had. They didn't believe in a literal resurrection, and they asked the Lord a hypothetical question.

The same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection, and they asked him a question, saying, 'Teacher, Moses said, "If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up children for his brother." Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died, and having no children left his wife to his brother. So too the second and third, down to the seventh. After them all, the woman died. In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her.' But Jesus answered them, 'You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? He is not God of the dead, but of the living.' And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching. (Matt 22:23-33)

Their argument was that it was absurd to teach a physical, literal resurrection, because of all the tangle of human relationships that would be involved. Imagine getting to heaven and finding you had seven wives all at once! Our Lord's reply was curt and stern: 'You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God' (v. 29). In the resurrection human relationships will be different, 'they neither marry nor are given in marriage.'

That is not to say we shall all be colourless, unknown identities in that coming day. On the Mount of Transfiguration the apostles readily recognized Moses and Elijah. On earth they were Moses and Elijah, and in eternity they are still Moses and Elijah. In the resurrection, not only shall there be that close link between the body that was and the body that shall be; but more, and supremely important, there shall be that unchangeable identity of personality. Our Lord comforted Mary and Martha with words, which doubtless comfort us: 'Your brother will rise again' (John 11:23).

Objection 4

But there is another difficulty that some have raised, and you will observe that as I raise these difficulties I am not erecting 'Aunt Sallies' for the fun of knocking them down. I am merely expounding 1 Corinthians 15, that long chapter that manfully faces these difficulties.

The other difficulty that the chapter mentions is the difficulty of *timing*. Some people who called themselves Christian said that there was no resurrection of the dead, and the apostle answers that the resurrection of the Christian is bound up with the resurrection of Christ (vv. 12-13). If you hold that there is not to be a resurrection in the future, you must hold that Christ

himself is not raised from the dead; and if you hold that Christ is not raised from the dead, you have ruined the whole of Christianity.

And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. (vv. 14–19)

Says somebody, 'I accept that Christ is raised; but why doesn't God immediately transform those who trust the Saviour?'

And the answer is that God has timed it by a deliberate purpose:

But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.' (v. 23–26).

I especially want to underline this matter of *time*. Failure to perceive the timing of the resurrection is a cause of much misunderstanding, so let us observe the facts. It doesn't happen all at once; it is planned to happen in stages.

First of all, the resurrection of Christ the firstfruits; linked inseparably with the great harvest that shall follow—as any firstfruits are linked with the subsequent harvest. 'Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ' (v. 23). After that comes the end, when death shall eventually be destroyed: 'Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire' (Rev 20:14).

But now let me further analyse this. It is not merely that Christ is already risen and other people shall subsequently rise, nor that the just shall rise and then the unjust; but Scripture indicates that the just shall be raised at one resurrection, and the unjust shall be raised at another resurrection.

If it should appear to you that I am speaking outlandish things then let me argue with words of Holy Writ. Let me take a detailed description of what shall happen at our Lord's coming. We remember the basic proposition: 'Christ the firstfruits' is raised; 'then at his coming those who belong to Christ.'

What exactly is going to happen at our Lord's coming?

For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. (1 Thess 4:15–17)

There is a significant omission from these verses. They describe the people who shall rise when our Lord returns and they are classified under two headings:

The dead in Christ

We who are alive, who are left

The first heading specifically points out that *the dead in Christ* shall rise, and that very description immediately divides all who have passed by way of death. It does not say, 'the dead, just and unjust, shall rise'; or simply, 'the dead shall rise.'

And then, the second heading: '*we who are alive, who are left.*' These will be 'caught up.' Who are the *we*?

We must be fair to what the Bible says. The Christian apostle Paul was not writing to all the citizens in Thessalonica, but only to those who had 'turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come' (1 Thess 1:9–10). They had had a personal experience of Christ and his salvation, and they shall be changed. The omission of everyone else in that city is exceedingly significant. That agrees in detail with 1 Corinthians 15:23, 'at his coming *those who belong to Christ.*'

Who shall rise when the Lord comes?

Let me ask you to honestly face this question. Do all living people on the earth at this moment belong to Christ? Obviously not: millions would repudiate the thought if you tried to suggest it. They don't want Christ; they do not belong to him.

Let me come closer. If the Lord came tonight, and those who belong to Christ in this city were raised and changed, would that mean everybody? Perhaps we could afford for the moment to leave other people out of it and ask ourselves, if Christ came tonight and those who belong to Christ in this lecture hall were raised to be with him, would that include us all? In this exceedingly important matter it is sheer sentiment for us to indulge vague and empty hopes.

To the Christians in Corinth, Paul wrote: 'the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed' (15:52). The dead shall be raised and the living shall be changed—both are described as those who belong to Christ. It is imperative therefore for each one of us to find out what it means to belong to Christ, and then imperative that we ask ourselves, 'Am I, in this sense, Christ's?'

Why do I make all the fuss, for everyone shall be raised at some time? The Bible shows us the importance of the distinctions that we mentioned at the beginning. There is a distinction between the resurrection of the just and the resurrection of the unjust. Secondly, those who are raised at the Lord's coming shall take part in the first resurrection (Rev 20:5–6). The rest of the dead will not live again until a period of one thousand years is ended and then they shall be raised.

Someone may ask, 'I suppose it will be a second resurrection that they'll join in?'

In a certain way, yes, I suppose it is a second resurrection, but the Bible doesn't call it a second resurrection. They shall rise, but because they do not belong to Christ it will be a resurrection of judgment, as Christ himself forewarned:

Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgement. (John 5:28–29)

This judgment is so permanent and so terrible that, instead of calling the whole process a second resurrection, the Bible describes it as a second death (Rev 20:6, 14). That's why the distinction is so important. And therefore, if we ask ourselves nothing more as a result of this lecture, we must challenge ourselves as calmly and as honestly as we can, 'In view of that first resurrection, when those who belong to Christ shall be raised, am I Christ's? Am I in Christ?' (see 2 Cor 5:17).

Some people seem to have the idea that resurrection is going to be a resurrection of all and sundry; that we shall be herded before God's throne and then it will be decided who are the good and who are the bad. It is only then that the decision will be made as to who should go to heaven and who should go to perdition. But that is not so. The Bible is explicit. Those who belong to Christ are raised to glory. They have become Christ's in this life, and they know it in this life.

Taking part in that resurrection is a thing for which we qualify here on earth. It is not a difficult thing; it is open for us all. If we come as bankrupt sinners to Christ on those simple terms by which he forgives us and makes us one of his own, we become Christ's, and by God's great work of salvation we are placed in Christ.

When a master gardener takes a branch that has been on a tree and grafts it on to a different tree, and the new branch becomes part of the other tree, so God takes a man or woman who trusts his Son and puts them into Christ by the joining of a life commonly shared.

Writing to believers, Paul describes their conversion in these terms: 'And because of him [God] you are in Christ Jesus' (1 Cor 1:30). God put you there. The gardener takes a good bough of a good tree and grafts it on to a wild root, whereas in the great matter of salvation the process is reversed. God takes us good-for-nothing characters and he grafts us into Christ.

May I emphasize that? You see, being saved is not merely believing the creed, which says '... our Lord, who ... suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried ... on the third day he rose again ... and will come again to judge the living and the dead.' It is not assent to certain doctrines; it is being livingly joined to a person, so that his life now and forever streams through us. That's why, if we are in Christ, we may be certain here on earth that we shall take part in the first resurrection.

The Apostle Paul was able to tell the Christians in Rome that the great power that one day would transform their mortal bodies and raise them to incorruptible life, is the power that is already resident in them.

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. (Rom 8:11)

It is the glorious fact that every believer in the Lord Jesus has been united to him and grafted into his person, and has already within them the colossal, vital power that shall perform the change and give them new bodies when the Lord comes.

But if any man or woman, however good they may be, is not joined already to Christ, they are not sharing in that life of Christ. They are not Christ's, and when the Lord comes they will not be raised. They shall wait until that other event, to be summoned before God's throne—yes, in a resurrection body. Because their names are absent from the *Book of Life*, they shall be cast into the lake of fire, not to be annihilated, to exist. But for anyone to exist apart from Christ, that cannot be called *life*. That is death, *the second death*.

Of that and all its solemnity we must think next time. But, in conclusion, let me stress the joyful side. It is still open for anyone even now to come and let God graft them into Christ, and the grafting will be eternal.

The Second Death

And he said to me, 'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.' (Rev 21:6-8)

I have no need to attempt by any flight of oratory to impress upon us the solemnity of the subject we are to consider here this evening. Certainly, it would be more pleasant for me if I could avoid discussion on the subject. But common honesty makes it imperative that, in one at least of these lectures, I discuss with you what God's word has to say about the final destiny of those who neglect God's great salvation. Like the Apostle Paul himself, I must be careful as a public lecturer in biblical things not to shun to declare the whole counsel of God. And indeed, to omit this subject from our thinking would be to stultify all that God has elsewhere to say about his salvation.

For seven evenings we have been thinking at length and in detail about the great salvation that God has provided for men and women through the death of his Son. If we could nevertheless neglect and reject that salvation, and still it did not really matter, then I submit to you, the whole of that salvation would be stultified.

Moreover, solemn as the subject must necessarily be, to wipe it out of our thinking would be to make light, to make emptiness, of the love of God itself. Some of the most beautiful, and some of the grandest, statements of the love of God that are found in the Bible are closely coupled with this very thing. The greatest exhibition of God's love, in fact, has been in the price he was prepared to pay in his love for men and women to make it possible for them to avoid this solemn and eternal destiny.

'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life' (John 3:16). We cannot honestly hug to our souls those comforting words, unless we are prepared to face the whole object for the giving of that Son. He loved and he gave; but he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him *should not perish*. The very love of God itself and the immensity of his gift in the person of Christ tell us in utterly unmistakable language that those who reject that love will perish, as, in fact, all the world would have had to perish if God had not given his Son.

