

Two Gospel Addresses

Drawn from the book of Revelation

David Gooding

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Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are based on the English Revised Version of the Holy Bible (1885) or are Dr Gooding's own translations or paraphrases. Scripture quotations marked *KJV* are from the *King James Version* of the Holy Bible.

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Life's Supreme Struggle

Introduction

We are going to begin a study of the book of the Revelation, a book which many people find difficult. We shall not be attempting to go through it in tiny detail; we shall be trying to get a general bird's-eye view of the book, so that we can get the major themes of its glorious message into our hearts and our minds.

Revelation is a very relevant book to our modern times. It tells, among other things, that there shall be a glorious future; a future where God's will shall be done on earth, as it is in heaven. There shall come a time when the nations of the world shall learn war no more and the military academies will be gone forever. 'They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks' (Isa 2:4). That quotation from the Old Testament stands at the United Nations building in New York. It is not an empty dream or a forlorn hope. It shall one day come to pass, because God is going to ensure it will come to pass.

But the bringing in of that day will, amongst other things, require God to rise up at last and say, 'Time, gentlemen, please.' God is going to redevelop earth; and he will not wait forever for his plans for that redevelopment to take place. God will have to intervene and that will mean very severe judgments upon this world to rid it of those who, the Bible says, destroy the earth; and to make way for the glorious coming of Jesus Christ our Lord. These are not daydreams or fantasies.

We shall begin by reading from that same book of the Revelation, chapter 3. I am old, as you see, and a trifle old-fashioned, so the translation I read from is an old translation, and if you have a new one, never mind, pity my simplicity! Then again, if you don't have a Bible with you, don't let that trouble you either. Sit back and listen to the good word of God from the mouth of the Saviour himself. We read of our Lord Jesus, risen from the dead, who has appeared to his apostle John on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea, and he is in the process of dictating, through John, some letters to the Christian churches of that time. He comes to dictate the letter that he wishes sent to Laodicea, and he says as follows:

And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write; These things says the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God: I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot: I would you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spew you out of my mouth. Because you say, I am rich, and have gotten riches, and have need of nothing; and know not that you are the wretched one and miserable and poor and blind and naked: I counsel you to buy of me gold refined by fire, that you may become rich; and white garments, that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness

be not made manifest; and eyesalve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. As many as I love, I reprove and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with me. He that overcomes, I will give to him to sit down with me in my throne, as I also overcame, and sat down with my Father in his throne. He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (vv. 14–22)

And along with that, we shall read some verses from chapter 21.

He that sits on the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he says, Write: for these words are faithful and true. And he said unto me, They are come to pass. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is thirsty of the fountain of the water of life freely. He that overcomes shall inherit these things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son. But for the fearful, and unbelieving, and abominable, and murderers, and fornicators, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, their part shall be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone; which is the second death. (vv. 5–8)

May the risen Lord who spoke those words speak them again in our hearts this evening.

Life's struggles

It is, I suppose, obvious, ladies and gentlemen, when you come to think about it, that it is simply a truism to say that for many people life is a struggle. That is obviously so, isn't it? Of course, for some people it's what gives life zest and interest and they don't bemoan the fact that life is a struggle. Take the champion who's just won an Olympic gold medal. We all know the tremendous struggle that his training has been to him; and then there was the race itself. What competition he was against, and how he had to struggle with every nerve and muscle in his being to win the race and earn the gold medal. But should you ask him about it, he isn't hanging his hands down with a glum face and saying, 'Oh, isn't it terrible, what a struggle life is.' He rejoices in the struggle and feels it was eminently worthwhile because of the tremendous prize at the end.

Or you could go into the house of a couple, now in their forties, and their home is very pleasant and beautiful. And then they open their heart to you, and the wife says, 'You know, when we started out, life was a very big struggle. We married quite young and we had nothing; we weren't like the young people who had everything given to them right from the start. We had to work hard for every stick of furniture that we've got. Then there was bringing up the children; sometimes they were ill and life was a tremendous struggle. We had difficulty making ends meet.' And then you can see her pride of heart. She isn't lamenting it so much now. She feels it's a tremendous triumph. 'Look what we have now,' she says. Yes, it was a challenge, wasn't it? She rose to it with her husband, and is gratified by the result. The fact that life is a struggle is not always bad.

Of course, there are struggles that are terrible; when what is at stake is so uncertain, and so important, that the struggle becomes a kind of a nightmare. I was in New Zealand just the other year. My hostess on the occasion was driving me along the road and she told me how a

year or two before she was all of a sudden taken with an illness that even the doctors at the time could scarce diagnose. It suddenly incapacitated her from head to foot and every muscle gave way, every nerve stopped functioning and she was barely breathing. She explained how the whole thing had happened so suddenly and her daughter had had to take her in the car and drive her down the motorway to the nearest hospital. She said, 'My daughter was driving with one hand on the wheel and one hand on my chest, trying to keep my heart going and my breathing going, lest I should be dead by the time I got to hospital.' That was some struggle, wasn't it? Yes, she got to hospital in time, and eventually was cured, but it was a struggle.

Or what about the farmer, when the bottom has gone out of the market and his cattle have been affected by mad cow disease. Some farmers, now facing impossible odds, have even committed suicide. They feel life's struggle has been too big.

Life's biggest struggle

There is one struggle, ladies and gentlemen, that is supreme above all others because of what is at stake. You might call it life's supreme struggle for it will determine, not merely our circumstances and experience here on earth, but it is going to decide what the eternity that lies beyond our life here shall be for each one of us. In this struggle we have read the words of the Bible: 'He or she who overcomes'—overcomes in the struggle—'to them I will give all these things' (Rev 3:21). What a magnificent future God has prepared for those who love him.

This life is not just an idiot's tale; full of sound and fury, but in the end signifying nothing. We were not brought on to this planet just for a few brief seventy years that in the end are pointless. This life was meant to be a stepping stone, a temporary stepping stone, on the way to the great eternity; that when we have finished our schooling here, we may go out into life that is real life, the great eternity that God has designed for those that love him. 'He who overcomes,' says God, 'in the struggle. To him, I shall give all these things.' But to those who don't? What then? And the Bible, with its frank but solemn honesty, says that to be defeated in this struggle is eternal loss and perdition. That surely is life's biggest struggle.

Why do we need to struggle?

I'm sure someone will say to me, 'But Mr Preacher, how can you possibly say that? I thought you Christians believe that salvation is a free gift. You don't have to struggle for it, do you? Surely you Bible preachers believe that salvation is a free gift. God gives it to all, free and for nothing, upon their repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus. You cannot deserve it, you cannot earn it; it's not a prize given for those who succeed in the battle.'

Well, I understand what you say, and of course I agree; that is absolutely true. The Bible says it in words almost of one syllable. 'By grace,' says the great Christian apostle, 'you have been saved.' He's talking to men and women that have trusted Christ. 'By grace you have been saved, through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest anyone should boast' (Eph 2:8-9). Salvation is free. You cannot earn it. You cannot possibly deserve it. You don't win it in the lottery. It is a gift, whereas, 'The wages of sin is death,' says the Bible (Rom 6:23). Eternal life is the free gift of God; free, gratis and for nothing. Let me

make that ever so clear right from the start; if we will have salvation tonight, we take it as a gift.

'Well then,' you say, 'what's all that about the struggle you talked of?' Well, of course, I'm not telling you that you have to earn salvation, but I am saying that to get it some of you may have to go through a struggle. You see, I've got a pen in my hand here. Suppose I were to say, 'If you would like a pen, just come up and I'll give it to the first person who comes forward. Come up right now.' I wonder what you'd think. I think most of you would say to yourselves, 'I don't want a pen anyway but even if I did I wouldn't go out in front of the entire congregation and humiliate myself to take a pen, even if it is free and for nothing. Whatever would people think of me? No, I'm not going to do that.' And even if you wanted the pen for some reason, and it's a free gift, you would face a sort of struggle in your decision. 'If I do go up, am I going to get it, or am I not going to get it?'

Yet that is how it is with salvation, you know. There are many folks that see salvation as a gift but then, when they think of coming to Christ and receiving it, all sorts of obstacles suddenly appear in the way. 'What will my friends think of it?' 'Do I need to be saved—am I not good enough as I stand now? I'm not going to humble and humiliate myself.' For some people, in some countries, it's a very big struggle. From time to time I and my colleagues do work in Russia and in the southern countries. At one time we received a letter from a student in Tajikistan who had been a Muslim and had trusted the Saviour. He wrote to us saying, 'When I trusted the Saviour my brothers beat me unmercifully. My father took a knife and carved my back, trying to persuade me to give up Christ. Please can you send me some literature to tell me why, when we trust Christ, we have to suffer so much?' Yes, some people suffer the loss of all things. It doesn't buy salvation; but if tonight it were to cost you everything you have to come to Christ and receive the free gift of salvation, would you come?

Our Lord Jesus was once asked by an enquirer, 'Lord, are there few that be saved?' (Luke 13:23). What would you say? Were there many who were saved?—was it the majority or only a few who were saved? If we were bold enough, we could ask the same question tonight. Are we all saved, or only some of us? How many? The Lord didn't reply directly, but said, 'Strain every muscle and strive to enter the narrow gate. One day the door will be shut and there will be many outside who, when the door is shut, shall knock on the door, but all in vain' (see vv. 24–27). They thought they were inside somehow or other, but they weren't. In fact they were outside; they had never entered. And to be sure, entering the door is a simple thing, isn't it? A child could do it. Thus it is with salvation.

We used to sing a little children's chorus, 'One door and only one, and yet its sides are two, inside and outside, on which side are you?' 'I am the door,' said Christ, 'by me, if anyone enters in, he shall be saved' (John 10:9). Entering the door is simple enough but you must come to the door, you must make up your mind that you're going to go in; that even if the sky falls on to the earth, you're going to get in. It is the prime thing in life that you decide to enter in; and to be sure you have entered in before that door closes. Our Lord indicated that we have got to take it seriously, and if we find obstacles in the way we must overcome them.

Why must we be keen on God?

So, here are these people, and our Lord is calling on them to repent and believe and to be saved. The people to whom our Lord was writing had special difficulties. Well, to be honest, they were members of a professing Christian church in a place called Laodicea. I suspect because they were members of a church they'd got it into their heads that they were all right. Although they were members of the church things were surely not quite right, were they? For the Lord has to say to them, 'I know your works, that you're neither hot nor cold. Would that you were either hot or cold, but because you are neither hot nor cold, but simply lukewarm, I am going to spew you out of my mouth' (Rev 3:15–16).

The Lord never talks to believers in Christ like that. What did he mean, 'You're neither hot nor cold'? Well, in my experience there are a lot of folks around like that. They are keen on gardening, maybe, or music or something, and that's lovely. If you ask them about Christ and God, and being saved, 'Oh well,' they say, 'I'm not particularly interested in that. I'm not against God, I've got nothing against it; I go to church now and again. On the other hand, I'm not madly keen on God, so to speak.' In other words, you're neither hot nor cold. Perhaps you sit here tonight and say, 'Well, I'm not mad keen. It's okay for the preacher to be mad keen on God but I'm not mad keen on God myself. Of course, I'm not against religion.' Shall we suppose that's good enough for God?

What would you say if one day you met a young gentleman, and he was telling you he was proposing to be married, and you say, 'Yes, I've seen your wife to be. She is a most beautiful, charming girl. You must love her immensely.' And he replies, 'Oh, I don't know about that. I mean, I've got nothing against the girl; but then, on the other hand, I'm not mad keen on her.' 'Oh, I see. And you're going to marry her, are you?' That would be a funny and curious situation. How could you ever make a proper relationship out of that, I wonder? Yet many people feel it's okay to feel like that about God. 'We're not against him,' they say. 'We're not cold, but we're not madly keen in love with him so we're not hot either.' Oh, but wait a minute; that won't do for God. The first commandment, said our blessed Lord Jesus, is that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength (Matt 22:37–38). That's the first commandment, and you only have to think about it to see how unsatisfactory any other attitude to God is.

What makes us lukewarm?

How do you suppose anybody would spend an eternity in God's heaven if they weren't keen on God? If they didn't love him with all their heart, mind, soul and strength? What was their obstacle? What was their difficulty? Why weren't they taking God and his things seriously; this whole business of being saved and getting to know the Saviour? What was in the way of it? Well, one thing above another, I suppose; you'd call it consumerism. You see, these people were living two thousand years ago but we mustn't imagine they were savages. Theirs was a very sophisticated city and a very prosperous one. They produced high quality clothing fit for Paris haute couture, and they were famous for their medical research and for their doctors. Yes, a very wealthy city they were.

You say, 'What's wrong with that?' Nothing. How I love to go round the shops and see all the colour and all the goods nowadays, compared with what they were in my youth during the days of the Depression in the twenties and thirties. What's wrong with lovely things? Nothing. But there is a danger with them. All life's lovely things given to us by God for our enjoyment were meant to lead our hearts in gratitude back to him; and if they do so, that's wonderful. But sometimes these good and lovely things have an unfortunate tendency to they take people's hearts away from God, don't they? So much time spent with the lovely music and the emails; so much time with the beautiful house and getting the garden right; so much the pressure of business. And all these things, lovely though they may be, can leave no time for God. No time to settle life's major questions, 'Am I right with God? Am I on the way to God's heaven?' No time to consider the doorway that Christ says is standing open for us to enter in and be saved; and therefore we are still outside the door, not taking it seriously.

What does Christ say? 'What a travesty it is. They say they're rich and have need of nothing, and they don't know that they're wretched, miserable, blind, poor and naked' (Rev 3:17). 'Blind?' you say. Yes. Here they are in the world overflowing with the good benefits God has given to them, and they can't see that there's a hand behind it. There stands the loving God, our creator, behind it, offering the gifts and hoping they will lead them to open their eyes to see him; to see how much more important he is than the gifts he gives. But they don't see it. It's as if there were no God.

They think they are clothed with beautiful attire, the latest fashion. Well, there's nothing wrong in it, but they 'know not that they are blind and naked.' To be physically naked is to stand ashamed, isn't it? One day we shall stand before God, says the Bible. Have we never felt ashamed of ourselves in the secrets of our hearts and minds? Yes, of course we have. We've done and thought things that we would scarce like our best friend to know. We cover them up and sink them in the depths of our forgettery. One day we shall stand before God as he sees us now. The Bible says, 'All things *are* naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do' (Heb 4:13 KJV). He sees what is inside us. He has not overlooked our good points, but he says we are naked before God. We have sins on our conscience and memory. Were we to stand before God now, as we are, our nakedness and confusion would be horrible.

What Jesus wants to do for us

Says the Lord Jesus, 'I could give you sight, I could open your eyes. I could give you clothing to cover your shame, so that you might stand before God cleansed, forgiven, justified, at peace with God and certain of his acceptance.' Marvellous. 'How shall I get it?' you say. 'Well,' says Christ, 'I want you to come, and buy of me gold purified in the fire, and fine linen white and clean that the shame of your nakedness may not be seen' (Rev 3:18). You say, 'There it is again—he says 'buy', but isn't it free?' Yes. That's an apparent contradiction, isn't it? Sometimes you meet contradictions like that in the Bible. In Isaiah the Prophet you read, 'All you that are hungry and thirsty, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come and buy things without money and without price' (see Isa 55:1).

Why does God talk like that? Salvation is free, absolutely free; but if you want it, you'll have to come and do business with Christ. This is real business with the living Christ and we must come in our need to him and say, 'Lord, what do you want me to do? How can I come, how can I have this gift, and how can I be sure of it?' 'Come buy of me that gold which is eternal, those values that are eternal.' Oh, what lovely things they are, the life with God; eternal life, membership of the family God, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. One day we shall sit, so to speak, with God upon his very throne, welcomed to his eternal heaven and all its joys. Oh, what valuables there are! 'Come and get it,' says Christ. 'Come and do dealings with me, and come and get this.' And you ask, 'How much will I have to pay?' Nothing. Nothing!

But you can't just sit and do nothing; you must come to Christ. Come and get the garments that are pure white, the righteousness that God gives us freely, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, so that we can come into the presence of God, clothed with this spotless garment, not of our works, but of the righteousness, the forgiveness and the holiness that Christ has bought for us at the cost of his death.

How should I respond?

What shall I say to him? Is he peddling some strange exotic religious cult? No, indeed not. 'These things says the Amen . . . the beginning of the creation of God' (Rev 3:14). Who is it that is talking to me and to you tonight? It is none less than your creator. Have you realised it? Surely you have. You didn't think yourselves up, did you? You are God's idea, you know; he invented you. The whole vast universe, Christ invented it. It began in his mind, and through his power it was brought into existence, and it was brought in for his pleasure. God invented us. It's the God who invented us who now talks to us. His name is Jesus. 'I made you,' he says, 'and you're so busy with all the gifts and things of life that you've no time for me.'

Is that not a kind of madness? You enjoy life; how would you not enjoy meeting the giver of life? 'I made you,' he says, 'and I love you with a creator's love; so much so that, rather than let you perish in your waywardness and sinfulness, I died for you, there on the cross at Calvary.' God is not against us, you know. God is not some miserable God waiting to make our life a misery and remove all good things. He has a whole heaven; but you can't have his heaven without Him. 'These things says the Amen . . . the beginning of the creation of God . . . come and do business with me. You will receive from my hand the gold and the clothing of salvation.'

We know the word 'Amen' I suppose, because if we pray at all we say 'Amen' at the end of our prayers, meaning 'so be it'. Our Lord Jesus was different. He used it at the beginning of a statement, meaning, 'Believe me, it's absolutely true.' And I love the things he says— how they provoke our confidence in him. Listen to him. 'Amen, amen,' or, in English, 'Verily, verily I say unto you, he that hears my words and believes on him that sent me, has everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation, but has passed from death to life' (John 5:24). 'I mean it,' says Christ, 'it is true. Come and do business with me right now if you will. I can assure you that I can give you eternal life. You will never perish. You will

never come into condemnation. You will have eternal life now, and my company on life's road to glory. You will have the whole eternity with God, sharing as joint heirs with God to the great inheritance with Christ.' That is his plea.

And even as we come to the end of our evening meditation there's a sound, is there not, echoing in our conscience, and at our heart's door? Can you not hear it, friend? It's the sound of knuckles on the door of our heart, and it's the Saviour who speaks. Our very creator, our Lord, and the one who died to redeem us, is saying, 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice, man or woman, boy or girl, and opens the door, I will come in and dine with them, and they with me, sharing the bread of eternal life.' He puts before us all those glorious marvels of redemption, and we can share the very friendship of God.

So then, we have read his word and heard his appeal, 'Come and do business with me, and settle the matter of your soul's salvation this very moment, and settle it forever.' And we hear his knocking upon the door of our heart. Oh, let us not allow any obstacle to stand in the way. If there be any obstacles, let us overcome them. Come, rise up and open the door, and bid the Saviour enter.

We all shall Stand before God to be Judged

This past week, good friends, some of us have been studying together the last book in the Bible, generally known by the name the book of the Revelation. It is the book that is full of God's information about what is going to happen to our world. We've found it to be brim full of hope that the God who made this universe and our world in it, spoiled though it is at the present moment, is not going to abandon it as a downright failure. He has schemes for redeveloping this world, what he calls, 'the redemption of creation.' And therefore as we listen to his purposes, as he has shown them to us in this book of the Revelation, our hearts have been filled with joy and hope and expectation. At the same time, this book has talked to us about the way God reacts to our world and the evil therein.

We come tonight to think together about what God has said about the fact that there shall be a final judgment, when earth's wrongs shall be put right and the consequences of the way people have lived shall come into play. By any standard of measurement that is a very grave subject. A boy or girl at school facing final examinations is a thing to be taken seriously, isn't it? Then what about the final judgment, for according to God's Word none can escape it.

Because it is so serious and grave and because we must, each one of us, eventually be involved therein, it seems to be good that we should read here and now the passage in the book of the Revelation that talks about the final judgment. We must take the trouble to read it very carefully, for there are all sorts of curious ideas in people's minds about this final judgment, and it is important for us to read it and notice exactly what it says and what it doesn't say. I am reading from the English Revised Version. I am elderly, as I pointed out last week, and the Bible translation I use is one I used in my youth. It is by now old fashioned and you marvellously up to date people will doubtless have a newer translation. Have mercy on me and the elderly and never mind if you notice some differences in your translation. Look at them all the more carefully to see exactly what it is saying. Or if you don't have a Bible with you, don't worry about that. Sit back and listen, but do listen. It is important.

This then is Revelation 20, where John is giving us a record of the vision that he was given to see.

I saw a great white throne, and him that sat upon it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne; and books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of the things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their

works. And death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death, even the lake of fire. And if any was not found written in the book of life, he was cast into the lake of fire. (vv. 11–15)

These are grave and solemn words and will call for a response on our part; a response of our mind, of our conscience, of our emotions and of our will.

A God of judgment, or a God of love?

The topic of the final judgment, ladies and gentlemen, is so solemn, and to many people so disturbing and frightening, that they are tempted to dismiss it from their thoughts altogether. Indeed, some seriously minded people do more than dismiss it; they question it. This idea that there will be a final judgment, followed for the impenitent by an eternal punishment, seems to them to be so outrageous, so immoral in fact, that they say it belongs to the primitive, savage days of the centuries gone by, and true Christianity ought to forget it completely. They argue that if there is a God at all, he must be a God of love; and how could a God of infinite love ever punish anybody at all, let alone punish them eternally? These are weighty objections, are they not?

The Bible does affirm, of course, that God is a God of love. It is a very interesting thing to notice who it was that first alerted us to the fact that God is a God of love. Some people think it is self-evident that God is a God of love, but if you were a historian you would know that you can search through the annals of history and the literature of bygone centuries, before Jesus Christ came into our world, and there is very little about God being a God of love. People thought of him as a supreme power in the universe. A God, if need be, of wrath against his enemies. But a God of love?

I suspect for all of us here tonight, the idea that if there's a God he's a God of love, we owe to Jesus Christ, God's son. It was he who taught us, spectacularly taught us, more than anybody else had dreamed of before, that the heart of the eternal is infinitely kind. He is a God of infinite love. It was in the person of Jesus, who being God incarnate, humbled himself and nursed the little babies on his knee and blessed them. He taught us that God is love, numbering the very hairs of our head and caring for us because we are the creatures of his hand. He affirmed that the God who made us will be loyal to us. It was Jesus Christ who showed us in practical terms that God is love in his supreme sacrifice for us on the cross, that we might be forgiven.

He died that we might be forgiven,
He died to make us good,
That we might go at last to heaven,
Saved by his precious blood.¹

But the interesting and important thing to notice is that it was this Jesus Christ that spoke more than anybody else in the whole of the Bible about the judgment that is to come, and

¹ C. F. Alexander (1818–95), 'There is a green hill far away'.

about the fate and doom of those that arrive at that judgment unrepentant, unbelieving and unsaved. As we try to think about these matters using our minds, our moral judgment and our consciences on the topic, we need to think coolly and calmly. These are not panic stories. We need to use our cool thought and conscience. Let's take the proposition then that God, being a God of love, would never punish anybody.

Ladies and gentlemen, as far as I can read it, the very opposite is true. It is precisely because God is a God of infinite love that he will punish some people. If we catch ourselves off our guard some days, we're not against punishment, are we? We hear of ex-President Robison visiting West Timor with her demand that the nation set up a court to try the war criminals, and likewise those guilty of crimes against humanity in Indonesia, in Kosovo, in Bosnia, wherever it be, insisting that these men be brought to justice. Wouldn't that be what ninety per cent of people would say? Those guilty of such heinous crimes must be punished, say people. And why do they say it? Because it is instinctive in the human heart that the sheer value of a human being is such that if some evil dictator or warlord commits crimes against humanity, they must be punished. Civilised society insists on it, God or no God, to maintain our sense of value of what it means to be human.

Can people commit horrible crimes against women and children and defenceless old men, or young men either, and get away with it? Have we come to think that such crimes don't matter? Who of us would like to vote, I wonder, and say, 'Yes, Hitler's crimes, Stalin's crimes, Pol Pot's crimes in Cambodia, in the end it doesn't matter. Forget it. Did they kill sixty million? Did Stalin and Hitler likewise? Did Pol Pot murder two million people in cold blood? Oh, but it's past, let's forget it.' Who would say that? Does it not matter? Ladies and gentlemen, as far as I can read God's holy Word, it is precisely because God loves people that he will never say that sin doesn't matter.

Suppose I'm a drug pusher and at a party I needle your daughter and get her hooked on some devilish drug, and it blows her mind and she dies an early death. What will you, her father, say about me? And what will you say about your daughter? Will you say it doesn't matter? No, you won't, will you? If you ever loved your daughter you will never come round to say, 'It didn't matter. Forget it.' I'll tell you more about your daughter. God loved your daughter, and if I don't repent, God will have it against me for all eternity; He will never forget. Your daughter is of eternal significance to him. That un-repentant sin committed against that lovely daughter of yours; her creator will never, never, never say, 'It didn't matter.' If I refuse to repent and pass into eternity unforgiven, God will have it against me forever, precisely because he is a God of love.

You say, 'But wait a moment. You're going to talk about eternal, never ending punishment. Suppose the biggest sinner there ever was, a Hitler if you like, or a Stalin or somebody; although their crimes were enormous they were, after all, finite. Could it be proper and right for God to punish somebody eternally for sins that they did in a brief lifespan, at the most, say, seventy years? Wouldn't that be unfair?' Oh, but we've only thought through half the question, haven't we? Do we suppose that people who have sinned grievously in this life and then shot their brains out, have escaped? No. Death is not the end. Do you suppose their sinning is at an end? Let me remind you that death doesn't wave any

magic wand over anybody. People who die sinners unforgiven, remain sinners unforgiven. Their hearts are not changed. They remain what they ever were.

We can choose because God has given us a free will

In one of the warnings that end this book of the Revelation, people are told,

Blessed are they that wash their robes, that they may have the right to come to the tree of life, and may enter in by the gates into the city. Without are the dogs, and the sorcerers, and the fornicators, and the murderers, and the idolaters, and every one that loves and makes a lie.
(Rev 22:14–15)

Blessed are those that enter in. Why blessed? Well, for this reason, amongst others. Scripture says that outside are the sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and all the rest of those who love and make a lie—unchanged and unrepentant. Because they are unchanged and unrepentant, God's displeasure will be shown against them forever. You say, 'That's not fair. If God is a God of love, and people make a mistake and they refuse to be saved—refuse to repent and trust the Saviour—why won't God, when they get to the other side, perhaps after a year or two in what you call hell, why doesn't he force them to repent? He could, couldn't he, so that they might be let out of their prison house and come at last to God's heaven?'

But God won't force them. You surely have observed that God doesn't force people to get saved. Why not? Well he respects people too much. I nearly said, 'He loves them too much.' You see, it's one of the awesome things about us that God made us and dignified us as human beings with a free will and a free choice. We are not just super-duper computers. This is the marvel about us. God has not made us to run like machines, or even like animals that just go by instinct. To be a human is to possess this marvellous gift from our creator of free choice, of free will. And you can see how important that is: you can't have a moral human being without free will.

Suppose I had here in front of me a box full of gold. There's nobody about, so I could steal it and no-one would ever find out. And I'm tempted to steal it. But I know that the box is wired up to a lethal dose of electricity and the moment I touch it I shall be finished. So I don't have any choice about it really, do I, unless I want to commit suicide? So I don't steal it. Would you congratulate me on being a very moral, upright, righteous man? Of course you wouldn't. You'd say, 'He had no free choice. He didn't steal it simply because he was afraid of the consequences. That's not real morality.' No, that's true, and you see what you're saying? God has made us with a free will, and he gives us the choice, and it is an awesome thing. God has given us the ability to say yes to God, or to say no. That's what makes us human.

Take away that free will, and we shall cease to be human and become mere animals or machines. Because God so respects us he will never force us. Oh, he will plead with us to trust the Saviour and be saved eternally, but he allows us to decide. He will warn us against the inevitable consequences of sinning and refusing to repent and be saved, but he will never force us. For if he forced people to be saved, what he would save would not be a human being but a creature no longer with a free will. 'And why is it all important,' you say, 'to have

a free will?' Well, you wouldn't like to be without one, would you? Have you ever thought about it? Would you like to be a machine?

What should we lack if we were mere machines? Well, this much is obvious, that love, grown up love, not just affection such as a dog can show for its owner, but real love, depends on there being free will. Suppose one of these days you are sitting in your lounge in your comfortable chair and in comes a robot, one of these fantastic things, and it comes up to you and, putting its robotic arms round your neck, it says in its sepulchral voice, 'Oh, I love you.' What would you do? You'd say, 'Don't be so daft,' and kick it in the ribs! Why? Because the thing is programmed; it doesn't have any real choice. It can only do what it's programmed to do, and we sense that for love to be real love, the one who loves has to have a choice. So it is with us and God. He seeks our love, gave his son to win that love, calls on us to repent and receive the Saviour and be saved, and warns us of the consequences of refusing. But, if we say no, in the end he will accept it. How do we know? