

# Two Personal Examples of God's Encouragement

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This text has been edited from a transcript of one talk given by David Gooding at a young people's Bible Class at Frances Street Gospel Hall, Newtownards, during their annual missionary conference, November 1990.

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## Two Personal Examples of God's Encouragement

Just for a few moments I want to speak to my younger brothers and sisters, and those in particular who are coming up to examinations. I would like to give two examples of how the Lord encouraged me when I was your age.

I don't want you to misunderstand what I say; the only way of passing examinations is to do the work necessary. It's occasionally a sad thing for me to watch students who have devoted a lot of time to spiritual work but haven't done their studies as well as they should have. The resultant failure in exams is not a good testimony to the staff who know about their Christian work and see with alarm how it has affected their academic studies. Work is not to be divided into two parts; whatever we do, we are to do unto the Lord. 'And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him' (Col 3:17).

On the other hand, life will very soon present us with decisions as to what proportions we are to give to spiritual things, and what to our daily work. At the time when you are coming up to examinations and thinking about your career, there is tremendous pressure on you to get the best results and embark upon a good career. There is a lot of sense in that.

I was converted as a child aged ten. I began to take God seriously when I was fourteen and got baptized. We had to attend school six days a week, morning and afternoon, and we were also given homework. There were three afternoons of compulsory games, so even after a rigorous day at rugby I had to do homework that kept me going until midnight on a Saturday night. As I came up to A levels the question began to be more and more, what proportion should I give to my studies?

I hoped to go to university, but it wasn't then as it is now. Getting into a university was a very difficult matter. If you couldn't get a competitive scholarship, and your parents couldn't pay for you, you didn't get in. To get a competitive scholarship meant competing against students from over the whole country. Added to that was the fact that the Second World War was on and many masters had gone off to the war, so a lot of our studies had to be done, as best we could, by ourselves.

The practical question that came before me was, could I afford the time to go to the prayer meeting and the Bible reading? Couldn't I be justified in saying that now is my time to do my studies and I could cut out the Bible reading and prayer meeting? When I had got my exams I could come back. But already I had begun to observe that sometimes people who talked like that didn't come back. They had said, 'The pressure is really on now; I must get Finals first.' But sometimes, when they had got their Finals, they got married and very soon the first child was coming along. 'When we have the children off our hands we shall get down to serious Bible study,' they said. But then they got rheumatism!

In my youth, therefore, I felt that I had better 'seek first his kingdom' (see Matt 6:33). I personally had better take the Lord seriously, so I determined to go to the meetings right up to scholarship examinations.

I was a year and a half younger than all the others in the class, and therefore, when it came to getting scholarships at Cambridge or Oxford, people like me normally had to have two bites at the cherry. I was a classicist, and normally we would have tried to get the scholarships at Oxford because of their particular classical tradition. Normally we wouldn't have considered Cambridge, but it was the middle of the war and it was now or never. Boys were being called up at the ripe age of eighteen and I was seventeen years and eight months. Cambridge decided to bring their examinations forward: they used to come after Oxford's, but that year they came in August. My teachers told me to have a go, and I did.

Some of the questions I never even got finished. The final paper held most terrors for me, because it was a general kind of paper and you had to write one essay for three hours on one topic amongst many that were given. There was no advance warning of what the topics would be, they could be about anything. When I looked down at the questions (there were nine of them) I didn't even understand what some of them meant. Number three was a question entitled, 'The Poetry of the Bible'. As preparation for those exams I had studied the examination papers of years past and had never seen such a question, ever! Far from my attendance at the Bible reading being a disadvantage, I was able to write and quote the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. I suspect it was a little bit of a phenomenon, for the Dons in those places were not given to detailed Biblical knowledge.

You may choose to regard this as a chance event, if you like. But for me personally, it was God fulfilling his gracious promise: 'those who honour me I will honour' (1 Sam 2:30). You can trust him for your career. He is looking for Samuels who from their youth up are prepared to hear the call of God, and when he calls they will say to the Lord, 'Speak, for your servant is listening' (see 3:10).

I speak to you fellows and girls who are doing exams. What marvellous careers God has for you, and he will give you the best if you put him first. May God make you like Samuel, who eventually was a rebuke to Eli and his self-indulgent sons.

It came then to final year in the university and to final exams. It so happened that year that our assembly had been given permission on Sundays to go into the local Corn Exchange, a big building in Cambridge city. It was just after the war and the city authorities provided a very rough cafeteria where you could buy doorstep sandwiches (that tasted like doorsteps) and cups of coffee at a reasonable price. Everybody used to congregate there on a Sunday night and we had permission to preach and sing for half-an-hour. Sometimes the people listened and sometimes they didn't. We would buy some coffee and sit at the tables and talk to them.

During that year a number of folks got converted, some of them from very wretched homes indeed. Some had no home to go to and others had to get out at night because their parents were drunk. Now that they had become believers their families had turned against them. They came to the elders of the assembly with an unusual request.

They said, 'What's the good of one prayer meeting and one Bible reading a week? What are we doing to do, when we can't go back to the pubs and we have no homes to go to? Can't you put on some extra meetings?'

The elders felt they didn't have the time available, so I was asked to do an extra meeting on Wednesday nights. I did it for a number of weeks and then it was coming up to summer term and Finals.

I said to them, 'Next week is my final examinations, so perhaps we won't have a meeting next week.'

They said, 'We must have a study!'

Some of them were on the very brink of salvation, and could either have gone forward or back. You may think it an unwise decision, but I decided we must have a meeting that week for their sakes. It was the very day that I had to do my final revision. However, I said to the Lord, 'I think it is your will and I will take the meeting. If I get a lower-class degree that's the sacrifice I shall pay.'

So I prepared for the meeting and had no time for revision. The next morning dawned and there was a three-hour paper. I came home for lunch and had about twenty minutes to spare. I had had to learn another language in a year (a very difficult Indian language) and I drew out some papers from my files and began to read passages that I knew we might have to translate and comment upon the syntax and grammar. To my horror I came across a passage that I could scarcely translate, let alone comment on. Hastily I got out the notes I had made earlier and read through them, making some sense of the passage. In the course of reading the notes I came across a philological question. Sometime earlier I had written a sample answer to it, so I read through that as well. My time was up and I ran as hard as I could to the examination hall, and there was the bit of Indian and the philological question that I had just read through.

I am not offering you that as a recipe for getting through your exams. I am merely saying that when as a youngster, with enthusiasm and perhaps lack of proportion, I dared to take the Lord at what I felt was his word and tried to put him first, then he confirmed in my heart, 'those who honour me I will honour.'

It would be wrong to give the impression that life is one long spectacular succession of providences or miracles. But God is real and I do covet young men and women for God. Don't fall into the trap of leaving your Bible study and getting to know God until your examinations are over, until university is over, until you have got married and raised children and life has gone by. It is now, when your minds are fresh and you have powers of memory that will begin to wane, when your minds are open and receptive, that God can speak to you as he did to Samuel. You are now laying the foundation of a trust in God that can prove its reality in your school or in your career. Now is the time to lay a foundation of the knowledge of God and of his word that will make you men and women of God, effective and effectual when you are at the height of your powers in your middle thirties and forties.

Don't succumb to the danger of leaving your Bible study and getting to know God personally until you have got to your middle age, because by then perhaps it may be too late to turn you into an effective servant of God. It is not when you become a missionary that God's care for you starts. It started way back in eternity and it carries on through life—even tomorrow, Monday morning!

## About the Author

**DAVID W. GOODING** was Professor 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.