

The Sovereignty of God

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This text has been edited from a transcript of four talks given by David Gooding. The first two chapters are talks delivered at a conference, location and date not known. The second two chapters are from another occasion—again details unknown—which focus also on issues which relate to God's sovereignty and the outworking of his eternal purposes.

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God's Sovereignty in the Created Universe

Thank you, Mr Chairman for your kind words, and to all of you for your invitation to this conference today. Our purpose is to discuss and to think about the sovereignty of God in general, and this morning in particular, the sovereignty of God in the created universe. I want to deal with it this morning under three or four different heads. I want to discuss with you the fact of God's sovereignty in the created universe, and then to say something about the gospel that it is; the implications that it holds for men; some brief remarks on the problems that it sometimes raises even for believers; and finally, the future that it guarantees.

The sovereignty of God, then, in the created universe, and we shall begin by reading two typical Scriptures from the book of Psalms.

Oh come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land. Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker! (95:1-6)

Oh sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth! Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvellous works among all the peoples! For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens. Splendour and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary. Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength! Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name. (96:1-8)

Alongside that hymn praising God's sovereignty in the created world, let us read a very different Scripture from the book of Job.

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said: 'Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me. Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be in the right? Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his? Adorn yourself with majesty and dignity; clothe yourself with glory and splendour. Pour out the overflowings of your anger, and look on everyone who is proud and abase him. Look on everyone who is proud and bring him low and tread down the wicked where they stand. Hide them all in the dust together; bind their faces in the world below. Then

will I also acknowledge to you that your own right hand can save you. Behold, Behemoth, which I made as I made you; he eats grass like an ox. Behold, his strength in his loins, and his power in the muscles of his belly. He makes his tail stiff like a cedar; the sinews of his thighs are knit together.' (40:6–17)

May God give us good understanding of his holy word.

Creator and sovereign

The Bible in general, and the Old Testament in particular, everywhere declares that God is the creator of the universe. In addition, and more to our point this morning, the Old and New Testaments declare that not only is God the creator of the universe, he is sovereign in the universe he has made. We live in a fascinating world, a world of fantastic beauty and, on the other hand, a world full of danger, sometimes also apparently cruel, and a world that is manifestly temporary and headed finally for destruction. As we look upon this world, not only its beauty but perhaps even more so its danger, declare to us that it is the work of Godhood. Paul the apostle reminds us that creation did not portray so much the love of God—for the love of God, you will have to look elsewhere—but the created world points to the divine power and Godhood that lies behind our universe.

A dangerous world

I say it is sometimes the very danger of our world—its incredible unlikelihood in and of itself—that points to the fact that there is a creator behind it. This was a lesson that God taught to Moses when, at the burning bush, he commissioned him to go on his dangerous task of confronting Pharaoh. To go in and confront and defy Pharaoh of Egypt was in itself a highly perilous task, and to counter the fear of meeting Pharaoh, God instilled in Moses' heart a certain remembrance of the fear of this universe in which we live. What a dangerous place it is as it goes wobbling its way through space, following the sun on the sun's own spiral course to who knows where in the universe. And God said to Moses, 'Throw down your staff that is in your hand,' and when he threw it down, that innocent shepherd's staff forthwith became a serpent, a dangerous, poisonous serpent, and Moses fled from it in alarm and fear (see Exod 4:3ff). He hadn't realized that he held anything so lethal in his hand as that innocent-looking shepherd's rod, but lethal it was. Now modern science has shown us how possibly lethal a shepherd's staff could be. Even this pencil I hold in my fingers, should its atoms be split, who knows what the consequences of the nuclear fission might be! How could it be that these so potentially dangerous things hold together and make life possible on our planet?

'Moses,' said God, 'put your hand inside your cloak. Now draw it out,' and when he drew it out, the hand had become leprous (see Exod 4:6). Moses was again filled with horror and fear. His hand hitherto had been so healthy, but remember for a moment what fantastically complex machinery it is that keeps your hand healthy. The cells that it is composed of have a complexity beyond our imagination; and the more science studies the cells, the more complex they appear. Should any one of those tiny mechanisms go wrong, it could spell disaster. That is not to be wondered at. What is to be wondered at is how such complicated mechanisms keep standing together to make life possible on this planet—not one cell but multi-billions of

cells. 'Moses,' says God, 'take some water from that river and pour it on the land,' and forthwith the water became blood (see 4:9). And here in our modern world, with all our worries about pollution, it points to the fact that the balance of the forces of nature is actually really critical.

How is it that our planet is so specially tailored, so delicately balanced in the middle of what is a hostile universe? What keeps its forces so balanced that there is enough air to breathe and wholesome water to drink? The wonder is that there is any world at all, when one considers its position and its surroundings. The very dangerous way it is thus poised and put together point us to the fact that behind this miracle there lies infinite power—there lies God. I have a bio-chemist colleague who is an atheist, but he can never resist pulling my Christian leg whenever we sit down to lunch together. He regards my faith as utterly naïve. But he senses, on the other hand, that if anything were going to make him believe in a creator, it would not be the normal things that people quote—the beauty of a mother's love or human kindness—it is rather the beauty of the sheer physical universe and how its systems repeat themselves so wonderfully. How come that the spring is so glorious, and how does it happen so regularly and constantly?

If this universe were the result of a mindless freak of chance, it would be a difficult problem indeed to account for the fantastic beauty of the thing and for its coherence. Its survival proclaims that behind this world there is a creator and proclaims also that the created universe bears witness to his divine power and Godhood. But what the created universe in and of itself would not point out or guarantee to us—and that holy Scripture declares—is that God has not only made this universe, he is sovereign in its control and administration. Now that is not to deny that God may have delegated certain powers to his people. We know from the book of Genesis and from our common experience that God has delegated to man considerable powers in the running of this world and, when created, he was given the brief that he was to organize and to develop the little planet that God had put him in.

The book of the Revelation, in its highly symbolic terms, talks of certain angels that are holding back the four winds of the earth. What this figurative language exactly means is a matter of opinion but it would not be an unbiblical principle to suppose that God may well have delegated some administrative powers in this universe to created beings. Our New Testament Epistles talk of created beings that are more than human—principalities, powers, dominions, authorities. The names and labels it uses to describe them are all administrative and governmental terms. How far God has delegated those powers is a matter which Scripture does not clearly indicate, as far as I can discern.

In the book of Job, for instance, we read how Satan had to apply for permission to afflict God's servant Job. It is a tremendous comfort to the believer to know that Satan cannot deal with the believer just as he will; and for those special trials that he is allowed to bring upon the believer's life, he is required to ask permission. God gave him permission—restricted and conditional, but permission nonetheless. Remember also that our Lord, in speaking to Peter of the trial that was about to come upon the disciples, informs Peter that Satan had asked to have them that he might test them (see Luke 22:31). The New Testament thus underlines what the Old Testament tells us, that in the affairs of life, when it comes to engineering trials for the believer, Satan has to ask divine permission. When he received permission in the case of Job,

then we read that there came calamities upon Job, upon his house, upon his land, upon his body—a whirlwind here, a grievous disease there. It remains perhaps an open question as to how much power Satan or other created beings have upon the actual immediate working of the physical powers of the created universe.

God's Sovereignty is good news!

But the Bible maintains that God is, and ever remains, sovereign in the maintenance and the ordering of the universe which he has made. Rejoice with me over the gospel that this is! With what pessimism in our hearts would we sit here this morning if we were not persuaded by God's self-revelation that God is sovereign in his created universe! You who have loved life, enjoyed its beauty, and see it beginning to slip away from you now that you have turned middle-aged and are perhaps beginning to feel the insidious workings of decay and disease in your bodies and in your minds, with what despair, with what fear indeed, you might be facing the future if you didn't believe that God is sovereign, even in the physical things of this universe.

And you scientists, who hold the secrets of nature and seek to use them to help the world and its progress, with what frustration would you go about your task knowing that this world, by definition, is a temporary phenomenon and eventually will be wound up. With what frustration would you proceed if you were convinced in your heart that God is sovereign, not only in the creation and the development, but in the final disposal of his created universe. You may pity the atheist, if you had a compassionate heart, for consider what a prison the man is in. He can't believe there is a God. He is obliged to think that this universe comes of blind matter, produced and worked upon by blind, mindless, purposeless forces. He finds himself, therefore, in a prison house, for in the last analysis, he cannot control those forces.

And a little virus—visible only with the aid of a powerful electronic microscope—will one day insert itself in his body and, little by little, it will tear him to pieces. The irony of it is that, when the virus has done its dastardly work, it won't know it's done it—your first-class scientist with his giant of a brain, full of intelligence and purpose, torn to pieces by a mindless bit of stuff. This poor man—a creature with a mind and intelligence and aesthetic sense—in a prison whose walls gradually contract upon him, and one day will crush him, and mindlessly destroy his mind and finally destroy him.

And your fair wife one day, God forbid it, walking along a cliff when a mindless bit of rock comes down and crushes her fair beauty into pulp, and it won't know it's done it. What a prison house this is.

Thank God, through our blessed Lord, we have discovered that there is a God behind this created universe, and he holds it in his hand. We think of that occasion when the Creator incarnate rode in a boat with his frightened fishermen apostles, and the storm came and those great physical powers threatened to engulf them. He commanded the wind and it was muzzled and reduced the waves, and there was calm. We have met in Jesus Christ incarnate, the God who is in sovereign charge ultimately of the physical powers of the universe. What a comfort it is to us: consider the gospel it is, not merely when we think of the ultimate destiny of our physical world but when we think of our present situation.

There are people born into this world with some major physical disability. For them sometimes it is hard indeed to believe that behind this physical universe, behind their bodies, is God. It's easy for the young and healthy who never suffer a pain or any mental illness, to think about the love of God, and they rightly so ought. But there is another side to nature, to the physical universe: nature produces disease, maimed bodies, imperfect minds. Some will seek to explain nature's imperfections by saying that somehow or other God has let the thing get out of control: that God is not ultimately to be held responsible. I know I've touched a vast subject, and more than can be properly dealt with in the few moments at my disposal now.

Others view these things as being some accident over which God has no control. We remove the problem of 'why did it happen?'—but it won't remove the pain. Let us hear the word of God from Moses yet again. When Moses protested his inability to go and preach before Pharaoh because he was slow of speech, God replied to him, 'Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?' (Exod 4:11). Ultimately, God will hold himself responsible even for those apparent vagaries of our genes, our inherited disabilities, our imperfect bodies. I am not forgetting all the intermediate steps of the rebellion of God's created universe against God, and all the necessary sufferings that have been brought as a result of that. There are vast wheels within wheels when we come to consider the actual day-to-day workings of God's universe. But it is a tremendous comfort to know that he who set it all going in the first place, and delegated its powers through nature, holds himself ultimately responsible for the outcome. And if, my dear brother, you have found yourself in life afflicted with some major disability, learn, if you can, to find comfort in this—that God won't try to wriggle out of his ultimate responsibility that he started the whole thing going, and it led to you. And you will find that the latter end of the Lord is kindness indeed. Not only will he compensate in the end for what you have suffered in the mid-term, but he is the God of your very disability, and he will use that disability now, and turn it into something potentially beautiful.

God's sovereignty and human dependence

We must pass at this juncture to consider the implication of God's sovereignty in the created universe for man's position. Genesis 1 tells us that when God made this universe, and our planet in it, he did not make it all at once, but made it in stages. And when we look more closely at those stages, we find that they are a progressive order leading to a climax. In other words, the work of creation was not simply divided into six parts of equal significance. There is an ascending order of progress and when you have a series designed as an ascending order of progress, you naturally look to see what the summit is, and the goal of that progress. And Genesis 1 proclaims the glorious gospel that man is the goal and summit of his great creative process—man made in the image of God, made to be God's viceroy, made to develop, to control, to subdue.

This, of course, is gospel. It stands in vivid contrast with the mythologies of the ancient world, and with the mythologies of the new. We shouldn't confuse the Hebrew account of the creation in Genesis 1 with the other creation stories such as the Babylonian epic. In the mythologies of the heathens, the gods themselves are the product of the material and forces of nature, whereas in the book of Genesis, God is the self-existent Lord, independent of the

created universe. The heathen gods were ultimately subject to some vague, blind force called fate. Zeus of the Greeks could strike terror into the hearts of subordinate gods, but he himself was bound by fate. The Hebrew revelation sticks its fist into the face of all such idolatry and proclaims that God is genuinely the creator of all.

It proceeds to announce that man is made in the image of that God, viceroy of God, made to be king and to rule. Though we do not see all things now put under man, that programme is very far advanced. We see him who, for a little while, was made lower than the angels for the suffering of death, now crowned with glory and honour, and one day all shall be put under his feet (see Heb 2:7–9). But even now, here is our charter to go about the business of living in the fear of God. Here is our charter, not only for digging our garden, as Adam dug his, but for the development of the deserts that lie outside Eden's garden and for mining its gold. For us it is our chemistry, our geology, our mathematics, and all the fun of those many disciplines that reverently follow the teaching of God.

I know you advanced spiritual men will tell us that the physical universe is only like toys on the nursery floor compared with those glorious spiritual blessings with which God has blessed us. I know it. I know that when we get beyond our childhoods and beyond the nursery floor, God will dismiss this present universe and there will be a new heaven and a new earth. But for the moment, I'm content for a while to be a child, now and again at any rate! I think it's fun listening to the rattle that's made when atoms dance around the place, and finding out what goes on inside them. It's fun understanding our world and its surrounding universe. What a lovely thing it all could have been had man remained loyal to God. Now, alas, science finds itself sometimes sullied by the spirit of her practitioners who go at their work, not out of faith, but some of them as a means of rebellion against the very idea of God. The Russians tell us that they've been out in space and haven't found God there. Who thought they would? And others will tell us that they have searched the cell and all else, and haven't found God there either. Who thought they would?

Let us remind ourselves that whereas man was made in the image of God, to be God's viceroy, he is viceroy so long as he remains in dependence upon God and God's sovereignty. That is written into our very created universe. Let me take just one example from Genesis 1. On day one, God created the light, and he divided the light from the darkness, and then he proceeded to call the light 'day' and the darkness 'night'. And you may wonder why he did that. Why call the darkness 'night'? Why not leave it as it was and call it 'darkness'? It's a very good term. And why call the light 'day'? Why not leave it as it was and call it 'light'? It is a very good word. You'll say, 'But darkness isn't the same as night, and day isn't the same as light.' Quite so. That leads us to the point of it, surely. If you ponder the way the lighting system of our planet is arranged, you may be struck with the apparent oddness of it. On this planet we must have light. It is vital to our life and all our activities, and yet what a curious thing. The light upon which we depend as our number one basic necessity is not in our earth. It is around ninety million miles outside of our earth, and we are so arranged on this planet that, for roughly twelve hours per day, we are spun round into the light, and that twelve hours of experience of the light is called 'day'. And when those twelve hours are done, it spins out again, but light doesn't cease to exist. It's just that we're spun out of it. Whether we are ready

or not, whether we agree or not, there's nothing we can do about it. We're spun out into the dark and there we sit for the next twelve hours!

The number one basic necessity is not within us; it is not within our power. It is stationed ninety million miles outside of our planet, and it treats us to its light once in twenty-four hours. This humble basic lesson of human existence that man can be lord of his world so long as he is dependent, not only on the provisions that God has made, deliberately and stationed them outside, but on the God who put them outside. As our Lord summed it up, if a man walks in the day, he does not stumble, but if he walks at night, he stumbles because the light is not in him (see John 11:9–10). Of course it isn't in him, nor in the world. It's ninety million miles outside of it. Thus God has put the thumbprint on his organization of our universe, to teach us from the physical facts those deeper lessons of our relationship with him as moral and spiritual beings.

Human rebellion

But man will not have it so. Man grasps at independence of God thinking that independence of God will somehow bring him freedom. It never has, it never will. See the misery that it plunged the ancient world into, when man grasped at independence from almighty God. They were then reduced to fearing the cosmic forces that they didn't understand. If a woman got a little static electricity in her hair at night when she combed her hair, she thought a demon had got into it, and set about the arduous business of propitiating the demon. And if the moon went into an eclipse, they banged all the bin lids to try and chase away the demon that had got hold of the moon, and sacrificed their children to this god, and deified the forces of nature, and deified their own psychological urges until man became a grovelling slave, enslaved to the elements of a physical universe. In modern society, they're not liable to erect statues to Zeus and Aphrodite in their garden but, without God, they are every bit as much in danger of falling into the slavery of idolatry.

Controlling the forces of nature as best man can, without God they are leading a mindless, materialistic version of evolution. And they are headed for the biggest bit of slavery our planet has yet seen. There is coming a man of sin. He will come with spectacular control of physical forces because demons are to be superhuman in their genius. He will make great fire come down from heaven as it did in Elijah's day (see Rev 13:13). Whereas in Elijah's day it was an evidence of the true God, when the man of sin performs these things, it will not be evidence of the true God—for God himself will allow man to go to extreme lengths in unlocking the secrets of the physical universe. His lieutenants will be able to give a voice to the statue so that it will speak, and through that final dictator man will make his bold grasp for complete independence of the very idea of God.

He will sit in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God and exalting himself above all that is called God already (see 2 Thess 2:4), and banish the very idea of God. And then what will man do? Be free? No. For if there is no God in control of the universe, you'll have to have some control. Man will set himself up as God. Men will worship man, and it will reduce mankind to the most grovelling slavery that humanity has ever seen. When that man of sin is at the height of his powers, there shall go forth the gospel in the terms that have always been implicit in any gospel, but then shall have to be spelled out explicitly, as it calls upon men to

worship the creator of the earth and the sea. For only by trusting him and depending upon him can man be free, let alone be reconciled to him, and be free of fear of the universe, free of slavery to the politicians, free of slavery to deified man or the deified forces of nature.

Enough has been said, I think, to emphasize in our minds and hearts that the doctrine and the facts of God's sovereignty in his created universe are not merely theological theory. It is a grand and a glorious gospel, but it is a gospel for those whose faith is placed in his son Jesus Christ. God has guaranteed to you on that basis that the future will not end in the whimpers and frustrations of man. The future opens out infinitely before us, ever a future of faith. God made this universe as a temporary stage to which creatures might come in their process of becoming something infinitely higher, namely children of God. The creator who designed this world to that end, and now maintains it to that end, will gather together all its forces and, by his divine grace and wisdom and power, will work them together for good to those who love God and are called according to his word.

God's Sovereignty in the Local Church

Let's begin our study by reading from the Scriptures of the New Testament. The first of them are to be found in 1 Timothy, followed by some verses in 1 Corinthians and in Romans.

As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. (1 Tim 1:3–4)

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen. (vv. 15–17)

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

Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. (1 Cor 4:18–20)

For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. Why do you pass judgement on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God; for it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.' So then each of us will give an account of himself to God. (Rom 14:9–12)

And may that same God guide us in thinking about his holy word.

I should like to begin with a small study of words and then proceed via a personal confession to our particular topic in this session, which is the sovereignty of God in the affairs of the local church.

Meaning of 'sovereign'

When we use the word 'sovereign' in the English language, we are not far from thinking in terms of a king. You may choose to find other synonyms to express the same idea. You may talk of 'lords' or of 'despots', but in the English language, 'king' is as good a word as any you'll find to express the idea of sovereignty. You have asked me this afternoon to talk to you about the sovereignty of God in relation to the affairs of the local church. It is perhaps a little unusual to find the term 'king' associated with the affairs of the church, and this brings me to my own personal confession. Bear with an odd Englishman on the first occasion of his visit to this place to indulge in a little reminiscence!

A confession!

I was taught by Christian men, most of whom are now gone home to heaven. I honour their memory and thank God for all that they gave me. They gave me of their best. They taught me many excellent things, but also among the things they taught me was this: that the kingdom of God has nothing do with the local assembly. The kingdom, they urged upon me, was totally a Jewish matter, and we ought in our theology and in our thinking, to keep things concerning the kingdom of God quite separate from things concerning the church.

Distinguishing Israel and the church

I imbibed those ideas, and I have since come to understand the background to their thinking. If you should find their thinking odd, just allow me to explain; and kindly listen to the reasons why they came to that notion. They themselves had been brought up in an atmosphere of theology in which great confusion was allowed in matters relating to Israel and the church. The church was commonly thought of as Israel, and the distinction between Israel and the church was not clearly made. They had come to know better, and to distinguish quite clearly in their thinking between Israel, God's earthly people, and the church. And they had seen, quite rightly in my estimation, the significance of Pentecost – that the day of Pentecost and its happenings were not just another slight extension to what God had been doing all down the ages anyway. They had come to see that the day of Pentecost witnessed something unique in all the history of mankind and in God's dealings with men – the coming to reside here upon earth of the Holy Spirit.

They were reacting also to the idea, common from the Middle Ages onwards, that there is no future for Israel, because Israel now is the church and the church is Israel. They had seen, quite rightly in my estimation, that God yet has purposes of grace towards that nation and that there will be a coming kingdom of Christ upon the earth. For these reasons they had been led to a position where they would have denied that the kingdom of God had anything to do with the church. The church, they affirmed, had a heavenly calling, but the kingdom of God had to do with the earth. God bless them: I hallow their memory. On this last point, I must however disagree.

You may check their misunderstanding at any time you wish by reading through your New Testament Epistles and marking what they have to say about the kingdom of God. We have read this afternoon from the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, and a more Gentile church you would not have found in all the area of the Mediterranean in those early Christian days. Hear then, Paul talking to that largely Gentile church, and hear him affirm that in the affairs of the running of that local assembly, they were to experience the kingdom of God. 'I'm coming to you,' he says, 'and when I come I will find out not just the talk of these arrogant people, but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power.'

It will help us, perhaps, to remember that when the New Testament talks of the kingdom of God, it is not normally using the word to indicate some territory, in the sense that you might talk of the United Kingdom. It is talking more frequently of the rule of God, the government of God, the kingly power of God being exercised. Far from it being true that the kingdom of God has nothing to do with the church, we hear Paul reminding the believers in the assembly at Corinth that the rule of God—the kingly rule of God—is something that has very much to do with the local assembly; and if they do not repent, it will be felt and experienced in their midst in terms of discipline.

In Romans 14, Paul likewise talks about the matters that are commonly called 'matters of indifference'—matters in which everybody has to make up his own mind before the Lord. He reminds his fellow believers that it is to God that we must give account. In these matters, therefore, we are not to judge one another. We're certainly not to despise one another. We are to see our solemn responsibilities as individuals before God, to make our decisions before God, as people who must eventually confess direct to God—so the question at stake is his lordship. Christ died and rose again that he might be Lord, not anybody else. Therefore, when it comes to matters of indifference, we are not to judge one another. We're not to spend endless hours discussing whether it is right to eat pork or not eat pork; to eat meat or not eat meat. Says Paul, 'The kingdom of God—that is the rule of God—is not in that sense concerned with petty regulations of food laws and other such things. The rule of God is directed to those higher spiritual concerns—righteousness and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit' (see Rom 14:17).

God's kingly rule in the church

We therefore talk rightly of God's kingdom, God's rule, God's authority in the affairs of the local church. Of course, this is what you might have expected if you had begun your reading about the Christian church from our Lord's statements recorded for us in Matthew 16 and 18. When Peter confessed our blessed Lord as the Christ, the Son of the living God, you'll remember that our Lord responded by saying,

'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven.' (Matt 16:17–19)

Let us try and catch the wonder of those words. The disciples had recently been much upset, so Matthew tells us, at the news that Herod had beheaded the Messiah's forerunner, John the Baptist. It seemed to their hearts nothing short of a disaster, almost a valid objection to Jesus' claims to be Messiah, that John the Baptist, his forerunner, should be executed by that foul despot Herod. For us all, John the Baptist was the Messiah's forerunner, come officially in the name of the Messiah. And in the name of the Messiah, he had gone boldly to Herod and denounced his immorality and demanded his repentance. For the coming kingdom of God which John had preached was not merely a matter of improving the National Health Service, producing better grapes and feeding the multitudes with free grants of corn, eminently good as those things are; the kingdom of God was concerned with moral things and spiritual things. And in the name of the coming Messiah, John had insisted in his thunderous voice that Herod repent of his immorality, and prepare himself for the coming rule of the kingdom of God which would draw near. Herod had defied John, and defied God, and defied the coming Messiah, and had executed John, and left the early apostles flabbergasted. How then could Jesus be the Messiah if he couldn't even protect his own forerunner from execution?

But hear now the tremendous statement of our Lord, consequent upon Peter's confession, 'On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.' 'The gates of hell', what are they? Some people hold that the 'gates of hell' is a Hebrew metaphor for the power of Satan. They observe that, in the ancient world, the gates of a city was the place where the elders of the city sat and, therefore, it's a metaphor for the government of that city. And they suppose that when our Lord said that the gates of Hades, the gates of hell, shall not prevail against the church, he could have had in mind a reference to Satan and Satan's power and government and machinations; assuring his people that the wiles and the government of Satan would not prevail against the church. That is, of course, true, but I think that it is not perhaps what Scripture means. Scripture doesn't normally represent Satan as being a king in hell. He will be a prisoner there, not a king.

Hades is the invisible world to which people go when they die and, reading the terms in their simplest form, our Lord was announcing that he was now setting up a church and the gates of death itself would not prevail against that church. Why not? Because his church is an institution that links together the seen and the unseen world, and lets us concourse between earth and heaven, and heaven and earth. The Messiah himself would one day die at the hands of men, and yet by the determinate counsel of God, he would rise from the dead and ascend to that heavenly realm. Now he is the risen and living head of the church. He holds the government of that church and, in his person and by his spirit, the church would have concourse and contact with heaven; and heaven would have concourse and contact with earth.

It remains gloriously true. The enemies of the church may do their very worst. They may torture, they may kill. They may execute the forerunners and all the other soldiers of Christ. What would it do to execute a servant of Christ here in this world? Merely transport him to another department in the self-same kingdom! You haven't done anything worth speaking about, effective to your cause, if you are an enemy of the church and you executed the leader. The church is a kingdom that goes beyond that. It exists on the other side of death, and death has no more power, no more dominion, over him. And all who are in his church have been

translated into that kingdom, into the kingly power of God's dear Son. Already their citizenship is in heaven.

This gives force to our Lord's observations in Matthew 18, where he reminds us of the solemn joy that there is, and the practical implications that there are, in being a member of his church. So not merely where churches gather, but even where two or three are gathered together in his name, as distinct from the church, there he is—the very link between heaven and earth, between the church and God. 'So that if two or three of you shall agree on anything,' said he, touching the rule of God, 'this shall be done for him, done by my Father who is in heaven' (see Matt 18:19). It is as solemn as it is a glorious thing to be a member of his kingdom.

Christ—absent but still present!

You will recall how, before he left them, Christ began to train his apostles to live in the church age when thus heaven and earth will be in contact. In Matthew 14, for instance, after he had fed the multitudes, our Lord sent the disciples away in a boat while he himself went up the mountain to pray. It was dark and there were the apostles in their boat, and Peter was there, taking the lead as usual. They were much buffeted by wind and waves and not making all that much progress, and our Lord, in the darkness of the night, was up the mountain, away from them, but praying, and doubtless praying for them. In the middle of the night he came to them, walking on the water. It wasn't something they told all and sundry and began to preach abroad, for if they had done it, the world would have thought them lunatics. It was real nonetheless.

As they saw Jesus of Nazareth, whom they knew as a real man who walked on terra firma, walking on the waves, Peter, if not the others, was inspired for the moment to do what his Lord did, and walk on the water himself. If you cannot see in that a preparatory experience to prepare the apostles for their life in the church, you're forgiven! But our Lord has now gone up another mountain, and in the world it is night and the apostles, and a good many more thousands, are travelling across the oceans in their boat. And from time to time, they know what it is to have the Lord come to them. 'I will not leave you as orphans;' he says, 'I will come to you' (John 14:18). Did he not do so in his resurrection during the forty days? Not always, not every day of the week, not every second, but now and, after a while, again. Whether in their times of sorrow like Mary, or in their theological difficulties like the two on the road to Emmaus, or in the frustrations of their work like the fishermen in the boat on the lake of Tiberias, suddenly they became aware that the risen Lord was with them. And John nudged Peter, and Peter nudged John, and they together said, 'That's the Lord!'

And all down the ages, not every day, but from time to time, he has fulfilled his promise. He who is risen and ascended that he might intercede for his people, comes to them, and he empowers them to begin to live as he lived. You will remember how, on another occasion, he went up the mountain with three of his apostles and was transfigured. Travelling down, he was presented with a crowd, and a father with his boy. And the father was saying, 'Look at my boy: he is demon possessed and I brought him to your disciples, and they couldn't cast out the demon.' And our Lord cried and said, 'Oh, how long shall I be with you? Why couldn't you cast him out?' (see Matt 17:14–17). Had the Lord been with them, they would doubtless have brought the boy to the Lord, but the Lord had gone up the mountain, so what could they

do? 'Look how slow you are,' said Christ, for they didn't get the point. 'I am going away one of these days. That's going to make no difference. I'm going up the mountain, and going up until my second coming. You ought, while still here on earth, to be able to exercise the Messiah's powers in his absence.' It seems to me thus that the church is the place on earth at this moment through which the government of God is and should be known, and recognized and obeyed.

The new covenant

You will come to the same conclusion if you come to that symbol and ceremony that lies at the heart of our Christian gathering, *the Lord's Supper*, as it is called. Central to the observation of the Lord's Supper is the taking of bread, representing our Lord's body, and then the taking of the cup. Hear once more the words that describe that cup: 'This cup . . . is the new covenant in my blood' (Luke 22:20). *The new covenant, not any covenant, the new covenant.* The words are inescapable—in spite of that theological background in which I was brought up, and which I have already confessed to you. Of course, on that occasion, we remember our Lord's great sacrifice: we remember the Lord himself. But as we take that cup, we must not banish from our ears our Lord's own description.

It is the new covenant, and a covenant in holy Scripture is an instrument of government when it is a covenant between a king and his subjects. On that I must not now stay to dwell. Had we time, we could perhaps consider the ancient Canaanite covenants between emperors and their subjects, for the old covenants that God made with the children of Israel follow the same legal terminology as those ancient imperial covenants. But we may content ourselves at this juncture by taking simply the words of the new covenant that we celebrate at the Lord's Supper; and they are concerned with what? 'I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts' (Jer 31:33). The new covenant that we rightly celebrate so regularly is our Lord's instrument of government of his people, his guarantee that by his Spirit he will write his laws on our hearts, and thus make us what we should be by his Spirit—obedient subjects of his kingdom.

Frustrating God's rule—in the organization of our churches

The sovereignty of God then in the local church. Let us think how we can frustrate it. In the First Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul spends the first four chapters dealing with that evil that had begun to show its head in Corinth, the evil of denominationalism. I use that in its strict terminology—the grouping of Christians into groups, and calling them after names that are not common to all the people of God. I would have you understand that I'm not campaigning for the dear 'brethren' when I say that! For unless you use that term as covering all children of God, you are committing the same sin as denominationalism. Paul spends four whole chapters identifying the things that are wrong with it. And one of them is this, that it frustrates the deliberate strategy of God. To call myself after Paul or Apollos, or Cephas, is to frustrate a deliberate strategy on the part of the God who called us.

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the

world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.' (1:26–31)

It is of God that you are in Christ Jesus, and it is of God that these things are thus made real to you, so that no-one should glory in his presence. All that we have been given should lead us directly to the faith and trust and loyalty that must exist between the individual believer and God. If I were to rely on the clever logic of some preacher to put me in Christ, then I might be able to feel secure for five minutes; but then I would always be in fear lest somebody else with a cleverer logic came and put me out of Christ. If it were his oratory or anything else that ultimately put me in Christ, how could I ever feel secure? Whatever God's servants do, when it comes to putting a man in Christ, it is God who does it. Let our very church organization reflect that glorious fact. If it was Christ who died for us, then let Christ be supreme. We must never arrange our churches or call them after any names or be guilty of any organizational ploy that obscures that great fact.

Frustrating God's rule—by our behaviour

We can frustrate the government of God by failure to cooperate with him. If we would examine ourselves, we would not be judged (see 1 Cor 11:27ff). In his divine sovereignty, God allows us the initiative. Examine yourself and judge yourself. Not merely if you perceive you have done something wrong, though then of course you must confess it and seek the Lord's grace. But I must surely know that, as I stand here, there are many things in my life, many attitudes that are not worthy, that are not yet as they should be. I must, therefore, examine myself. I must pray God to search me and see if there be any wicked way in me. As I take that holy cup at the Lord's Supper, the cup of the new covenant and hear him say that he will write his laws on my heart, I must cooperate with him—'Lord show me; is there something in my heart that still goes against your laws? Is there some attitude of my spirit that contradicts your commandments? Show me, Lord. Help me to judge it. Help me to seek your Spirit's power to correct it.'

Suppose I fail to discern it and come idly, and take that cup of his covenant which expresses his government, but I myself am not concerned too seriously to see that his kingdom in my life extends as it should. Then I am frustrating his purpose and he, in his faithfulness, according to his covenant, would take me in hand and discipline me. For he has made the covenant, he will write the law: he will do it with my cooperation if he can, but if he can't, he'll still do it.

Usurping God's rule

I can also frustrate his government in the lives of other people, if I'm not careful. Some of the early Christians were very good at that. I think some of the later Christians are as well. They were forever poking their fingers into other people's lives where they ought to have kept their fingers out. Now, there are some things where God's word is abundantly clear, and God has explicitly made clear what is, or should be, done. There are other areas of life where God's

word has not declared itself explicitly and in detail. Those areas, it seems to me, have been deliberately left. It is not that God forgot, or didn't foresee, things like televisions and what not and, therefore, forgot to tell us whether we ought to have them or not have them, whether we ought to eat beef or vegetables, and so on. There are a multitude of things upon which God has chosen not to speak explicitly. Why? Well, because in these things—the 'indifferent things' as the theologians describe them—God's desire is that each individual should be exercised in heart, taking his own personal decisions solemnly and responsibly before God. So that, in making up their mind over all these details, each person might have personal, practical experience of the government of God in his or her life.

I might say to myself that one of these days I've got to answer for this before the Lord. While brother A says it's right, brother B says it's wrong. It can't be both. What do the Scriptures say? Well, I can't find a verse about it in the Bible, so now what? So now it's a matter I must pray about. I must think about what principles should guide me, supremely keeping the faith of the Lord. And when I come to my decision, whether my brother thinks it right or wrong, it must be a decision that I'm prepared to stand by in front of the Lord himself when at last I meet him: 'So then each of us will give an account of himself to God' (Rom 14:12).

Suppose I get before the judgment seat and the Lord points out that the thing I allowed was wrong? I'd better be able to say, 'Lord, you know I did think about it. I prayed about it, and when I decided to do it, I did honestly think it was what you would have me do. It isn't that I didn't care less or I didn't think it mattered whether I sought your will or not.' So that in these smaller things we get practice at taking life's decisions constantly before the Lord, as people who are responsible and must give an account of themselves before God.

Now you see what happens. Here am I trying to make up my mind. I've got my thinking wrong, and I think I mustn't eat beef. I think it's a great sacrifice, incidentally, but I'm going without beef, genuinely to please the Lord! And some brother comes along and he is of the strong variety, and he puts his finger in my life and he pushes the old meat down my throat, and I've got a conscience about it, but he tells me I'm stupid. Or it may be the other way round: he tells me not to do something that, before the Lord, I have every liberty to do, but he has a conscience about it and expects me to have. He so believes that his decision is right that he forces it on me, thinking that it will make me more godly. He's done the opposite, hasn't he? For now instead of taking the matter responsibly before God, as a man that must give an account to God at last, I'm now doing it to please my brother. It has weakened my conscience instead of strengthening it. We must be careful, therefore, not to frustrate the government of God in other people's lives in this way.

A scriptural example

Finally, let me call your attention briefly to one of the themes of Paul's first letter to Timothy. It too, you will remember, was written about the affairs of a local church, the church in Ephesus. It begins with the glorious description of praise to God as King, and ends with a magnificent tribute of praise to God as King. For in the affairs of a local church the rule, the kingdom, of God is to be experienced—considering always and in all circumstances and situations, the mind and the will and the character of God. Godliness is a term that means literally 'to reverence well', but normally implies reverencing God well. Therefore to be godly

in any given situation, I am not to leave my Bible shut and simply philosophize after the manner of men. Having seen what the problem is, I am expected to turn round and consider what God has said—consider the attitudes and the character of God in this particular. And it is when I am totally reflecting God’s mind and character and word that I, in my turn, interpret that in my particular circumstance. In so doing, I shall have the supreme example of our blessed Lord himself who, when he was here on earth, perfectly interpreted the will of God.

He has left us an example of how God will run a church. How will God get rebel sinners to obey him and behave in an ordered kingdom? There were some in Ephesus who said that Paul should preach the need to keep the law for salvation. For if you tell people that they are saved and they can know it—for salvation is not by works, but by grace—you will have the people misbehaving all over the place. But if you preached them law for salvation, that would keep them on their toes; for if they think that they’ll be lost unless they keep the whole law, you’ll get them to behave. Will you? Paul himself is a shining example of the matter. How does God enforce his rule in a human life? There were days when Paul the apostle thought that salvation depended on keeping the law as a work of merit; and in those days he was rebel number one, the arch sinner and rebel against God. That kind of preaching of the law never converted a rebel into a pope yet. It made a man more proud than ever, and more independent of God.

So how will God turn a rebel into an obedient subject, for is he not a king? As I think of that, I think of Saul of Tarsus who, for all his religious ties, was rebelling against God to the point of persecuting God’s own Son. How would God crush the man’s rebellion, and bring him to Jesus? Paul tells us of the attitude of God as king and he explains it this way:

the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. . . . But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. (1 Tim 1:14, 16)

God has left a pattern in Paul’s case for the rest of us. For our blessed Lord interpreted the heart of the eternal kingdom towards the rebel, Saul of Tarsus: God will rule the man and bring him to his knees by his infinite grace. That’s how rebels are made subjects, and God is king. That doesn’t mean, of course, that once in the kingdom of God, they do what they like. That same chapter tells us that such is God’s kingship, if we misbehave, God will reserve the right to use his archenemy Satan to discipline disobedient believers.

Great is the mystery of godliness: the mystery of our Lord’s life as it portrays the principles of godly behaviour. How wonderfully that was demonstrated and revealed and exemplified in the behaviour of our blessed Lord. We seek by his grace to follow that example. Says Paul, writing to Timothy,

I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display at the proper time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. (1 Tim 6:13–15)

May we in the church know his government, that his will may be done on earth as it is in heaven. The world rejected him: one day he shall come again. Happy are those servants who, when he comes, are found standing loyally for him.

As I close, I'll tell you a story. King David, so says the first book of Kings, was then very old, and they covered him with clothes to keep him warm. King David was dying and one of his sons, Adonijah, thought that this was the moment for him to grasp the throne (see 1 Kgs 1:5ff). So he got among his cronies and off he went with a priest or two to have a celebration. And there were other men there to praise and to follow Adonijah, although there was no word from the king that Adonijah was to be the successor. Bathsheba, the mother of Solomon, heard about this and she went in to the king through the good offices of Nathan the prophet. And they said, 'Did my lord the king not swear that your son Solomon should be king in your stead? How is it then that Adonijah has gone off to proclaim himself king? Will you not do something about it, Your Majesty?' And old and cold though he was, he gathered his remaining strength and commanded his servants, and they brought out the royal mule and put Solomon on it. And they ran through the streets and they had it cried aloud, 'Solomon is king' (see vv. 11–34).

At that moment Adonijah's party was going on, over on the other side of the valley. When the sound of the coronation ceremony came to their ears, the men put down their drinking glasses and they began to turn pale. They were following Adonijah, and right out in the hills of Jerusalem there came the cry, 'Solomon is king.' For King David might have been old, but he was acting. The men put down their glasses and turned away, for it would not have gone well for them if they'd been found with Adonijah and all his pretences, when they had to meet God's appointed king.

That's past history: you are not now to think of some poor old King David in a bed. You are to think of the blessed and only Sovereign, King of kings, and Lord of lords. He has decreed who shall be king, and in the church we serve him. We serve him by faith, and know his presence by faith. Soon his manifestation is coming, for God has decreed that his blessed Son is to be King and one day he shall reveal him to the universe as King. Oh, my friend, where will you be found? Happy are those servants who, when he comes, shall be found in him, and share with him in his glory.

God's Sovereignty in the Lives of His People

Serving God—God's Way

We begin with some readings from God's word.

By faith he [Abraham] went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. (Heb 11:9–10)

Now Lot went up out of Zoar and lived in the hills with his two daughters, for he was afraid to live in Zoar. So he lived in a cave with his two daughters. (Gen 19:30)

To put those vividly contrasting verses in their historical context, let us just now skim a few items earlier in this book of Genesis.

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, 'Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.' And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. And Sarai said to Abram, 'May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!' But Abram said to Sarai, 'Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please.' Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her. The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, 'Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?' She said, 'I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai.' The angel of the LORD said to her, 'Return to your mistress and submit to her.' The angel of the LORD also said to her, 'I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude.' And the angel of the LORD said to her, 'Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has listened to your affliction. He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen.' (16:1–12)

When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless.' (17:1)

May the Lord give us good understanding of his holy word.

Contrasting priorities: contrasting outcomes

Lot's wife

The southern end of the Dead Sea has a landscape very much like a lunar landscape for its terrible desolation. But among all that desolation, there was at one time an exceedingly pathetic piece of desolation. It was a standing pillar of salt and its pathos was that, once upon a time, that standing pillar of salt had been a woman—warm and loving and pulsating with life, but now dead and barren and salty. A woman who had made the mistake of thinking that all of life is to be summed up in life's goods and possessions, and the activities of a busy social life. A woman who could not be persuaded that there were bigger things in life than mere home and possessions, even when that home was being engulfed in flames. Instead of looking for that city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God, she looked longingly back to Sodom, even as the brimstone was falling on it. In that moment, warm pulsating life and love shivered in the cold hand of salt-encrusted death. For some centuries, she remained a desolate spectacle indeed of the way to love your life and, loving it, lose it. But I don't know whether that is to be thought sadder than what happened to her husband.

Lot

The man, Lot, ended his days in a cave, and a disreputable old cave at that, where things were done that would have made even the ungodly blush for shame. He had been born in cities fair and cultured, full of the beauties of civilization, for they were not cavemen from which he set out, but modern civilized and cultured men. Lot had left those cities with all their splendour because, with Abraham, he had shared a vision. He left it for he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God; whose culture is as far above the culture of Ur of the Chaldees as heaven is far above earth. Lot ended his days on earth not in a city, not in a tent, but in a cave. Caveman indeed—gone back to the instincts of an animal.

The New Testament tells us authoritatively that Lot was a believer and therefore, in the technical sense, he was right with God. He was a justified man. 'Righteous Lot,' says Peter (2 Pet 2:7) and as he thinks of Lot, he dwells upon the wonder of God's ability to save his people. He pictures Lot outside Sodom as Sodom itself is turned into a quagmire of salt and sulphate and ashes and, says Peter, 'The Lord knows how to rescue the godly' (2 Pet 2:9). All praise to God for his wonderful knowledge and ability. He will save all his people. Were it not for God's extraordinary knowledge and ability, there isn't one of us but who might fear in the end to be lost.

God knows how to save, and however weak the faith that placed its anchor in Christ at the beginning, however far the man has wandered from the true path of pilgrimage, let it be known and said that the Lord knows how to deliver the godly. And none who have ever trusted Christ will perish. Hear the words of the angel as he caught hold of Lot's hand, hurrying him out of the city upon which God's judgment must fall and permitting him to go to Zoar. 'Escape quickly,' he said, 'for I can do nothing until you arrive there.' Wonderful

words, for the executors of God's judgment will always be stayed: not one part or particle of penal judgment will ever fall on the head of one who has trusted the Saviour.

As I think of Lot, my heart wells up with joy and the tremendous feeling of security, for as Lot needed a saviour, I need one more. But then I don't know whether I ought to be glad or sorry. I see him again in that cave, saved but so as by fire, with all the acquirements of a longish life lost, with no evidence of any fruit for God at all. His family lost, dead in the flames, and those who survived would have been better to have died. A believer ending up like an animal, doing things that they would have blushed to hear of in the cities that he left, away back in Ur, even before he became a believer.

It is easy to see the moral of the story—one huge warning writ large: 'the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption' (Gal 6:8). If I may speak to a young Christian here this afternoon, please don't be misled by those who would tell you that the flesh has died or that the old nature is dead. It isn't anything of the sort. The flesh is very much alive and will remain alive. To imagine that the flesh is dead or the old nature is gone is to walk into battle as though it were a paradise. It is to treat earth as though it were heaven, and pilgrimage as though it were home; and to walk into danger without knowing the danger is there. The flesh is with us and in its extreme form, such as Lot manifests, it is more easily and readily recognizable. But I have no intention to dwell on the darker side of the flesh this afternoon for, in its historical context, Lot's story is told us against the background of Abraham's own struggle with the flesh.

Abraham

Abraham never descended to the instinctive immoralities of Lot's cave. He went about his life in the noble character of a saint of God, journeying worthily from earth to heaven and to that final city. But in this part of Genesis, we see Abraham wrestling, struggling, and very often defeated, wrestling against an enemy that is, in fact, the same enemy as defeated Lot—only that same enemy in a different guise. Not now the flesh in its grosser sins and irresponsibility, but the flesh with all good intentions, and christened with a great deal of prayer and determination. Attempting to fulfil God's will and bring about God's promise from the very best of motives, but relying upon the flesh itself. Only to learn that to attempt to be a saint of God and to fulfil all godliness in the power of our flesh is doomed to endless defeat.

But lest you think that this afternoon should descend into more fearsome gloom, I hasten to add that we shall then see that it is this part of Genesis which tells us, in its quaint old-fashioned terminology, the secret of a man's triumph. It is not that he should discipline his flesh until his flesh is strong enough to do the will of God. It is that he should get out his knife and circumcise the flesh, and cut it off. To have no confidence in that flesh, whether it be dishonourable flesh as Lot's was, or God-fearing flesh, if there is such a thing, as Abraham's seemed to be. So then you get it—we're going to talk about the flesh and in particular, the flesh on its nicer side—trying to fulfil God's salvation and work out God's promise. We're going to think of its defeat but, praise God, we're going to think of a way of overcoming.

The spiritual battle

God's covenant with Abraham

The background to the story is this. At a certain juncture in Abraham's life, God had come to him and said, 'Abraham, I'm going to give you a vast territorial inheritance.'

'Thank you,' said Abraham. 'Now, how shall I know I'm going to inherit this?' (see Gen 15:7-8). Says God, 'You shall make your covenant sacrifice, that I may make a covenant with you and with your offspring that I shall give you this land to possess it and much more besides.'

So Abraham made his covenant sacrifice and the divine presence solemnly walked between the pieces of that sacrifice, ratifying the covenant and establishing this vast territorial inheritance as a free, unconditional gift to Abraham and to his offspring. It was, I repeat, an utterly free gift. There was no signing of the contract for Abraham to do. There was no walking between the pieces for Abraham to perform, for it was a one-sided covenant, a one-party treaty. Only God had conditions to fulfil, and in his grace he promised to fulfil those unconditionally. Abraham and his offspring were to be heirs of the whole world, no less (see Rom 4:13).

But then in that same moment when God was making that magnificent gift to Abraham, he said to Abraham, 'Do you know why I'm not giving it to you now? Do you know why I'm asking you to wait, to be a pilgrim still? For the simple reason, Abraham, that this territory that I'm going to give you one day is in the hands of the Amorites.' I can imagine Abraham thinking in the back of his mind, 'Well then, Lord, why not dispossess them right now. If they're making such a mess of it, why not give it to me now? I could do with a few more square inches. It gets a little bit narrow in the tent with Sarah all the time and not much front garden to send the children out to play in. Why not give me a bit more now, Lord?'

God explained, 'The Amorites are exceedingly wicked and one day, because of their very wickedness, I shall dispossess them. Taking the territory from them, I shall give it to you and your offspring. I can't do it yet, Abraham. Wicked though they are, their wickedness has not come to its full. Their wickedness has not yet manifested itself and proved itself to be the evil thing it is in the eyes of all who look upon the thing. If I were to take that territory from them now and give it to you, Satan and his host, and a good many men as well, would sit back and say, "There you are. That's God showing favouritism again. Taking the country for one lot of people—taking it from the Arabs and giving it to the Jews—is just sheer favouritism. There's no rhyme or reason or moral justice in it." So I shall not be giving it to you yet,' said God. 'I'm going to wait until the iniquity of the Amorites is absolutely full. And when it is demonstrated before both heaven and hell that evil is evil and sin is sin, then in my judgment upon them, I shall take the territory from them and give it to you, Abraham.'

That, I should imagine, made Abraham think. If it didn't, it ought to have done. I wonder did he sit on his divan in his tent that night and say, 'Yes, this gift I'm going to get is a nice gift, but if God publicly takes it away from the Amorites and tells the whole world he's taking it away from them because they're sinners, and then gives it to me, some of the Amorites and others will look at me and say, "The Amorites lost it because they were sinners, but what kind of fellow is Abraham, I wonder?"' It was pretty obvious, wasn't it, that though the inheritance

for Abraham was an utterly free gift, it did not mean that Abraham could then do as he pleased and live as he liked.

Whereby there hangs a lesson for us, surely. We should be sitting here before God feeling exceedingly rich, for that covenant which God made with Abraham and his offspring lies written in our favour. For if we are Christ's, then we are Abraham's offspring and heirs according to the promise (see Gal 3:29). Nothing less than worldwide dominion belongs to every child of God. Some children of God are not very interested in it. They have become so spiritually-minded that they are waiting for the day when they can say goodbye to earth. They're not interested in earth: all they care about is heaven! But God nevertheless affirms that just as our blessed Lord will not be content with heaven but to rule the whole of earth—for Christ isn't giving it up—so all those who are Christ's will inherit this earth as well as God's heaven. All those who are in Christ will receive this vast inheritance simply because they are Christ's—solely on the ground of grace and God's free, unconditional gift. Then does it matter how we behave? Will it affect your inheritance how you behave?

Walking worthy of the inheritance

I'm going to say yes and no to that at the same time. In a sense, of course, because it's an unconditional gift, you cannot lose it. But wait a moment: you haven't got the inheritance yet! Even our Lord waits. One day with due pomp and ceremony, the King of kings and Lord of lords, that blessed Sovereign, will stage the great revelation. He will publicly take from the hands of sinful men and women the dominion of this earth and all in the heavens besides, and he will put it into the hands of Christ. And all shall say, 'Amen', for he is worthy to receive glory and honour and power (see Rev 4:11). In that moment God will take the world from the hands of unregenerate and impious men, and put it into the hands of those who are Christ's. They believe that they will then reign with him and the inheritance will belong to them, though now they think little of it.

But wait, our Lord on one occasion spoke some other words which went like this:

And if you have not been faithful with that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? (Luke 16:12)

It's yours, but, says Christ, 'If you had not been faithful in that which is somebody else's, who will give you what is your own?' Even though it is your own, who will give it to you? It is a glorious thing that this inheritance is promised to us. It is ours by legal right, but though it is ours, the question whether it will actually and in practice be put into our hands to administer, that depends. And if in that day it is found that we have not been faithful in that which was somebody else's, then even though the inheritance is ours, it will not be put into our hands.

All the House of Windsor, as you well know, are members of a house that is a reigning house. In that sense, they all reign—her gracious Majesty and her consort; Prince Charles and his sister and brothers; and now the grandchildren—they all reign, for they are the reigning house. What vast riches and territories belong even to the little princes and princesses, I couldn't begin to describe to you. But though they have it out of legal right, I don't know anybody yet that would give them what is, in fact, their own. And if by some unfortunate

happening, those little princes and princesses suddenly ceased to grow and never went beyond their infantile stage, while the great inheritance is theirs, nobody would give it to them.

Let us heed our Lord's solemn words. That glorious inheritance to which we go is ours. Whether we shall be found fit actually to have that inheritance put into our hands to administer depends on the faithfulness of our present stewardship. If in my teaching, I have not been faithful; if in my research, I have not been honest; if in my business, I have done shoddy deals, then let me remember that this present world isn't mine. God hasn't covenanted to give me this world. Nowhere will you read in Scripture that he covenanted to give you your four bedroomed house, your car, your job. He hasn't covenanted those things. They're not yours. They're his. We have the use of them as stewards but they're not ours, and if we have been unfaithful in that which is not ours but somebody else's, then we shall not be given what is our own. I hear God's solemn word to me, 'Walk before me, and be blameless' (Gen 17:1). I see before my eyes that great day of appearing when I must be manifest. How shall I walk before God and please him with honest, truthful, loving, unselfish and consistent godliness?

The wrong way—through our efforts

We learn in this passage first how not to do it, and then how to do it. How should we fulfil God's great purposes? Abraham, finding Sarah was barren, at her suggestion took Hagar, the slave girl, thinking that by his own power and strength, he would fulfil the great promises of God. His intentions were good, his purpose nothing but godly. He would do God's will. He would do it with all his heart. Wasn't he required to do God's will? Then he would do it. But he learned that the power of the flesh, even though it is buttressed with will and intellect and emotion, is still insufficient and still unable to please God. 'For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God' (Rom 8:7-8).

When Hagar found that she was to have a child, then interestingly — you might have said predictably — things began to happen. Her mistress was despised in her eyes. She was only a slave girl, but now the way she sat at table and began to command the other servants and tell Sarah what to do, Sarah soon found this was impossible. The slave was getting out of her position. She was taking the centre of the home. 'This won't do,' said Sarah, partly in godliness, I'm sure, but partly in those other kind of feelings that people get in that situation sometimes. Finding her nose out of joint, she said, 'Abraham, my dear, I admit I did wrong, but you'll have to do something about it. This slave is putting on these airs and graces, and refusing to obey me when I tell her to do things. This is insufferable, Abraham: may the Lord judge between you and me' (see Gen 16:5). Sarah thought that she'd only got to put the screws on and things would be better, but they were no better. She asked God to judge the matter and he did, but she wouldn't find it very pleasant.

In the end, Hagar ran away, and there in the wilderness, the angel of the Lord met her and said, 'Return to your mistress and submit to her.' The angel of the Lord also said, 'You will have a child and that child will be a wild donkey of a man' (see Gen 16:11-12). I'd say it wasn't very pleasant in Abraham's home for the next few years — to have a slave girl getting out of

her place, and putting on airs and graces, and refusing to obey, and to have a boy about the place who was absolutely a wild donkey of a child. I should imagine that there were not infrequently what I euphemistically call 'scenes' in the house, with Sarah saying, 'Oh but, Abraham, it is impossible. You can't expect me to go on like this. Look what the boy did. My best china! Look at the furniture, and as for that hussy of a girl . . .' And Abraham saying, 'Yes, it's terrible, but you can't turn her out. The angel of the Lord has sent her back and we will have to put up with it.' I can understand why the angel of the Lord sent her back like that. It was the only way you could teach Abraham the lesson, surely: 'that which is born of the flesh is flesh.'

I may not have let my flesh go to the lengths that old caveman Lot did. Every Monday night, they see me on my knees praying and studying my Bible, but it remains true that that which is born of the flesh is flesh. I've a wild donkey inside me and he's not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. His energies will never be able to be recruited to fulfil the lovely law of God. Abraham was saddled with this difficult lesson—the impossibility of ruling this chap with any success for many long years until the promised offspring was born. And Israel likewise was saddled with the law, striving against their flesh, until the promised offspring was born.

The right way—through God's provision

Many dear believers—surely most of us—spend years of our lives struggling with that same flesh until we come to realize that another way of dealing with it has been born. The fulfilment of God's holy law is not, and never was expected to be, in the power of my flesh desperately trying to subdue sin, but to know another kind of power. 'Walk before me,' says God, 'and be blameless. And Abraham, I ask you now to observe the covenant of circumcision.' This was a covenant in which the flesh was cut off. True, in those ancient days, it was a seal for the covenant; and very often as a symbol, it was abused. It should have been a symbol of a man's willingness to keep the law of God, but it very often was treated merely as an external symbol without any effort or intention to keep that moral law.

In contrast, the new birth is an event which cut the roots of my personality. No longer is a believer in the flesh. The flesh is in him, very evidently so, but the roots of his personality are not in the flesh. They are in Christ and in the spirit—a wonderful reality, mysterious though it is. It means that now I have my eye on that great inheritance, and the quality of life that is required of me as one who is pilgrimaging towards that city and that inheritance. As I think of God's eye upon me now, and my charge to walk before him and be blameless, I may know that there is a power adequate to my responsibility.

It may take me years of very uneven experience and progress to learn how that power is to use me. I may have to be taught by uncomfortable methods that my flesh, Christian though I am, is still impossibly bad and remains flesh. God's spirit will progressively teach me, if I let him, that the fulfilling of God's way of life for me is not a question of my fleshly powers and determinations to try to accomplish his will. Rather it is despairing of myself altogether, and trusting the living Christ, by his power, to live and work in me.

I need to learn that lesson, for if not, two very real dangers stare me in the face. If I attempt to do the will of God in the power of my flesh, I shall inevitably fail. Then will come the

temptation of saying, 'Well, it's all impossible. Those creatures on the platform, their mouth speaks great things and they set marvellous ideals, but when you get into the workplace on a Monday morning, it just doesn't work. What's the good of pretending to live up to a full Christian standard? Should we not give in and go the way of the world?' That way lies insincerity. And after insincerity, disillusionment and, if we're not careful, loss of faith. For it is possible that if I attempt to live a godly life in the power of my flesh, I shall conveniently forget the glaring moral failures in my life and compensate by concentrating on the fulfilment of certain tiny little rules, like the Pharisees did — punctilious in their observance of tiny little religious rituals and rules, and thereby imagining they were holy. We know of the glaring holes in their business dealings. They were lovers of money, says the holy Scripture, and not too careful how they got it.

Let me honestly face my inabilities. I am as bad as anyone else. Not even as a Christian can I fulfil God's standard by my own effort. Let me, therefore, learn constantly and consistently to go on abandoning all faith in the flesh and learn that for him who has no confidence in the flesh at all, there is an inimitable path — our living Lord in whom we are, by whom we are saved.

God's Sovereignty in the Lives of His People

Seeing God in Our Blessings

Now there was a famine in the land, besides the former famine that was in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went to Gerar to Abimelech king of the Philistines. And the LORD appeared to him and said, 'Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you. Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.' (Gen 26:1-5)

And Isaac sowed in that land and reaped in the same year a hundredfold. The LORD blessed him. (26:12)

And the LORD appeared to him the same night and said, 'I am the God of Abraham your father. Fear not, for I am with you and will bless you and multiply your offspring for my servant Abraham's sake.' So he built an altar there and called upon the name of the LORD and pitched his tent there. And there Isaac's servants dug a well. When Abimelech went to him from Gerar with Ahuzzath his adviser and Phicol the commander of his army, Isaac said to them, 'Why have you come to me, seeing that you hate me and have sent me away from you?' They said, 'We see plainly that the LORD has been with you. So we said, let there be a sworn pact between us, between you and us, and let us make a covenant with you, that you will do us no harm, just as we have not touched you and have done to you nothing but good and have sent you away in peace. You are now the blessed of the LORD.' (26:24-29)

When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called Esau his older son and said to him, 'My son'; and he answered, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Behold, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me, and prepare for me delicious food, such as I love, and bring it to me so that I may eat, that my soul may bless you before I die.' (27:1-4)

Then he said, 'Bring it near to me, that I may eat of my son's game and bless you.' So he brought it near to him, and he ate; and he brought him wine, and he drank. Then his father Isaac said to him, 'Come near and kiss me, my son.' So he came near and kissed him. And Isaac smelled the

smell of his garments and blessed him and said, 'See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field that the LORD has blessed! May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!' (27:25–29)

May the Lord bless his word to our hearts.

Introduction

The events of Isaac's young manhood are well known to us all, and often they have pointed for us most practical, spiritual lessons, as well as filling our hearts with the wonderful delights that God prepares for those who love him. We have marvelled at the young man's obedience both to God and his father as he allowed himself, in the time of youth and vigour, to be bound by that elderly man with cords to the altar. And equally we have admired the tremendous goodness of God to him as, in his providential mercies, he secured for Isaac a wife to comfort him after his mother's death and be his lifelong partner. The events of Isaac's middle age are perhaps not known so well, though in middle life he performed great feats of spiritual courage, even though he was on the whole a rather passive and perhaps a timid man.

The sad mistakes of his old age are known to us, but perhaps we prefer not to remember them. His life is a warning to us all who have reached middle life, that the promise of youth with its idealism, its vigour, its clear-cut sense of obedience to the Lord and its determination to please him, wonderful though it is, is not always fulfilled in middle and later life. It is perhaps harder than our young folks imagine, for those of us who are middle aged to maintain that same enthusiasm, that same vigour, that same singleness of heart, that same idealism. Not only does the weight that clothes our bodies get heavier, but the weights that press on our spirits get bigger. Isaac's case is sad because the mistake into which he fell in life's closing days was brought about as a result of the very blessings that God had blessed him with. It is not always our sins that divert us. It can sometimes be the very blessings of God when we receive them, but not in the right spirit or not always with the right discernment.

Isaac and his blessings

It is evident from the reading of the text that the central matter of Isaac's life is the matter of blessing. Here is the account how, in difficult times with hostile kings around him, living the life of faith as a pilgrim in a strange land, Isaac trusted the Lord and was blessed by him. Blessed so remarkably and so consistently that even the ungodly nations around came to recognize that here is a man in whom markedly present was the very blessing of God. You will say to me that those blessings that he received were largely matters of corn, and wine, and cattle, and children. Are these not very pedestrian things? Let us not despise these blessings of God. Let us not claim to be so spiritual that we fail to see the hand of God's blessing in our day-to-day experience.

This is what life is—to have my crops, to have my flocks, to have my home, to have my business consciously from God, as a gift, experienced and known of God. This is a happy

thing indeed, to have them with a sense of God's blessing upon them, just for a little heaven on earth. To have them without God's sense of blessing, that was but vanity and disillusionment. Here is the record of how Isaac, seeing himself blessed of God over many years, learned at last to bless his son. And in that very action, shows us how he had misread all his days what the blessing of God really means. Where is the heart of God's blessing? And what blessing is it really that has to be grasped in life — as the nuts of a fruit have to be grasped with the shell discarded?

We learn in his final moments that much as God had blessed him, Isaac had frequently misread where the chief of the blessing lay. He had gone for the externals and missed the centre, so that in the end, his attempt to bless his son apart from God's sovereign intervention would have ended in utter disaster. I call upon my own heart and life and I call upon your heart again to think, in all God's blessing, where is its heart and what is the real thing? In the midst of so much potential blessing, I can grasp at the external and miss the solid reality. Here lie the central points of Isaac and Jacob, blessed of God but blessed in spite of themselves. Here lies the wailing of a man who forgot to seek God's blessing — indeed even despised it, until that blessing was no longer available and every prayer was answered by a wail of disappointment.

Blessings?

A blessing: what is it? We use the word so often, but what is it? What is blessing? I ask the question but I couldn't possibly define it, so I shall content myself with describing it and giving some instances of it. And we shall take our lessons from these lowly things with which Isaac was blessed, if we regard them as lowly things, because whether it is in flocks and herds or whether it is spiritual blessings that God gives us, the same principles are involved and, therefore, the same lessons can be learned. My first point is that we must give good care not to equate God's blessing with sensation. And my second point would be that we should ever remember that God's blessing is ultimately his sovereign gift. And my third point will be simply this, that while all blessing is God's sovereign gift, we are exhorted to seek that blessing and lay hold of that blessing. It is possible to neglect, to miss that blessing and miss it forever.

Not sensations!

What then do I mean when I say that we should be careful not to equate blessing with sensation? Well, I begin to explain. By observing Isaac's middle-age experience, God blessed him, and we read that he sowed in that land and he found in that same year a hundred-fold blessing. How happily the national cash registers would ring if our profits were always one hundred-folding! God blessed him with flocks, and he blessed him with herds, and he blessed him with a home, and he blessed him with a family.

I think I am not over-imaginative if I picture to myself Isaac then on one of these days when God had blessed him with many herds, and therefore, good beef steaks, and much corn, and therefore good, beautiful, wholesome wheaten bread as good as they know how to make it in Ireland itself! And here he sits at the table which Rebecca, dear soul, has spread. Oh, what an experience it is. Some of our mouths already water as we see in prospect the table at Christmas time all spread. The artistry of the table napkins, the settings of the knives, spoons

and forks, and lungs full of fresh air that we have got through coming to the praise and prayer meeting on Christmas morning instead of staying too late in bed; and that brisk walk by the river; until we come home quite ready for our Christmas dinner with the blessing of God on it. Such a Christmas dinner will not only do its immediate task, which is of course simply to feed our bodies and to keep us alive; that is its main task, even for a Christmas dinner, to keep our bodies alive: that's where its centre lies. But our God, being such a wealthy and such a generous God, is not content just to nourish our bodies like that, but he surrounds the whole operation with delights untold, doesn't he?

The aesthetic delight of it, that marvellous sensation you get, at least I hope you get, from that juicy piece of turkey breast that's just done to perfection and melts on the pallet! There is a positively joyful sensation in eating it. In fact, at the moment, it's the sensation that's everything and not the whole business of how it is going to build up my body, my protein – and not too much carbohydrate, I hope! Then there comes after the meal that other lovely sensation when you're sitting by the fire – that lovely, comfortable feeling that all's well with you and the world, at least for the next hour.

I mentioned that Isaac enjoyed all that and I'm not so glum of mind as to think that he was simple in enjoying it. God gave him the thing richly to enjoy. He blessed him magnificently, but I come to my point. We must not, for all that, equate blessing with sensation. What would you think if Isaac in those years gone by, or some gentleman here next Christmas, after everybody had retired to the lounge, is suddenly discovered by his wife still in the dining room? There he is sitting at the table with a kind of puzzled and rapt look upon his face.

'Hello, my dear, what are you doing here?'

'Well, I'm seeking the experience I once had. It was just a marvellous experience, eating that beautiful food and the lovely feeling I got afterwards.'

'Really! Are you still hungry? There is some cold turkey in the fridge and there's some more ham.'

'No, I don't want that cold stuff. I want the experience. Oh, the wonderful feeling, the sensation I had.'

You would think that the Christmas festivities had been a little bit too much for him maybe! When all is said and done, the very centre of the blessing is in the food that builds up our bodies, and not in the sensations which accompany it.

Sometimes there come periods in life when we lose our taste – having the flu or something. Those who have our good at heart come to bring food to us. Even though we may think it tastes horrible, we know we need the food to keep our body going. He would be a stupid man who rejected the food because it didn't bring him nice sensations. And he would be a sad and consummate fool who thought that the food which fed his body was the very centre of the blessing – forgetting that the food itself is just the physical thing which allows God to pour his love into our experience. God is the centre of the blessing and if we see our food as his gift and we thank him, it will not only be filling our bodies, but satisfying our very spirit. Happy is the man who learns moreover that the very heart of the blessing is not even in the food but in the sensation – the experience of God and his giving. Happy is the man who has discovered that blessing lies in our relationship with God, and who mightn't be afraid to exchange his comfortable home for a shanty in Peru as a missionary.

And what we may learn at that physical level, so we may learn at the deeper and spiritual level. It is a thing to be observed that when God blesses us with spiritual blessings, he also allows in that same kind of way the blessing to overflow into sensation. Here comes Mary Magdalene who, despite her many sins, knew the whole experience of the free gift of forgiveness that overflowed in her heart, through her emotions and down, tingling to her every nerve. So it isn't only a spiritual thing perceived by faith, but has its physical repercussions in the woman who's crying at the feet of Christ. Oh, how generous God is. He made none of us to be stark computers, unfeeling and mechanical, but even the highest of spiritual blessings are, on times, accompanied with physical sensations.

It is just at this point that those of us who are younger are liable to be misled when, having had such an experience accompanied by sensation, imagine that the centre or the most important part of the thing is the sensation. But if we do that, we shall be in danger of doing like that stupid man I just imagined who went into the dining room to recapture the experience and the sensation. Let me take an example. If you had gone through some long, protracted experience of the feeling of guilt, or if maybe your life had been darkly coloured and stained with the guilt of sin, I dare say that when you first grasped by faith the truth of God's word—that he who believes is justified from all things—not only did you receive the gift of forgiveness but with it, that overflow of sensation.

Oh, happy day! when first we felt
Our souls with deep contrition melt,
And saw our sins, of crimson guilt,
All cleansed by blood on Calvary spilt.¹

Oh, the wondrous sensation for those tears of gratitude, and they're so wonderful that many a man who's tried to recapture the sensation brought himself no little despair by tasting not the blessing but merely the sensation.

Excuse my descending pathetically to something else, but I have heard those who are in the know—young men and their young wives—saying that occasionally there come differences and fallings out when, for half an hour or half a day perhaps, they're not altogether on the most loving of speaking terms. But then I am informed that when they come to make it up, 'Oh, it's such a marvellous experience,' said one young man to me, 'that really it's almost worth falling out for!' But I say what a fool he would be who deliberately provoked his wife and fell out with her just so he could have the wonderful sensation of making up. The only time it makes sense is when it is a result of having been forgiven. To seek the sensation for itself would be ludicrous. It might even be mentally unhealthy.

Who hasn't learned the joy of being used of God? Surely we all have, undeserving though we are. What a sensation it is to have known yourself to be used in the hands of God to convey his blessings to somebody else. The use of gift can bring such sensations, but if we thought that the centre of that blessing was the sensation, we would be sadly mistaken. For many a man is called to use his gift in many wearied years of slogging and plodding against hard hearts, when instead of wonderful sensation, there is nothing but frustration. And if he

¹ James G. Deck (1802-1884), 'Oh Happy Day!'

thought that the blessing is merely in the sensation, then he could be sorely disappointed. The blessing is not in the sensation but in being allowed to work for God, to have him use you, whether that is accompanied by wonderful, pleasant sensations, or the reverse. We therefore need to watch ourselves. We are to seek God's blessing as he has indeed blessed us with all spiritual blessings. As we can bear them, he will give them, but let us beware of seeking sensation for sensation's sake.

There is a vast amount of it being done all round the continent of Europe and the other continents of the world—young people imagining, because some have had special sensations, that these sensations are the blessing. But they're not the blessing, even if they are legitimate sensations—and sometimes they're not even that—but still they wouldn't be the blessing. To seek sensation is a delusion. It is the Lord we seek, and his blessings and gifts and fellowship; but above them all, it is himself we seek. Far from good and happy sensations being the mark of true spiritual progress, they could be the reverse. It could be that God's gracious dealings with any one of us at periods in our lives would necessarily bring sensations that are not pleasurable but hard and difficult. The blessing would be no less, and probably greater. So then, let us make up our minds on this point before the Lord. Let us thank him gratefully for every sensation he has ever given us that has followed one of his genuine gifts, and let us determine not to seek the sensations, but to seek him.

Blessings—God's sovereign gift

For notice what can happen to a man when he thinks that his senses are the true indicator of God's blessing. Isaac came to bless his son. Now, there had been given him and his wife a straight and clear word from God that the second son should be placed in privilege above the first, for as I remarked earlier, God's blessing is always, in the last analysis, sovereign. The children had not done good or ill. Of God's absolutely sovereign choice and grace, God decided to give the chief blessing to Jacob. Knowing that word of God, Isaac came to bless his son and determined to bless Esau. You say to Isaac, 'But what about the word of God?' The feeble reply comes back, 'Ah, but I love Esau because he brings me venison, and when the wife cooks it, oh, the lovely smell and taste of it.' You say, 'Dear me, is this the level a person can get to?', but that is what he did. Did he love Esau because he was now progressing in spiritual stature? Sadly not; it was because he was good at hunting and brought him nice, savoury meals that his stomach could enjoy. If that was his concept of God's blessing it was sadly inadequate. His eyes were dim and if he were going to trust any sense, he would have been well advised to trust his eyes perhaps more than his stomach, but his eyes were dim, poor man, so he couldn't go by them at all. So now, led by his stomach and the taste, he proposes to bless his son.

Seeking God's blessing—in the wrong way

But Rebecca and Jacob get to hear of it and they concoct a scheme, and now here comes Jacob dressed up like Esau with some supermarket meat or something. It was the real stuff anyway, otherwise Isaac would have noticed.

Isaac: 'Who are you?'

Jacob: 'I am Esau.'

Isaac thinks: I'll put him to the test. I'll apply my final criterion of blessing.

Isaac: 'Come here, my boy, let me touch you.'

Isaac thinks: there's something real here, solid bone and a nice lot of hair.

What Isaac doesn't realize is that his criterion of reality is the very thing designed to deceive the old man. How many of us feel safe if we've got things we can really touch? To walk by faith with just the word of God, is it not too thin unless we've got something solid that we can touch and hold that feels real? And he felt it.

Isaac: 'Come here, I'm about to bless you. Let me smell you.'

Isaac thinks: it's the smell of the field that the Lord has blessed.

It's lovely to walk through a field and smell the wild flowers and their scent. How lovely, and to be enjoyed because God painted those flowers and filled them with their scent. But the scents are temporary—of a temporary flower in a temporary meadow.

Oh, what a sad concept of blessing. Something I can touch, something I can taste, something I can smell. Lovely things but just the pretty paper of the wrapping. They're not the blessings themselves. Trusting to his senses, Isaac was hideously deceived. We face that same test. We are not to be ungrateful for the sensations that God gives us that come from his many blessings—whether material or spiritual. We pray that God gives us the understanding to see where the heart of the blessings lie. Certainly not in sensations, nor at last in the emotion, but in the gift, but only then if the gift is in God and his fellowship.

Sometimes it may be that God will, in his blessing, give us nothing more than his naked word. Perhaps difficult to understand and seeming to go against all our natural inclinations—nothing but his naked word. Our hearts may pray for some kind of sensation that's pleasurable and all we get is his naked word. Happy is the man who has learned that God and his word is the blessing, even should we not have another comfortable sensation to the end of our days.

Seeking God's blessing—in the right way

God has indeed blessed us with spiritual blessings in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, but this incident also shows us one more warning. We are to seek God's blessing but we are to seek it in the right way. Because God's blessing is a free gift, we may not imagine that when God does bless us, that means he must approve of everything we do, or that we are sinless, or that we are no longer to be criticized. God had Isaac bless Jacob, but you mustn't imagine that that was because Jacob deserved it. And you certainly mustn't imagine that because God blessed Jacob, God approved of the methods by which Jacob and Rebecca sought the blessing. It is a mistake we make sometimes. If God blesses us, we think that that must mean that he approves of everything we are doing or have done. That is not so. If God has blessed you with work or in business, that doesn't necessarily mean he approves of your methods.

What a hard bargain Jacob drove, and what deceit he used. God blessed him in spite of it. He saw his brother desperately hungry and took advantage of the situation. Jacob saw the chance to make a very dishonourable bargain. 'Sell me your birthright,' he said, 'and I'll give you this bowl of lentil stew.' Now that was a very, very advantageous deal on Jacob's part to get a whole birthright for a bowl of stew. Adding to that, he got the blessing through sheer deceit. This is evidence that, because God has blessed a man, you cannot argue that his ways

necessarily please God. And we all admit that when God really blesses a man, there comes to him that sense that he would be considered worthy.

How can I prove to you that God didn't approve of Jacob's methods, even though he blessed him? Why, by what God did in the end. There came a night when Jacob came back with his flocks and his herds, and away out there in the darkness and distance was Esau, and he had to meet him, and Jacob now had flocks upon flocks. 'What shall I do?' he says. 'I must meet my brother.' And in the darkness, the voice of conscience and the voice of God began to suggest:

'If I were you, I would get a large batch of those sheep, and send them in front, and give them to Esau.'

'What? Give my hard-won profits away?'

'Give them away? Give them back, you mean. They weren't yours anyway, Jacob. Didn't you drive a very hard bargain one day with Esau? So, Jacob, give them back.'

So, the first lot goes, but that isn't enough.

'You better send a second lot, Jacob. Pay him back.'

Can you imagine the man? His precious sheep, every one of them counted out and double checked, then at last sent off.

'Send a third lot, Jacob There's all the interest to be paid for all those years he did the work. Pay him back, for when I bless you, Jacob, I don't do it by cheating somebody else.'

We must seek God's blessing, and when he blesses us we should not imagine that that means he necessarily approves of everything we have done. Rather we would do well to examine our heart and see if there be some wicked way in it.

What is true at the physical level is true at the spiritual level. Picture a man who labours in the north of Ireland and many souls are saved. Another dear man labours in amongst the Muslims and over years only two get saved. Why? Because the man in Northern Ireland is more godly than the man among the Muslims? Of course not. God's blessing is his sovereign gift and if we see that, it will save us from competition. It will save us from pride if we appear to be more blessed than another. It would save us from disappointment if we should appear to be labouring in vain.

A blessing missed

Esau despised his birthright and neglected the blessing. When, at last, he came to get the blessing, the blessing was no longer available. He prayed, and he pleaded, and he sobbed, and he cried. I have no doubt that his father forgave, but forgiveness cannot undo the past. Esau found no place of repentance. What does that mean? Well, it was simply one of these things where there was no way now of changing your mind. Picture a man who should have served the Lord, maybe gone out as a missionary at the age of twenty-five, but he didn't. He's now lying on his deathbed at eighty-five and he says, 'Oh, Lord, I see my mistake. What a foolish man I've been. I ought to have gone and served you. Forgive me.' Yes, the Lord will forgive him. 'Give me back the chance.' No. He can't. There's no going back from eighty-five to twenty-five and having the chance again. You may seek the blessing with tears but you'll never find a place of repentance, for the thing cannot be undone.

Conclusion

We thank God that the salvation we have we cannot lose. There are blessings untold beyond forgiveness and eternal life. They are ours for the seeking of them while there is the chance to serve him. May God give us the desire and the wisdom to seek his true blessings so that we spend our time in service for him and have no reason for regret at the end of life's journey.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING (1925-2019) 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.