Therefore, at the very beginning of this lecture, I must ask you to face with me, calmly and courageously, the description that is given in holy writ of the second death.

Temporal, physical judgments

May I at once call your attention to the proportions of the length of Scripture that God devotes to this subject. We read together some ten or twelve verses, and that is remarkable, for this book of the Revelation, as many will know, is a book that talks much of the judgments of God. From chapters 4–19, the book is full of vivid and detailed descriptions of several series of divine judgments that shall overtake this world at the end of this age. They are told in full and at length, and there is reason for that. They are physical judgments; temporal judgments; judgments that shall befall men in this life. Their tremendous severity is, perhaps, that it is the last voice of God to men and women while opportunity to be saved remains.

Their severity, therefore, is told us because in those judgments God will still be wishing to speak to men and draw them to himself. In fact, we read that, out of those days of great judgment, there shall come great companies of men and women, their number impossible to estimate, who have found salvation through the blood and sacrifice of our Lord Jesus (Rev 7:9–17). It tells us that, if God's temporal judgments against sin can awaken men and women to their need and to seek salvation, in his great heart of love God is prepared to use the fiercest temporal judgments to bring them to himself. Many a man or woman has known God's love in that fashion in days gone by. There have been those whom God has had to break in their earthly fortune or in their bodily health before they have woken up to their need to come to the Saviour for eternal salvation. So then, chapters 4–19 in this book detail a whole range of physical judgments.

The final judgment

But when it comes to that final judgment, the second death, the description is dismissed in about twelve brief verses. Why? Because God is not a sadist; God does not delight in the death of any who die (see Ezek 18:23). When it comes therefore to the description of the final destiny of men and women who have neglected God's salvation, and they pass to that destiny of endless pain, it is altogether unalterable and unceasing. God does not enter into long and harrowing descriptions; they would be pointless. God uses as few words as he can, but let that not hide from us their awful truth.

The main features of the final judgment

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (20:11–15)

Who sits on the throne?

The Bible has told us who exactly it is that shall sit upon that throne: it is none other than our Lord Jesus Christ. He himself said in the days when he was on earth, 'The Father judges no one, but has given all judgement to the Son' (John 5:22). So then, it is our Lord Jesus who shall occupy that throne. The point is that, even amidst these solemn realities, we can see the exceeding kindness of the heart of God. It shall not be God the Father, but the *Son of Man*. The judgment has been given to him, precisely because he is man. The one who has known life—the one who perfectly knows what it is to be flesh and blood; the one who has suffered being tempted; the one whom we have seen there on earth weeping tears at the graveside of Lazarus; that very same one who stood outside Jerusalem city and, as he contemplated the terrible judgment that was to descend upon that city at the hands of the Romans, openly broke down and sobbed—it shall be that man who sits upon the judgment throne. Feeling, loving, and now, at last, judging.

Who shall be judged, and how?

We read that *the dead, great and small*, shall be gathered before him, and books shall be opened. Then another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged *by what was written in the books, according to what they had done* (see v. 12).

God speaks to us in language that we can understand. We shall not imagine, of course, great tomes made of parchment and bound in leather. God does not need such devices by which to record things; but there will be records, both on God's part and man's part. Psychology and psychiatry together have shown us how the human mind stores up its impressions; unbelievably and incredibly so. By skilled manipulation, memories of events long since gone by can be evoked from the deep subconscious. The human spirit shall take with it into eternity the memory of its deeds on earth. God's records shall be there, and the dead shall be judged according to what is written in the books, strictly according to what they have done—their works (KJV).

It will not be an indiscriminate judgment, nor yet will it be a mass judgment; but each individually shall give account, and every item in the record gone over. The punishment shall be strictly according to the deserving, and we shall presently see the importance of that.

What part of the judgment is the second death?

But for the moment I want us to notice one other thing that could possibly escape our attention. When it is said that the dead shall be judged according to their works, it then adds, 'Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire' (vv. 14–15).

Being thrown into the lake of fire—that is the second death. We do well to get that clear. Punishment for sin shall proceed according to a person's works, but it is not that punishment that is described as the second death: it is being cast into this lake of fire. That happens to those, not whose works were bad, nor whose crimes were excessive, but the determinant feature is that *their names were not written in the Lamb's Book of Life*. I want to emphasize that,

for at the end of our study this evening I trust we shall see the point and have the wisdom not to begin assessing our works, but rather to ask ourselves what is the basic and decisive thing — is my name written in the Lamb's Book of Life? If it is not, there shall follow for eternity separation from God, which is eternal death.

I am aware that the very statement of these things will arouse many a furious emotion within us, for how could we sit and listen unmoved? It would not be surprising if we found within our hearts a certain sense of revulsion and loathing at the idea of a destiny of unalterable eternal pain. It will help us, of course, if at once we can disabuse our minds of all those distortions that medieval theology and some popular preaching have added to the calm words of Scripture.

If you go through the door into the chapel of St John's College, Cambridge, you will see on the left a stained glass window of tremendous size. Among other things, it depicts in medieval fashion the last judgment; it is grotesque and crude. In the right hand corner, if I remember it correctly, there are demons in green livery with three pronged forks, stuffing people down into terrifying flames. Popular imagination seems to picture the lake of fire like that. It has spun legends of a place where Satan is king and his demons are the prison jailers, who, with indescribable sadism and horror, gloatingly pile up humans in some vast furnace of a prison.

That is not the picture the Bible paints. Satan is not king in hell, nor are his demons the prison wardens. The lake of fire shall be a prison house in which God, in his mercy to the rest of his universe, will permanently confine Satan and his fallen angels. We are not told why God does not take away from these great beings the life he originally gave them, but we do read that, in his mercy, Satan shall not be allowed to forever continue those hurtful and wicked practices that have brought such delusion and misery to so many thousands of human beings. In God's supreme mercy, there is a lake of fire to which Satan shall be eternally confined, and all who have reason and any sense of moral judgment shall add their deep felt 'Amen' when God orders that confinement to begin.

It was never God's intention that human beings should be confined in that same prison; but if at last men and women are found to choose sin and self-will, to neglect God's salvation and go their own way, God himself shall be obliged to confine them likewise in a confinement that was originally prepared in the mercy of God for the devil and his angels.

Other difficulties that arise

When we have disabused our minds of the crudities that have gathered around this subject from people's uninstructed imaginations, there will still be plenty of difficulties left. Nor need we be ashamed to feel those difficulties, so long as we are prepared to bring them to God's word and to the Saviour, whom alone we can trust.

A loving God wouldn't send his creatures to the lake of fire

Some people will say outright, 'But surely the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God whom Christ taught us to regard as a loving father, could not possibly send men and women eternally to the lake of fire?'

They say it can't be so. Some of them add that our Lord Jesus would not have taught that. They maintain that our Lord pictured God as a loving father who, to the end of time and throughout all eternity, would welcome home his prodigal sons. They say that our Lord taught of a God who is so loving that he would never banish a creature of his to eternal pain. They say that these ugly doctrines of an eternal lake of fire were the invention of Christ's apostles, and therefore are not necessarily true. Such a statement merely shows their fearful ignorance of the Bible and of the God who made them. It was pre-eminently our Lord who warned us of eternal perdition. It is the fact that the one who speaks most of eternal wrath and judgment is the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

There is far more about eternal perdition in those lovely Gospels that record the works and words of our Lord Jesus than you will find in the writings of his apostles. It was Jesus himself who said that, for some, eternity would mean a suffering 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched' (Mark 9:48). It was the loving-hearted Christ who told us that it would be better to be maimed with permanent physical disability throughout the whole of life here, than to end in an eternity of weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth (see Matt 18:8; 13:42).

The lesson to be drawn from Sodom and Gomorrah

But then somebody will say, 'I can't believe it; God just would not do such a thing.'

To argue like that is to close our eyes to the lessons of history. Presumably at some time all of us have read the story of the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:24). The New Testament points out the lesson that is to be drawn. It says that, in suffering that vengeance of God, they are set forth to the rest of mankind as an example of eternal judgment (Luke 17:28–30). Admittedly, the judgment that befell Sodom and Gomorrah was a physical judgment. As far as we can later deduce from the words of Christ, it does not mean that the people of Sodom are permanently and necessarily lost to God. The judgment that befell them was a physical judgment, but it came down in all its awful severity so that in the early stages of human experience on earth they might serve as an actual example of eternal wrath. It would be foolish to say God would not do it, when he has given such pointed illustrations and examples to assure us that he would.

There are folks who believe in an eternal heaven because the Bible says so, who, nevertheless, refuse to believe in an eternal hell. The Bible says that as well, and to disbelieve the Bible when it talks of hell, how can it be believed when it talks of heaven?

Annihilation would be unjust

The Bible does not say that men and women who refuse the gospel shall be annihilated, and I for one must record my gratitude that it doesn't say that. Think of what an awful thing that would be. I put it to you: if it were the fact that people who reject salvation are annihilated at

death, it would mean that this world is just a crazy lunatic asylum, a savage jungle in which the most terrible monsters of men can work their destructive will and bring misery upon millions of people, while they themselves die painlessly and peacefully in their beds, and that's the end of it.

What sort of God should our God be, if that were the truth? Shall Hitler not face again the millions of Jews he gassed? Will they find no sense of satisfaction in the judgment of God, if the unpunished Hitler has been annihilated? I wouldn't worship a God like that.

That common thief, dying by the side of Christ on the cross, had sense to see more. As he watched the innocent Christ die grouped with common criminals, he said to his fellow thief, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong' (Luke 23:40-42). If there's a God in heaven at all, and the innocent suffer here on earth along with the guilty, then there must be a resurrection in which earth's wrongs will meet with perfect judgment.

But you say then, 'Can it not be that the wicked dead shall be raised and punished suitably for their wickedness, and then annihilated when their punishment is over?'

It may doubtless be well meant, but that suggestion makes God more of a monster than the first one. Suppose millions of years of suffering could eventually cancel out the sin of a man like Hitler, until everybody, God included, would be satisfied that he had paid in full for all that his crimes deserved. If God is a God of love, could Hitler then be instated in God's heaven? Why annihilate him?

Then you say, 'After exceedingly long ages of suffering, perhaps the wicked shall be absolved and brought at last to God's heaven?' That too rests on an impossible hope; on the fallacy that human suffering can expiate the guilt of sin. If human suffering could expiate human sin, then Calvary has been 'a storm in a teacup' and altogether unnecessary. Our Lord himself reminded us of the serious fact that human suffering will never atone for human guilt. If men and women were ever to be saved from the guilt of their sin, a far more than human sacrifice must be given. That sacrifice was God's Son.

God was not doing idle things at the cross, playing around with unnecessaries. God's Son suffered the awful anguish of the cross because, 'There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin; | he only could unlock the gate of heaven, and let us in.'⁵ All who will trust that sacrifice shall be eternally saved; and those who neglect or reject that sacrifice, not a billion years of suffering would expiate their guilt.

Isn't the punishment out of proportion?

'But,' you say, 'then everything is out of proportion. It is utterly unfair to say that people shall all be consigned to one common end that you call the lake of fire, when their misdeeds vary so much.'

But that objection too is false. The Bible says that the amount of suffering that will be necessary is strictly determined by people's works. 'And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. But the

⁵ Cecil Frances Alexander (1818-1895), 'There is a green hill far away' (1848).

one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating' (Luke 12:47–48). We may be certain that a God of infinite love shall not allow one throb of pain that is avoidable.

So there is a mistake in the reasoning here. Eternal death, in the sense of eternal separation from God, is a thing that permits of no degree. You can't really be half alive and half dead; you are alive, or you are dead. God is willing to save all who will come, and hug them to his bosom (see Matt 11:28; Isa 40:11). But if an otherwise good, decent and generous-hearted person has the folly to neglect the salvation God has provided, there is only one alternative that permits of no degree, and that is banishment from God's presence.

It is not true to say that, if you are not going to believe the gospel, you are going to be damned and therefore you might as well sin as much as you possibly can. All who reject this gospel shall suffer banishment from God's presence—that is the second death. After that, the amount of punishment must be determined according to people's works, but we must remember even then that God's standards are not necessarily ours.

We dismiss the murderer, the sexually immoral, and the fearful crimes that a savage commits in the wilds of the jungle, as terribly awful. But, by God's standards, I fancy that the person who is decent and knows all about the gospel, but in a very polite way says, 'No thank you, God,' is far worse than the savage.

What about those who have never heard the gospel?

Someone says, 'But then that raises a point. If you say that all who do not believe in Jesus Christ shall be lost, what about the people who have never heard the gospel?'

It is a very curious thing, and those who have tried most to help their fellow men and women in these matters will perhaps recognize the truth of what I say. When the human mind is faced with the solemn alternatives—either we receive Christ and live, or we reject him and die eternally—we suddenly develop an interest in the heathen and become missionary spirited. 'What about the heathen?' we ask, when perhaps we weren't at all interested about them before. Let's be careful that it isn't just a naughty dodge of the human heart.

We may rest content that the God of love who gave Christ to die will do absolute justice. Indeed, he will do veritable *goodness* by those who have never heard. No one shall ever be held responsible for rejecting what they never knew. Our Lord himself indicated that God is able not merely to assess what people have done with his truth that they possess; he is able to assess what they would have done had they known about Christ.

Do you not remember what he said to the Pharisees? 'The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here' (Matt 12:41).

And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgement for the land of Sodom than for you. (11:23–24)

How is that? The people of Capernaum knew him; they heard him personally, saw his miracles. But in their self-righteousness they denied the need for personal regeneration and salvation, and knowingly rejected Christ. 'If they had seen what you see, and had known what you know, they would have repented.' Only divine omniscience could know that, but God does know that and he shall deal with it accordingly. People who have responded to the evidence of God in creation, and in their ignorance have cast themselves believingly on the grace of the God behind his creation; everyone like that who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved (see Rom 10:13), though they may never have heard the name of Jesus.

The people who lived in ancient days under the law and the Ten Commandments and knew they couldn't keep them, if they confessed before God that they were sinners and with all their hearts cast themselves on the mercy of God, they were saved—though they never heard the name of Jesus nor of his cross and sacrifice—as Israel's king did on that famous occasion (see Ps 51). But alas for many men and women, even in this country, who have heard the name of Jesus a thousand times over, and his solemn affirmation, 'You must be born again' (see John 3:3). If you ask them kindly, 'Tell me, are you born again?' they'll say, 'No, I'm not. I wouldn't like to say that.'

You enquire, 'Do you not believe Christ, who says that you must be born again if you're ever to see the kingdom of God?' But they shrug their shoulders and go on, apparently unconcerned.

God shall see to it that the thing is in proper proportion.

An eternity of suffering is unfair

Somebody says, 'I still object. It is altogether unfair that one brief little human life of seventy years, though it were full of sin, should bring an eternity of suffering.'

At first sight, I must say, that is a very big difficulty. How very brief life is. If such solemnly eternal things hang upon the decision of a few brief years, is it fair? But science itself has begun to warn us that we oughtn't to think in these matters with our puny minds, and contradict the loving warnings of the Saviour. We cannot begin to conceive of eternity, nor of the relation of time to eternity. Most of us are completely confused when mathematicians tell us that time is relative. They inform us that if you could travel through space at the speed of light, and you left earth and travelled for four years and came back again, you might find yourself, as you thought, just four years older; but the inhabitants on earth would be sixty or seventy years older. Our minds boggle at that kind of thing, but the best brains among us tell us it is so. Time is a relative thing.

We cannot begin to imagine what the relationship of eternity is to time. When we pass out into that realm where God sees the end from the beginning then those kind of difficulties disappear. Because our minds are finite, and if we try and think along that way we are bound to make mistakes, is it not our wisdom to trust the Lord Jesus? He came from eternity into time and has gone back into eternity. And the Saviour who died for us on the cross constantly affirmed that once people pass the boundary of time their condition is fixed.

Is there another chance to repent?

As the book of God ends, it issues once more that solemn warning: 'the time is near' (Rev 1:3). The dawn of eternity almost breaks for us. So near it is, says the New Testament, it is almost too late to change: 'Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy' (Rev 22:11). It's *almost* too late to change, but thank God it's not *completely* too late. However, once time's boundary is past, the saved shall be eternally saved, thank God; but the lost shall be eternally lost.

You say, 'That's unfair. It's cruel of God. Why doesn't he give them another chance to repent? Surely, when they wake up in those eternal miseries, they will repent.'

How do you know? That is the very solemn thing. We are given no indication from God in Scripture that there's anybody in hell who has since repented of their sin. If God's love in Christ in this life doesn't melt a man's enmity and bring him to the Saviour for salvation, I very much doubt whether God's eternal wrath will melt him and change his opinion.

You say, 'But our Lord himself told of people who come when the door is shut. They knock on the door, and say, "Lord, let us in." Surely those are people who have repented?'

Do you really believe that? Do you really believe that God will be in his heaven and have people knocking on his door, really repentant of their sin, and refuse to save them? Not so, not so. They'll certainly regret that they are not in heaven, but when our Lord replies to those people, 'Depart from me, I never knew you', do you hear them say, 'Lord, can't we come and know you now'?

They're like Esau who, when he saw that he had let his blessing go, wept buckets full of tears for the remorse that now his blessing was forever gone. But the Bible says he never changed his mind (Heb 12:17). Doesn't it stand to reason that, if men and women in this life can reject the love of God in Christ in spite of all the pleadings of God's Holy Spirit, there's very little likelihood that they'll ever change their minds in eternity?

You see, it is not that God says, 'Look, you must take my salvation, and if you don't I shall pour on you eternal wrath.' Men and women are perishing anyway, and God in his mercy has done a colossal thing in his attempt to save them. If, having seen God in Christ, they don't want to be saved, there's no reason to think that in eternity they will change their minds.

The importance of making the right choice now

That makes our own personal decisions exceedingly important, and I come back to where we started. Solemn as this is, we cannot avoid it, but we can turn to the brighter side of things. We need not complain against God; there is no need for anyone to perish. So perfectly has the work been done that every soul in this lecture hall could go out of the doors tonight saved eternally. If anyone is not sure, allow me please to tell you my friend, in God's name, you could be sure before you leave, and go in the deep peace of God and peace with God.

But alas, so often when people have been confronted with these realities, they go out and for the next day they feel the solemnity. They try their best to improve and live a bit more zealously for God, as if it were necessary for them to persuade God to love them and to save them. But all the while they stand away from God's salvation.

Let us grasp it: none of us has anything to do to persuade God to love us. You don't have to beseech and implore God to save you, and you don't have to earn or merit his salvation. It is at this very moment complete: the work has been done and there is no need to perish. 'God does not wish that any should perish' (see 2 Pet 3:9). Perishing is such a ghastly thing that God hasn't let it depend on our works as to whether we perish or not. He has given his Son and if, as bankrupt sinners, we receive his Son we shall never so much as come into judgment (John 5:24). The issue is already settled: we *have passed* from death unto life, and there is therefore now no condemnation for such people (see Rom 8:1). They are eternally saved; their names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

The wonderful thing is that we do not have to wait, we can know it now. 'Rejoice', said our Lord Jesus to his disciples, 'that your names are written in heaven' (Luke 10:20). They knew it, and therefore the eternal terrors of God's wrath left them quite at peace.

But similarly it is also settled in this life that, if anyone does not believe the Saviour, they are 'condemned already' (John 3:18). The issue is settled either way in this life. Therefore, though this is a lecture and not a sermon, allow me please, inasmuch as I love you, to ask you personally and point blank if you are certain that your name is in the Book of Life. And may I implore you, if you are not certain, that you make it your immediate business to find God's salvation so that your name will be written there at once, for God himself has said that, in that coming day, if anyone's name is not found written in the Book of Life, he shall be thrown into the lake of fire—that is the second death.

Repentance and Faith

This evening I wish to discuss with you the two subjects of *repentance* and *faith*; those exercises of the heart which are necessary to enter and enjoy God's salvation personally and practically. They are generally spoken of in that order. 'Repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ' was the apostolic description (see Acts 20:21). Necessary as repentance is, by itself it is not enough. It is the negative side and faith is the positive side. It's not enough just to repent without positive faith.

What is repentance?

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.' (Matt 3:1-2)

I propose to discuss with you again the ministry of John the Baptist, which was primarily concerned with this matter of repentance, and though he lived before the full blown Christianity that was to come, nevertheless we may learn many a helpful lesson from him. He was, so to speak, the specialist in the preaching of repentance. But before we do so, perhaps we ought to pay a little attention to the meanings of words.

Unhappily, in the English language, the word *repentance* has gathered around it a lot of ideas that, strictly speaking, belong to other words and not to repentance itself. That is because our English word 'repentance' has some relationship with the Latin word *poenitentia*, which later on became in the English language, 'penance'. That has produced a build-up of ideas in people's minds that, when the Bible talks of repentance, it is prescribing a sort of penance, a miserable state of soul. It was the kind of thing the Jews did on their great Day of Atonement, when they afflicted their souls. For other people, it has come to mean a feeling of remorse and self-loathing. With others it indicates certain meritorious works, which they feel obliged to do to make reparation to God for their sins.

As you know, the New Testament is translated not from Latin, but from Greek. In Greek, the word for repentance means 'a change of mind'. It is primarily an activity of a person's mind, rather than emotions. It has to do with moral judgment, and it means that when a person repents, he or she comes to radically change their thinking. From indulging in sin as though it were right or harmless, or that it didn't matter, they come to change their thinking on that score, agree with God, and if need be condemn themselves.

The story of Esau

This illustrates so well the difference between feelings and a change of mind—a change of moral judgment. ‘Esau . . . sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears’ (Heb 12:16–17). You might have said, ‘There is evidence of contrition on Esau’s part; look at his tears and his grief.’ But he didn’t get the birthright, and the Bible explains why ‘he found no place of repentance’ (KJV).

That was true also of Isaac, his father. He had given the birthright to Jacob, and was now no longer at liberty to change his mind and give it to Esau. Though he felt very sore about losing the birthright, Esau did not change his mind over that initial decision, ‘I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?’ (Gen 25:32). If you’d given him the choice between the birthright and porridge, once again he would have chosen porridge, even though it would cost him the birthright.

There are many people who have felt within them the desirability of God’s salvation. They have been deeply moved as they have listened to preaching; but when they see it means giving up and letting go of things that are sinful—maybe companionships that are unhealthy, business advantages that are dishonest, or whatever it may be—though they would like salvation with all their hearts, they are not prepared to repent. They will not face those issues—perhaps little things, though to them they may seem big things—and judge them for what they are. They are not prepared to agree with God that they are wrong and sinful, and consequently all their deep feeling and desires after God’s salvation never materialize. They are not prepared to repent.

I told you the other evening about the woman who said to me, ‘I need to be saved and I would like to be saved, but I’m just not prepared to give up certain things I do that I know are sinful.’

The preaching of John the Baptist

The historian Luke records the fact that there were two main results from John the Baptist’s strong preaching of repentance.

(When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.) (Luke 7:29–30)

1. The tax collectors and the people in general ‘declared God just’

Remember that the word ‘justified’ does not mean to *make* righteous. You can’t make God righteous; he is that already. It means to *declare* somebody to be right. When these tax collectors and people heard John speak and denounce them as sinners, they admitted it was true. God was right, though it meant that they were wrong. That is repentance, and in public admission of that fact, they got themselves baptized. Being baptized didn’t wash away one of their sins; water has no efficacy at all to atone for sin before God.

In fact, they had to wait for the coming of the Lord Jesus. John told them that, in addition to being baptized, they must believe on the Lord Jesus to obtain the forgiveness that they needed. But the first step was necessary: they must agree that God was right, they were wrong and in need of salvation. His judgment of their sin was just, and if they had what they deserved it would be God's unqualified judgment.

2. The Pharisees 'rejected the purpose of God for themselves'

They also came and listened to John. They were nominally interested in anything that was religious, but when they heard what kind of preaching it was—a forthright condemnation of sin and a call to repentance—they refused to be baptized. They told John bluntly they didn't see the need of such a thing. It might be all right for a few publicans maybe, and the heathen, but they didn't need to be baptized.

Sure enough, they would have admitted that they were guilty of the occasional slip and one or two peccadillos, but they genuinely thought that their good deeds did outweigh the bad and there wasn't any need for all this fuss. Being the God of love that he is, he surely didn't expect people to get concerned like this and make a public show of affairs? They felt that they were more or less good enough as they stood, and I've no doubt that they dismissed John's preaching as the ranting of an over keen evangelical. But the Holy Spirit's comment is that they rejected the purpose of God. They refused to agree that God was right and they were wrong. As you might expect, they did not get saved, though events took a very curious turn with them.

When our Lord came and pronounced the forgiveness of sins to the repenting and now believing people, and told them explicitly that their sins were forgiven and that they might know it, these self-same Pharisees took objection to that too. They said that this was blasphemous. To tell people that their sins were forgiven was more likely to encourage them in sinning.

Our Lord's comment was that these Pharisees were like children sitting in the marketplace. You couldn't please them either way. 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn' (Matt 11:17).

They wouldn't have this matter of being saved, and it is not difficult to see why their sins were not forgiven. They were not saved, and for other people to come alongside and claim that *they* were saved would understandably provoke their indignation and jealousy. But the root of this attitude is an unwillingness to agree with God against oneself, a refusal to change one's own thinking and let it be conformed with God's word.

Without throwing any stones at all, but just being realistic, I can point out how common that attitude is today. As in the days of these Pharisees, it cloaks itself with the outward works of Christianity. Make the test yourself. If you find people who deny that they deserve the extreme penalty of sin and the eternal perdition that our sins deserve, see how many of them will likewise deny that it is possible to know oneself saved here in this life. The two attitudes spring from the same root.

There is no salvation without repentance

The Bible declares that the wages of sin is death, that is, eternal death (Rom 6:23). To deny that is to deny God. It states plainly that here in this life we can know we are born again and our sins are forgiven. To say that it is impossible for anybody to be sure shows an unrepentant heart that refuses to change its thinking and agree with what God says. It must be evident to us all that without such repentance there is no salvation.

Now let's think a little bit more deeply on this matter. I want to point out that when people came to John the Baptist he only baptized each person once, as far as we know. You may think that's a superficial observation to make, but it is nevertheless important. People didn't sin today and come and say, 'John, baptize me, I've sinned and I repent', and then tomorrow they did another sin, repented, and he baptized them again.

No, it was being willing to admit that the whole of life, from first to last, was stained with sin and unworthy of God's heaven. When folk were prepared to admit that their whole life fell short of God's requirement and deserved his judgment, then they were ready to see that the Lamb of God takes away not odd sins here and there, but deals with the whole of a person's life, and can offer forgiveness once and for all.

That still remains true, though we should not confuse the issue in our minds. Following that once and for all repentance, it is perhaps unnecessary to point out that a Christian will find it necessary to repent seven, or perhaps seventy, times a day. When first we come to Christ for salvation, we're dealing with the whole of life. We receive forgiveness and justification that covers it in total. We admit that the whole of life is a wreck, deserving the wages of sin, and from the Saviour's hand we take eternal life, which by its very nature and definition knows no end. But, because he has a salvation that is as big as eternity, that does not mean that a Christian grows slack and careless.

When a person gets saved it is often the fact that there are many things he or she does, and attitudes they adopt, that are sinful, although they are unaware of it at the time. God loves them even while they are yet sinners, and if they come and admit it, God is prepared to save them. But after that God will raise the matter of individual sins and require them to repent, judge them to be wrong, and allow the Saviour to save them from sin. If we do that, we shall not be judged. But as Christian people who possess eternal life, if we refuse to cooperate with God in these matters and allow sin to carry on unjudged, then God will take very decided steps to teach us that sin is sin and bring us to judge it in the light of his presence.

Works are the evidence of genuine repentance

But let us think again of the stress on works that John the Baptist made in his preaching. 'Bear fruits in keeping with repentance,' he said (Luke 3:8). I hasten to add that he is not alone in this. This is not some pre-Christian attitude that we Christian people can afford to neglect. The Apostle Paul announced before King Agrippa that he likewise taught all his converts that they should perform deeds in keeping with their repentance (Acts 26:20). We must study that a little bit more closely. What does that mean? We are told at length what it meant with John.

And the crowds asked him, 'What then shall we do?' And he answered them, 'Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.' Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, 'Teacher, what shall we do?' And he said

to them, 'Collect no more than you are authorized to do.' Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what shall we do?' And he said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.' (Luke 3:10–14)

In a most forthright manner, John lays it down that works are to accompany repentance. Now at once, we may be certain that none of those works earns forgiveness, or else the Bible would glaringly contradict itself. None of those works made reparation or atonement for sins before God. That can only be done by the sacrifice of Christ. Why then were the works necessary? They were necessary as evidence that the repentance was genuine. If those works had not been forthcoming, one might have seriously doubted it.

Suppose I have here a man, and he comes asking the way of God's salvation. He professes to be repentant for his past life. He sees that forgiveness can only be had through Christ, and forgiveness is offered free without any works at all. But enquiry shows that the man has stolen one thousand pounds from a friend of his. The money is safely lodged to his own account and he could pay it back if he wanted to.

'I want to be saved,' he says, 'but tell me, does it mean that I've got to give that money back?'

And you say, 'Of course it does.'

'Well,' he says, 'I'm not prepared to do that.'

'But I thought you said just now that you were repentant.'

'I am,' he says, 'and I want my sins to be forgiven.'

Oh no. There must be that 'work' of giving back the money, otherwise how can the man possibly say that he is repentant?

Let me take another example. You doubtless will remember the terms that the Apostle Peter laid down to the Jews in the city of Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost.

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?' And Peter said to them, '*Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*' (Acts 2:37–38)

You may have observed how different those terms are from what happened when Peter preached the gospel in the house of Cornelius, the Gentile centurion. He had not reached the end of his sermon when that gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them there and then, and it was not until after they had received the Holy Spirit that those people were baptized.

While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word . . . Then Peter declared, 'Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. (Acts 10:44–48)

Why the difference? Well certainly not because God has favourites and is prepared to save some people and give them his Holy Spirit on easier terms than others. It's not that at all; but you see, the Jews in Jerusalem were guilty of something that Cornelius was not guilty of.

In Jerusalem

The apostle was preaching to people who had stood in that city and shouted, 'Away with him, crucify him!' (John 19:15). They had done it publicly. Now they professed to be sorry and repentant. They needed God's salvation for their desperate sins, and in particular they needed forgiveness for the sin of the murder of Christ. Of course, repentance was the paramount condition; but if their repentance was genuine they must be willing to show publicly in that same city that they had renounced their former verdict. Publicly they had said, 'Away with him, crucify him', and if they were genuinely repentant they would now publicly confess they were wrong and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. If they were not prepared thus to show the genuineness of their repentance, do you think the apostles would publicly have received them as Christians?

In the house of Cornelius

Here the issue did not arise, of course. Cornelius had not been in Jerusalem; he was not personally guilty of the murder of Christ. That didn't mean that his life was not dotted all over with wrong practices, but the man was genuinely ready to confess his sin. There was nothing glaringly outstanding, and the matter of his salvation could proceed. But I stress again, all those works that are the evidence for our repentance being genuine, all of them together cannot bring us forgiveness. They do not buy God's forgiveness, nor purchase salvation. That must come solely through Christ.

The work of the Holy Spirit

There is one further consideration that we ought to remember before we proceed to discuss the other matter of faith, and that is the power of God's gracious Holy Spirit helping us towards repentance. In God's supreme mercy, he does not leave our consciences to themselves. He does not leave us merely with the evidence of natural law, nor even the evidence of his written word. From time to time the Holy Spirit visits men and women to illuminate their needs, pressing upon them the need for repentance and the seriousness of sin. We should thank God for that lovely ministry of the Holy Spirit. It is described in the Bible as the rain that comes down from heaven, softening the ground that the ground might eventually yield its fruit and receive the seed and that seed might grow. 'He will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth' (Hos 6:3). We thank God that he does not leave us to our own choosing, but follows us constantly, and sometimes very vividly and persistently in the days when specially he visits us.

It is possible to reject him

When the Holy Spirit has done everything he can to enlighten the mind, inform the conscience, and urge repentance and faith in Christ, it is still possible for the human spirit to make its own decision. Just as it is possible for the human spirit to say yes to God, it is possible to say no. The Bible is very solemn on this score. When the human heart deliberately and with

eyes open turns its back on God and says its final no to the pleadings of God's Holy Spirit, there comes a time when it is impossible to restore such a person to repentance (see Heb 6:4–6).

Now those verses have upset some people, and sometimes they have upset Christians with over-tender consciences. Sometimes genuine Christians get under the weather in health, hit by pain and suffering and misfortune and calamity, and come to have doubts. They get it into their heads that they have committed this unpardonable sin, and go through months, and sometimes years, of unutterable anguish. Far be it from me to cause or precipitate such a feeling in anybody's mind.

Let us notice what the verses say: 'It is impossible . . . to restore them again to repentance.' That is to say, you will never get them to change their minds again; they will be permanently indifferent. If anybody is in great distress of mind, longing to be saved, but fears they can't because they might have committed the unpardonable sin, let me tell you that the very fact they feel concerned at all shows they haven't committed that sin. It is said of those people that you will never get them to change their minds. They're happy to go on as they are, and they turn their backs on God and his Holy Spirit by their personal choice. Being unable to do anything more for them—he would if he could—God lets them go the way of their choice, and they're quite happy to do that. That is a sad thing. Let it warn any of us with whom God's Holy Spirit might be striving at this moment, to decide in the right direction and yield to the Saviour, lest we weary God's Holy Spirit and pass beyond the point of no return.

What is faith?

I begin by a reading from holy Scripture that illustrates, perhaps better than anything in the New Testament, the meaning and action of faith.

So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine. And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill. When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. So Jesus said to him, 'Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.' The official said to him, 'Sir, come down before my child dies.' Jesus said to him, 'Go; your son will live.' The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering. So he asked them the hour when he began to get better, and they said to him, 'Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him.' The father knew that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, 'Your son will live.' And he himself believed, and all his household. This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee. (John 4:46–54)

Necessary as repentance is, by itself it is not enough. It is the negative side; faith being the positive side. It's not enough just to repent without positive faith. We might learn that from the vivid example of Judas Iscariot. When he was confronted with the outcome of his foul deed, 'he changed his mind' (Matt 27:3). If we ask how genuine his repentance was, we can only observe what he did. '[He] brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood"' (vv. 3–4). Manfully, he

confessed his wrong and made restitution as far as he possibly could. But he wasn't saved. There was no glimmer of personal faith in the Lord Jesus; no evidence of reaching out his empty hand to take in reality from the Saviour that morsel of bread that he had taken before in utter insincerity (see John 13:21–30). He didn't believe; no personal relationship was formed between him and the Saviour. There was no faith. It drove him to commit suicide.

The early Christian preachers were insistent on this thing. If they found people who had been baptized merely by John's baptism, good as that was, they would insist that they went the next step. John's message had been to repent of sin as a necessary preliminary, but then they had to personally believe in Jesus. First, repentance towards God; then, faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21).

I trust I am not making things sound difficult. Faith should be the easiest and simplest thing in all the world, but many people find it difficult. Let me try and strip away many of the difficulties that have encumbered people in their thinking. As I proceed through these various things and point out what faith is not, you will observe that I am not progressively making the thing harder, but easier.

Faith is not presumption

Let us just start here and clear our thinking. Faith is our response to God and to something God has said; it is not just wishful thinking.

Sometimes, if you ask of somebody, 'Do you believe in the Lord Jesus?', they will say, 'Oh, I have great faith.'

Then, if you ask, 'Are you saved?' they will say, 'Well, I do my best to live out the Christian life.'

If you say, 'But you surely must know that salvation is not that way round: it is not by works,' the reply will come, 'I don't think it really matters what we believe, so long as we sincerely believe it. It's sincerity that counts. So long as we are all sincere and seeking the right thing, then we shall all end up the same way.'

Shall we really? That is utter presumption. If you are ill with the flu and go to your medicine cupboard where you have twenty bottles of different sorts of medicine, try the argument out. Select one at random, whatever it is, and say to yourself, 'It doesn't matter what these doctors give us. So long as we are sincere when we take it, it will work.' Well that is nonsense, and could be fatal.

Cain and Abel

The Bible reminds us of this in a story we know so well, the story of Cain and Abel (Gen 4). 'By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain' (Heb 11:4). It wasn't that one day he somehow had a bright idea that this might be a good thing to do. God had indicated to our first parents that he required sacrifice and the shedding of blood; without that there is no forgiveness (Heb 9:22). Abel, in faith, responded to what God said and came in God's way.

Cain, on the other hand, came his own way. I've no doubt that he was full of confidence that his sacrifice would be accepted too, and he may well have argued with himself that his sacrifice was as good as Abel's and perhaps a little bit better. After all, Abel only had to let the

lamb grow and feed it occasionally, whereas he had to work hard to till the soil. All Cain's unbounded confidence did not bring him acceptance with God, for it was sheer presumption.

Wishful thinking will not do. We must see that our faith is the genuine thing; that is, in God's word, in response to what God has said and done. If God has said something, then it is not presumption for me to believe it with all my heart. Sometimes it is said to people who claim that they are saved and know it, that it is very presumptuous. That is not so at all, of course. When the Bible says, 'I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life' (1 John 5:13), it is not presumption for us to say that we know it. In fact, it would be making God a liar to say that it couldn't be known. Faith is a response to God and what God has said.

Faith is not feelings

At the same time, as Christian preachers have laboured to point out, faith is not a question of feelings. Faith is our response to God's fairness, and let us not confuse the fact with any consequent feelings. Our feelings sometimes reflect the true state of affairs, but very often they don't.

Here's a man and he's on his summer holidays, sitting on the beach in a deckchair, in a cosy little bay in the south of Cornwall. He dozes off in the sun, and as he sleeps the tide quietly creeps in. It has already surrounded the other parts of the beach and has crept up behind him. The bay is quite cut off; behind him are only sheer high cliffs and he can't escape. The man is in deep peril, but he's snoozing away quite happily in his deckchair unaware of the situation. His feelings are utterly no guide to the true situation.

Here's a good lady in bed one dark night. Her husband is away on business. Presently, she is startled out of her sleep by an awful crashing and banging downstairs in the lounge. What has actually happened is that the poker had been standing a-slant on the tiles, but eventually by the law of gravity it slipped down and made an awful *boom*. She's upstairs and can't see what the true cause of the noise is. You know what happens, don't you? Vivid pictures begin to arise of masked burglars and guns and bandits, and I don't know what.

Feelings do not reflect the facts. How often that happens in the experience of our hearts and souls. People will say, 'Yes, I do believe the Lord Jesus, but I don't feel saved.' Now that's unfortunate. It is a beautiful thing when faith brings us into God's salvation and reflects itself in our feelings; but the feelings are not essential. There is no verse in the Bible that tells us how many feelings we've got to have before we may be saved. Very often, even those joyful feelings that sometimes we get are replaced temporarily by a stomach ache, or a toothache, or too much cheese eaten the night before, or a sudden bereavement or illness. Don't let us confuse feelings with faith.

Someone has likened it this way. Fact, Faith and Feelings were walking along the top of a brick wall. Fact went first, and so long as Faith kept its eyes glued in front on Fact, Feelings followed quite respectably behind. Presently, Faith looked round to see how Feelings was getting on, and took its eyes off Fact. Then Feelings became very wobbly and the more it tried to get on the right path, the more wobbly Feelings became. It is always so.

Faith centres itself on God's unchangeable facts and leaves feelings to take care of themselves. After all, in this matter of forgiveness, it is what God says that counts. Even

though I feel as happy as the day is long, if God has not forgiven me, I am in danger of eternal perdition. And even though I feel all confused inside, if God has forgiven me, the fact is that I am eternally saved.

Faith is not sight

Our passage that we read on this score reminded us that faith is not sight. When that nobleman came to the Lord Jesus and pleaded with him to come down before his child died, Jesus said to him, 'Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe' (John 4:48). The man would have preferred the Lord to come down to his house and do a miracle so that he could see the results, and then he was prepared to believe. That is useless. God wants us to believe before we see the results. How many folks are waiting until they see the results of God's Spirit working in their lives before they can be sure? They feel that this is being honest. They want to see genuine Christian work in their own lives, and until they see it they are not prepared to say they're Christians. Except they can see the wonder of Christ working in their souls they are not prepared to believe.

That's like wanting to get water out of your kitchen tap without first opening the stopcock on the road outside. You say, 'I'm not prepared to believe there is any water out there until I see it coming out of my tap.' But you'll have to go out to the road, turn on the mains and wait some minutes, like you used to do in some bathrooms, until the water comes up.

So this man was made to wait. In the nature of things, he would not see for some hours whether what Christ had said was true or not. Would he believe? Would he just take Christ's naked word, when he couldn't see or feel any result? All the authority he had to know whether the thing was true or not was that Christ had said it. What a challenge that was to the man's heart, when at home his boy was at the very gates of death with fever. Yet these are the terms.

God does not ask us to wait until we see the evidence of his workings in our hearts, he asks us to believe Christ and take his word for it.

Faith is not a sense of conviction

Conviction comes with growing knowledge and growing experience of God. Faith is the willingness to commit myself to a person, whatever happens.

Here's a man and he stands in his bedroom on the 74th floor of a skyscraper and his retreat has been cut off by fire. The fireman appears at the window and he says, 'Now, old fellow, come to me and I'll carry you down.' He comes to the window and has a look at that long distance down. He's scared stiff and he can scarcely move.

'Come on,' says the fireman, 'I want you to trust yourself to me and I'll take you down.'

The man says, 'I'm scared. I daren't.'

The fireman says, 'Never mind, just let yourself go in my arms. Relax and shut your eyes, and I'll do it all. I've taken hundreds of people down ladders like this and I've never lost one of them.'

The man says, 'I'd like to believe that, but I don't feel you can.'

‘Look here, old fellow,’ he says, ‘if you don’t make up your mind and come to your decision soon, the floor is going to drop out underneath you.’

Faced with that dreadful fear, the man says, ‘Right, there’s only one way out of this. I’ll do it; I’ll trust myself to this man. I’m sure I’ll break my neck, but it’s the only way, so I’ll trust myself to him.’

The fireman gets hold of him. Every single step down the ladder the man is in fear of his life, but he gets to the bottom safely. He hasn’t a lot of conviction, but he came to his decision and entrusted himself to his saviour.

In Mark 9 we read of another father, whose son had an unclean spirit. It was the man’s first experience of Christ. Even though he was full of doubt and difficulty and fear, he made the decision in his heart to bring his will to bear upon the matter. ‘I believe;’ he said, ‘help my unbelief!’ (v. 24). There’s a mighty great difference between him and an aged apostle with years of experience of God, saying, ‘I am convinced’ (2 Tim 1:12), but the one man was saved as much as the other. Believing in Christ is a matter of our will. ‘I will trust him and commit to him all the difficulties, doubts, fears, and the worries.’

Faith is not by our trying

And so I end with a remark or two on how this faith comes. It doesn’t come by our trying. ‘So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ’ (Rom 10:17). It’s by listening to what he says and letting his word provoke the faith. In the last analysis it will depend on what we think of God and Christ. In fact, the Hebrew word for *believing* means, ‘I believe in somebody when I consider them to be utterly reliable.’

Christ says to each one of us, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgement, but has passed from death to life’ (John 5:24). Then it’s a matter between myself and Christ, and what I think of him. I’ve got to decide if I think he’s a liar: perhaps in some things he said the truth and in other things he was grossly astray? Would he say one thing today and another thing tomorrow? I’ve got to decide whether I really think that he meant every word he said and it’s impossible for him to lie (see Heb 6:18). If I do, then I shall commit my all to him and enter into rest.

We see the tremendous importance of this. Knowing ourselves to be sinners and God’s judgment is against sin, we face eternity and need to be saved. Soon we shall be beyond the place where it’s possible to choose. We are confronted with the situation where we must decide whom we are going to choose, and whom we are going to believe. Am I going to believe myself, trust my feelings, and let them be the judge of the matter? I tell you, that is hell begun on earth. To go out into eternity trusting ourselves is to be one little speck of humanity locked within the prison house of itself forever. That’s hell.

The Saviour who died on Calvary stands in front of us, imploring us to cast the anchor of our souls outside of ourselves, and he guarantees that if we place it in him it will never drift in this life or in the next.

Christian Responsibility

Our Lord Jesus Christ indicated that Christianity is both a gate and a road. It is a gate that one enters once and for all by a simple and speedily effected experience, but it is followed by a road that lasts for the whole of life. It is on the road ('the way' ESV, KJV, etc.) that I wish to concentrate this evening, whereas last time we were thinking of the gateway. I would therefore like to point out from the start that it is important to see in which order those things come. Our Lord Jesus said:

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few. (Matt 7:13–14)

In his exposition the gate comes first and then the road. Unfortunately, in many people's thinking, the order has been reversed. Their idea of salvation is that it is a long road with a gate at the far end, and we toil along the Christian pathway doing our best to behave like good Christians. The result is always uncertain whether we shall in fact qualify to enter the gate of heaven at the end after all. That idea is not only wrong, but exceedingly harmful.

How do we begin to have a relationship with God?

It is not the fact that we walk the Christian pathway in order to qualify to enter God's heaven and kingdom; it is altogether the reverse. True Christian experience starts with entering the gateway. To put it in our Lord's words, 'I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture' (John 10:9).

Without that initial experience of salvation, it is impossible to walk the Christian pathway. Unless I can honestly say that I know what it means to enter that door—I have entered it and I am saved—all my trying to walk it will prove to be not only fruitless but disastrous in the end. We cannot *live* as Christians until we have personally *become* Christians, and that is the point I should like to emphasize at the beginning of this talk. So let's read what the Apostle James has to say:

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled', without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your

works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead. (2:14–26)

From the Apostle Paul’s writings, and from the words of our Lord Jesus, it is evident that a person is justified before God not by works, but by faith alone: ‘Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Rom 5:1). There may appear to be a contradiction here. James is making the point that faith apart from works is utterly dead, and a man is justified by works. This has been a very real difficulty to many people and they find James far easier to understand than Paul.

‘This begins to make some sense,’ they say. ‘James is saying that we are justified by our works. We must work; to say we believe without doing Christian works, that’s altogether idle. Does it not mean that we do our very best to please God in order to be saved?’

If you point out the words of Romans 4:5, ‘And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,’ they will very often frankly confess that it completely mystifies them. They understand James when he says that we’re justified by works; it seems common sense. They find it very difficult to grasp, then, that this other part of the Bible should say it’s to the one who does not work that God’s salvation is given.

Of course, it is not a question of some isolated verse. Paul elsewhere positively says, ‘For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast’ (Eph 2:8–9). He records his own conversion in these terms, ‘But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy’ (Titus 3:4–5).

Faith and works

So then somebody will say, ‘There must be a contradiction in the Bible after all. A good many chapters say that salvation is utterly by faith and not by works. How will you reconcile it with James when he says that we are justified by works?’

Let us notice that there is no contradiction, and that can easily be seen and proved. The Apostle James wrote his epistle before the Apostle Paul wrote his letters to the Romans and to the Galatians, or perhaps any of his letters. But more than that, we read in the Acts of the Apostles that a doubt arose early on in the minds of Christians as to what Paul taught and what James taught. In consequence, Paul went up to Jerusalem along with Barnabas and met James. At that conference they declared that James and Paul believed exactly the same thing,

and wrote a letter to that effect, so the idea that they contradicted each other was permanently and forever knocked on the head (Acts 15:23–29).

How then can it be reconciled? The answer is very easy. Paul says that we are justified before God by faith because our works are altogether inadequate. We could not possibly earn salvation by them, so we come as bankrupt sinners, believe the Saviour and he gives us eternal life as a free gift. But because eternal life is a real thing, a real power, then it will show itself in the life of the person who receives it. If I say I am a real believer in our Lord Jesus Christ, I am claiming to have eternal life. If I do that, everybody has a right to look at me and see whether there is any evidence for my claim. When my works give practical evidence, it is justified and shown to be real and right.

If I claim to have eternal life, but my works belie my profession and are consistently unworthy of a Christian, you'd have every right to call into question the reality of my salvation. It is not only my fellow men and women, but the Bible informs us that God himself looks for evidence in the lives of those who profess to trust him.

Two examples

Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead. (Jas 2:21–26)

1. *'Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?'*

On that historic occasion it was not a question of Abraham proving to his friends that he was a genuine believer, for there weren't any friends there. He was alone on the mountaintop with Isaac, even the servants had been left behind. He was not proving his genuineness to his friends; he was demonstrating before God the reality of his faith by his act of obedience. The voice that came from heaven did not say, 'Now Sarah knows that you are a genuine believer,' nor, 'Now your friends will see that your profession of faith is real.' The voice came from God himself, '*... for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me*' (Gen 22:12).

But somebody says, 'Surely God knew that before?' Perhaps he did. That does not diminish in the slightest the fact that God himself insists upon those of us who profess to be saved that in our lives there shall be works that provide evidence that we are genuine.

2. *'And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?'*

'Take Rahab, who let in the spies,' says James. She showed by her practical action towards those spies that her allegiance had been transferred from the wicked people of her city to the side of God and God's people. If the people in Jericho had known what Rahab had done, they would not have felt like commending her. It would have enraged and infuriated them. They

would probably have said, 'Do you call that being a good religious person?' It was not a question so much of proving the genuineness of her trust in God to them, but showing it to God himself.

When a man or woman gets converted and begins to break away from former evil habits and sins, it is a common thing that, instead of complimenting them, their former companions will criticize them most severely and dub them as narrow minded and all sorts of other things. They will object most furiously, but what they say is for the moment beside the point; we must show God that we are genuine. In a moment I'll come to how we may show him, and what kind of works he is looking for in those who trust him.

But, while we are considering this matter of evidence, there is one exceedingly important thing we ought to notice. I say this, lest somebody who is a genuine Christian should go away and start to look at his or her life, and say, 'I've not been too good; I wonder if I'm a Christian at all.' That could be exceedingly dangerous and I have no intention of unsettling people's faith.

Evidence and proof are different things

Try to follow while I make what may seem to be a difficult distinction. When we think of our lives, we must always remember that evidence is one thing, proof is quite another. You can have conflicting evidence, but you can never have conflicting proof. There ought to be plenty of *evidence* in my works that I am saved, but *proof* is another thing altogether. We're not talking about proof; we are talking about evidence.

Let me adopt what may appear to be a crude illustration. Here is a beautiful car, the engine is perfect. As everybody knows, there are two ways of propelling a car along the road. The first is the way we normally use: we fill the tank with petrol, set the engine going and it pushes the car along the road. The other way is the discomfoting method we are forced to adopt sometimes. When the petrol runs out we have to get behind the car and push it. The distinction is exceedingly important.

How do we find out whether the car has the vital stuff that makes it go? We know right away that the real secret is that there should be petrol in the tank, but we can't see whether it's full or empty without taking the engine to bits. The garage man says that he put the petrol in; how do we find out if his claim is genuine?

Somebody says, 'We'll turn the key and look at the gauge.'

You turn the key and the gauge shows that it's full. But then you can't trust all gauges; they go wrong sometimes. How shall we justify the profession that the gauge makes? It says that the tank is full, but is the claim right?

'I shan't believe it until I see the car move along the road,' you say.

That's very good and sensible. You want evidence that there's petrol in the tank and the only evidence that's likely to satisfy you for the moment is that the car moves along the road.

The only way we can possibly lead a Christian life is by God giving us his Spirit, his eternal life within us. We cannot buy eternal life by our works, we must have it as a gift. I claim to

have the gift, but you won't be satisfied with my words as a gauge, will you? You'll say, 'All right, you claim to have eternal life; show me your eternal life by your works.'

But come back to the illustration of the car. Sometimes you're going along the road when suddenly the engine peters out and it comes to a dead stop. Nothing you do will make it start. You say, 'I didn't know we had run out of petrol,' but when you look at the gauge it says that the tank is at least half-full.

Somebody comes along and says, 'I don't believe there is any petrol in it.'

But you say, 'I know there is, because I was there when it was filled up.'

'Well,' he says, 'it doesn't go.'

The fact that the car doesn't go for the moment is not proof that it hasn't got any petrol. The petrol is there, but some dirt may have got into the carburettor, or the plugs may not be clean, and for the moment it's stopping the petrol doing its work.

My illustration is aimed to show that it is very possible for a man or woman to believe the Saviour, receive his Holy Spirit, have eternal life, and for that life to become temporarily choked. They may be 'sowing to the flesh' (see Gal 6:8), and their actions for the time being seem to contradict the claim that they have God's salvation. That is frequently the case for many of us who profess Christianity. Though we have eternal life and are born again, and we shall never perish, our channels get clogged and the evidence of the Holy Spirit's work within us is not apparent.

It is most unfortunate when that happens with a genuine believer, but it doesn't prove that they have never been saved and never had eternal life, does it? The Bible talks like this. It is possible for a person who has the Holy Spirit to be overtaken in a fault, and to fall (Gal 6:1). But if a person's normal behaviour is to continually live in sin and to constantly practise sin, if his usual attitude to his brother is one of hatred (1 John 3:15), then that person is not from God; he does not have eternal life. Do you see the difference between the two?

There's a third thing we ought to notice. We watch a car doing fifty downhill; it's going well. Then it gets on to the flat and begins to pull up; when it meets an incline it comes to a dead stop. The plugs are clean, the carburettor clear, what's wrong with the thing? Well, it just hasn't got any petrol. So, what do you do about that?

'Oh,' says somebody, 'we'll get out and push it until it gets some petrol.'

But it will never get petrol by pushing, you know. If you're strong enough you could push it along the road at fifty miles an hour, but that won't put any petrol inside. Alas, there are many people who are pushing desperately through life to do Christian things, to live like Christians ought to live, but they've no 'petrol' inside. They've never received eternal life, and they feel that if they work hard and really endeavour to be a Christian, that's how they'll get God's salvation. If I may mix the metaphor, they have 'put the cart before the horse'.

No, if you want to get petrol, you don't get it by getting out of the car, pushing hard and trying to make the car go; you go along to the supplier. But I'm afraid he won't just give it to you, you'll have to buy it.

The parable of the ten virgins

My illustration is not so crude as you might think. Change car to lamp, petrol to oil, motorist to virgin, and we have precisely a parable that our Lord himself gave.

Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise answered, saying, 'Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.' And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterwards the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. (Matt 25:1–13)

All ten had heard the fact that the bridegroom was coming. Outwardly all were alike: all had lamps, all were virgins, all were waiting for the bridegroom, all became drowsy and slept—yes, all of them. They shouldn't have. The Bible exhorts Christians in these terms, 'So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober' (1 Thess 5:6).

'The coming of the Lord is at hand' (Jas 5:8). Judgment is coming on this wicked world and coming very fast, so don't let us go to sleep. We ought to be awake, and one of the evidences that we are genuine Christians is the fact that we are awake to the Lord's coming. How can I call myself a Christian, if I know that the Lord is coming and I believe that this age is soon to experience God's judgment, and my fellow men and women will perish eternally if they are not saved and born again, if I never utter a word to my friends of their need to get saved? It seems to make a nonsense of my whole profession, doesn't it?

They ought not to have slumbered and slept. If you had come across those virgins, all sleeping, you'd have said to yourself, 'I wonder if they are really expecting the bridegroom to come. Are they genuinely interested?' Eventually at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' They all woke up and then the truth came out. Five of them not only had oil in their lamps, they had oil in their large pitchers. They had been joined, so to speak, to the greater supply. Waking up out of their temporary carelessness and sleep, they made themselves ready and went in with the bridegroom to the marriage feast.

The others woke up, but found that they had no big supply. What little oil they had was running out. 'Our lamps are going out,' they said. Eventually they spluttered out completely and while they went off to buy the oil the bridegroom came and they were left outside.

It does not excuse Christian inconsistency, but if it was announced that our Lord would be here ten hours from now, some of us Christians would wake up with a tremendous start. My, how furiously we'd work in the places where we live, telling folk that we'd never told before about God's salvation. We'd waken up, and because we are genuine believers and have God's Holy Spirit we should find adequate resources for our responsibility.

But if it were announced that our Lord would be here ten hours from now and we all woke up, I wonder would some of us find that we haven't got the real thing. We've all got some oil: all of us maybe know some little text of Scripture and we have sometimes stood in our churches and sung hymns. We've got a little light, but that's not enough. It's not enough to know pieces out of the Bible or to sing nice hymns, lovely as those things are. The only thing that will suffice for time and for the world beyond is the possession of God's infinite Holy Spirit, the personal possession of eternal life. All the 'pushing' in the world and trying to be a Christian will never put that oil inside us. We must come to the Lord and 'buy' it for ourselves. In the Bible's words, 'Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price' (Isa 55:1).

You see, salvation is a free gift. How important it is to receive that free gift of God's eternal life, his Holy Spirit, and to know that we are saved before we go about trying to lead a Christian life. If we have God's salvation and the Holy Spirit—light enough for ourselves and for our whole city, if need be—then how important it is that we get about our business and tell the world that Christ is coming, that it is possible to go in with him, but those who are not prepared will be left outside forever. It is important to remember these two distinctions.

Christians can sometimes be criticized by people of the world. Here's a poor old woman and she was brought up in an ungodly, cruel home. Her father was a drunkard; her mother was careless. She grew up maimed in her personality from a child, saddled maybe with an inferiority complex that makes her difficult to live and work with. In all her awkwardness, she comes to the Saviour and receives the gift of eternal life. The Lord receives her just as she is, and she becomes one of God's children. The Lord begins his reconstruction in her life, but it's a work that will take years. She has God's Holy Spirit and she's eternally secure, for God loves her and has forgiven her for Christ's sake. But often her difficult temperament clogs the channels and there isn't always the full evidence of the Holy Spirit within her.

'There you are,' says the world. 'Look at her sharp tongue and her quick temper. How does she call herself a Christian?'

If she has God's Holy Spirit, certainly she is a genuine Christian. Before God has finished with her he'll make her perfect and 'present [her] blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy' (Jude v. 24).

Here's another man who was brought up in a very comfortable home. He has a good physique and an easy temperament, a kindly chap, 'hail-fellow-well-met'. It's easy for him to be suave and courteous; his back doesn't bend over a washtub, he isn't constantly pushed for money, and he thinks he's a decent chap. But God says he is a broken sinner, and if he does not become regenerate, receive God's Holy Spirit and be born again in time, eternity will tell. Good as he is, he's not good enough for God. Proceeding on his own steam without God's salvation, he will perish and his personality disintegrate for eternity.⁶

⁶ This does not mean annihilation.

What does God require of Christians?

What does God require of Christians—people who do have his Holy Spirit, who are saved and have eternal life—those who say they are walking this Christian pathway? I do not propose to list in detail all those many social, church, family, or business duties that we have, nor have I any need to do so. They are plainly written in holy Scripture for us all to see. Our Lord Jesus said that the basic principle was: ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments’ (John 14:15).

Let me mention, however, the two commandments that our Lord specifically left for his followers. There are only two Christian ordinances, and our Lord personally commanded them both:

1. to be baptized publicly in his name;
2. to remember him by eating the Lord’s Supper.

These things are not left as a matter of our choice. If you had been one of Peter’s converts, he would have done with you what he did with Cornelius. When Cornelius believed and received the Holy Spirit and there was evidence that his profession of faith was genuine, we read that Peter *commanded* him to be baptized (Acts 10:48).

Our Lord ordained that, at the very threshold of our profession of faith in the Lord Jesus, we publicly give evidence that we have accepted his Lordship without any reserve by being baptized in his name. Ours is not to reason why, or to reply, ‘What good is it?’ or to offer the observation, ‘But I don’t think it’s necessary.’ That is to miss its immediate point.

We profess to receive Jesus as Lord. ‘Very good,’ says God. ‘Now justify your profession by your works.’ It wouldn’t matter if baptism were of no earthly use whatever; it stands as a test of our profession. If we say, ‘Yes, I receive Jesus as Lord,’ and then, when we see the Lord’s command to be baptized, we say, ‘I don’t see the point or any need of it,’ that contradicts the profession we have just made. If we love him, we keep his commandments—the ones we understand, and the ones we don’t yet understand. Isn’t that true?

Just before he went out to face Calvary, he asked us to gather publicly and remember him in the Lord’s Supper (see Luke 22:14–20). If we love him, we keep his commandments. It’s idle to say that we love him, and not keep his commandments.

The development of Christian character

Christianity is not merely keeping ordinances, valuable as they are. Christians need to give heed to the exhortation of the Apostle Peter.

For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Pet 1:5–8)

Being saved and having eternal life, we now seriously, deliberately and joyfully cooperate with God. By the aid of God's power and his promises, we build Christian ways and virtues into our character. You see, it's one thing to be born a wee babe in God's family; it's another thing to grow to a maturely developed Christian personality. It is open to us to choose to remain babes and say, 'I'm eternally secure; why should I bother any more?' Or we can do as we are asked and cooperate with God in the deliberate building-up of a Christian character.

Does it matter? 'It matters eternally,' says Peter. 'For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' (v. 11). Let us cooperate with God, lay hold of his power and his promises, and by his grace develop our characters. Then, when it comes to his eternal kingdom, an abundant entrance shall be richly provided for us. If we neglect that task and remain Christian babies, we shall still get in—just in; and as far as I read it, the difference is eternal.

How to make friends for eternity

We are fond of comforting the sinner who repents with the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15), and how right we are to do so. The man who went out and foolishly wasted his money, time, talents and strength; wasted the lot in reckless living. He repented and came to his father, and his father received him with open arms. The past was forgotten. The father re-equipped him with robe and ring and shoes, and our Lord holds up the example to show us how God receives the sinner who returns. God's grace welcomes him back and makes him a child in the Father's family.

We should not forget that there is another parable following that one (16:1–13). The first parable teaches us that, however we have squandered our substance, there is salvation and eternal life for us if we come to the Saviour. The next parable reminds us that if, as Christians, we squander our lives, our money, our time, our talents, we shall suffer loss eternally. 'Give your time and talents,' says our Lord, 'so that when you have to leave earth's goods behind, you have friends who will "receive you into the eternal dwellings"' (v. 9).

I sometimes think that we are not realistic enough about eternity. By being saved on earth, it doesn't mean that every Christian is equally our intimate friend. There is no reason to think it will be so in heaven. If I have lived for God and God's glory and my fellows' good, and if I've spent my time and energy in bringing God's salvation to my fellow men and women, when I get home at last I shall not only be eternally saved, but there will be a bond of friendship between me and those who were saved by my work and prayers; a bond of friendship that will be close and eternal. But if I have taken that same time, energy, money and talents, and spent them on legitimate things, but just selfishly for myself, I shall still be saved—but I don't know that everybody will feel especially friendly towards me. Our Lord urged upon Christians the necessity to use their time and talents for eternal advantage.

Building on the foundation

The Apostle Paul says that it is not merely a matter of building to yourself Christian character, but of building up that great church, that great temple for God that consists of redeemed men and women.

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (1 Cor 3:10–15).

Talking to his fellow Christians at Corinth, he said, 'I have laid the foundation, which is Jesus Christ. You don't need to lay the foundation again, but go and build on it. If your work is of good quality, your wealth will abound eternally and you will receive a reward. But if you build shoddy stuff, it will be burned up.' The believer who did the work shall be saved, but he himself shall suffer loss. Perhaps a lifetime's work shall go? 'He himself will be saved, but only as through fire' (v. 15). Christian responsibility and opportunity is an exceedingly real thing.

'Oh,' says somebody, 'I don't believe in working for reward. I think we should work for the love of it.'

Well go on and work for the love of it then! But it has pleased God to say that there is reward for Christian work.

'What kind of reward?' you ask.

Well, judging from our Lord's parables, at the judgment seat of Christ a person who used the little gift he had in service for the Lord here shall get the reward, not of a gracious and dignified retirement, but the opportunity to do ten times more work up there. In heaven they count the opportunity to work one of their greatest privileges. I don't know how enjoyable it would be to walk around on golden streets unemployed.

Somebody says, 'That's all right for you to talk, because apparently you are a Christian lecturer and preacher, but we can't all preach and lecture. Some of us have got to run the shop and cut up the meat.'

Of course you do, but let none of us feel any conflict here. Whether our work is tending the shop, making the beds, or expounding the Bible, it is the motive that counts. If the motive is right, much of the apparent conflict of duty will disappear. 'But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you' (Matt 6:33). Make that your object in all you do, rather than the getting of your bread and butter. In the peeling of the potatoes and the keeping of the ledger and the making of money, let the prime motive be, 'I'm in God's business and I'm doing this for him.' All the rest shall be added and there will be no conflict of duty. It is as holy a thing to plough one's field, if it is ploughed primarily for God, as it is to preach to sinners. Of course it is, and it will obtain a right reward.

We can't be on the road until we have entered the gate

Now I come back to the point I made at the beginning, and with this I close this lecture. I have concentrated on the Christian pathway, and I trust these few observations have been helpful to you, even as they have added to my own personal responsibility.

But for any who have been following these lectures who are not yet committed Christians, I have just one fear. In the previous lecture I emphasized the need to begin by coming to the Saviour, being born again and receiving eternal life. I stressed heavily that, if we would be saved and have a proper relationship with God, we must come through this experience that the Saviour describes, 'I am the door. *If anyone enters by me, he will be saved*' (John 10:9). Your reaction perhaps has been a whole array of different emotions. You can see that what I have been saying is founded on holy Writ: a man must be born again if he is to enter the kingdom of God. You have wondered and wondered and thought and thought. You've stood outside the door wondering.

In this lecture I've gone on to speak of the Christian pathway, and perhaps I have diverted your attention and raised all sorts of other issues in your mind that strictly belong to people who are already Christians. I am just afraid that I may have diverted your attention from what for you is the first, and in fact the only important point at this juncture. If any of us are not yet inside the gate, not yet born again, or if in anybody's mind there lingers a doubt about personal salvation, I would ask you to forget this lecture. There's no need to worry about the road, until we have settled this business about entering the gate.

You say, 'I find it so difficult. There are so many viewpoints.'

So there are, of course. But it is not as difficult as you make out. Conflicting though your emotions and thoughts may be, in the end it is settled by the decision of your will. Christ says he is the door; he urges you to come to him and enter in. Outside you'll perish, inside you are saved. He will deal with all those perplexities that may surround you, but you must come in first and discuss the problems with him on the inside. I warrant you, they'll look a lot different from the inside. It is a matter of the will. Whether it all seems abundantly clear to you, or whether at the moment a number of things confuse you, in his name I insist once more that this is your decision.

It's as simple as this. The Lord Jesus says, 'Come to me, enter in and be saved.' You either decide that you will, or you decide that you won't. Putting it off, wanting to get it clear to the very last question and the last difficulty, is often but a smear by which the enemy of our souls diverts our attention from the real issue. It is not feeling, it is not emotion, it is the decision of our will as we listen to the Saviour—will we come, or won't we?

Said our Lord, being deadly earnest, 'Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able' (Luke 13:24). Of some, our Lord had regrettably to lament, 'yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life' (John 5:40). Until it is your will to come, he can do nothing to give you practical salvation.

God grant that these lectures shall lead to that end. May all of us enter in and then be helped of God to walk that narrow road that ends in glory.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING was Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He 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.