

Testimony and Experience

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Testimony and Experience

Usually when someone is asked to give a testimony to Christian experience, salvation has made an obvious and clear difference in his life. I cannot claim any marvellously interesting and lurid experiences. Indeed, I cannot remember a day in the whole of my life, however early I go back, when I didn't know the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. I can't remember a time when I didn't know that people needed to be saved. I'd heard from my babyhood of marvellous cases of people who had found the Saviour and were converted. And I can't remember a time when I didn't know how to be saved.

I personally came to faith as a child of ten on the basis of that wonderful and simple verse in the Bible: 'If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved' (Rom 10:9). I remember the night still. I was in bed; my father came up as usual to pray at the side of the bed. I wasn't taking any particular notice, when my mind fastened on that text, particularly the second part of it: 'believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.' I said, 'Well, I do. So I'm saved.' And then I forgot about the first half, and didn't tell anybody, but I have tried to make amends since.

You say, 'That's not very satisfactory, Mr. Preacher. You can't expect us to be impressed by the experience of a child of ten.'

Well, you should be! Our Lord Jesus said, 'Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matt 18:3). If you would enter the kingdom of God, you must receive it like a child (see Mark 10:15). If a child wants an ice cream, he's going to have an ice cream and he's not going to be put off. It looms the largest thing in all his horizon for the moment. Stocks and shares wouldn't change his mind; they are irrelevant. Ladies and gentlemen, if you want salvation you must learn to act as a child and regard salvation as the supremely most important thing in life, and make it your great goal to be certain that you get it.

But I know what you mean. What can a child of ten know about the world? I've done my best to make up for it. I have spent my professional life studying the ancient Greeks. What a marvellously enriching experience it's been. Daily to converse, so to speak, with those brilliant minds that invented almost every form of literature still common in Europe, men who first began to enquire what the universe is made up of and how it works.

It was my joy and delight to be able not just to study them but to teach. I used to teach courses on the early atomic theory, and the theories of the men who first had the hunch that the universe is made of atoms and argued it through as best they could. Some of their arguments are still valid to this very day. They discovered how it is that you can smell anything, and the theory they adopted those hundreds of years ago is still true. It has given me a lasting interest, of course, in physics and cosmology: to know how the moderns treat the atomic theory and what fascinating things the cosmologists get up to as they try to explain the way the universe works.

I had another reason for studying the ancient classics. I wanted to get hold of the languages of the Bible as best I could. By the time I went to university I believed with all my heart that the Bible is the word of God. I had known God speaking to me personally through it. But then, how do we know that we can trust the Bible?

Some people say that the New Testament has been copied out so many times that you can't be sure that you have what was originally written. If anybody tries to tell you that, smile as graciously as you can and suggest that they don't know what they are talking about. They are talking ignorant nonsense. The textual critics of all colours will tell you that, in the New Testament manuscripts, we have for all practical purposes exactly what the ancient writers wrote, bar one or two percent of small matters that could be uncertain as to whether it is this or that. But no major doctrine of the New Testament is anywhere at all put in doubt whatsoever. After long years of studying ancient manuscripts—the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Septuagint—I stand before you as one who believes in the inspiration of God's word one hundred percent. Having surveyed some of the other theories (the old Greeks and the atheists) I come to see more than ever the wonder of the Christian gospel.

I have also been asked to tell you something of what happened in our recent visit to Kiev. I shall do so gladly. Last year I was invited by a Christian businessman to address some students in the planetarium in Kiev. It used to be the headquarters of Russian propaganda in that lovely city. Outside there was a bit of a disturbance: a protest march was going on with hundreds and hundreds of people from Ukraine coming to protest against Stalin's crimes, and demanding the return of Ukrainian culture. The police and the army were out in force and there were some gentlemen in plain clothes with big bulges inside their jackets. My Russian translator said, 'Be careful, don't go near them. They are KGB.'

Eventually we got inside and up the spiral stone staircase to the top lecture room. On the walls were hung pictures and photographs of all the atheists who had ever been since the year 'dot'. I recognized some of them as the men whose writings I had studied among the ancient classics, and many were modern atheists. There weren't a few students, but about one hundred and fifty Russians. They had already sat for two hours, and now sat through another hour and a half gladly and willingly.

Their atheism had let them down. I was able to talk to them quite freely and heart to heart, pulling no punches. I was asked to speak on why I believe the Bible. I gave a whole host of reasons. Let me give you the first one.

I believe the Bible to be the word of God because of the dignified position it gives to human reason and to humankind. The Bible declares that we are made in the image of God.

'You say there is no God. How did your intellect come to be?' I asked them.

Well, according to them, it was by mindless matter and mindless forces with no purpose whatsoever, largely by thousands of millions of accidents. Hey presto, your brain has come to be!

I said, 'It strikes me like a pot of jam, or a bit worse; a whole colossal collection of accidents. The thing is nonsense. If atheism is true, one of these days a senseless virus is going to get into your brain and tear it to bits and it won't know what it's doing. When it has destroyed you, it won't know what it has done. So what is your intellect worth now? You don't really believe

it, do you? Look at that electric light bulb up there. If I said, “which is more important, that electric light or your brain?” what would you say?’

They said, ‘Our brain, of course. We need that light to see with, but it’s only a bulb and our brain is more important than that.’

I said, ‘If I took you outside and pointed to the sun, and said, “which is more important, the sun or your brain?” what would you say? The sun is vast, a mighty great atomic furnace, and my brain is so small. But my brain is self-evidently more important and more sophisticated than the sun. The sun doesn’t know I’m here; I know that the sun is there. The sun doesn’t know how my brain works, nor how I work either. The scientists can tell me how the sun works. If you are going to say that atheism says that your intellect is only a collection of stuff that accidentally came together, then I say that atheism is an insult to human intellect.’

Why do I believe in the power of the intellect? Why can I hold on to the validity of reason and rationality?

Because there is a God. He is the sum of all reason, the source of all rationality, and he made us in his image.

Why do people try to run away from a God like that, for if Christianity is true it validates rationality in man? If atheism is true it means that ultimately there is no hope for human rationality. One day the whole planet will explode, when the sun explodes. Why do people prefer to think that their brains aren’t ultimately significant and rationality is insignificant?

Because of conscience. If there is a God behind reason there is a God behind morality, and we have sinned so how can we face him?

There is a way back to God from all the byways of atheism and agnosticism, where we can find pardon and peace. God made us in his image, but we have been defiled and broken, and he waits to remake us and fashion us again according to the image of his Son (see Rom 8:29).

He knows where each of us is in our life’s experience. He knows our past; he knows our wounds; he knows where we hurt inside, our fears and our resentments. He knows us by name; ‘the very hairs of your head are numbered,’ said Christ (see Matt 10:30).

May the Lord himself, the great shepherd, draw near and cause us to hear him calling us by name, so that we might hear his lovely gospel and respond to him in faith, be found by him and saved forever.

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.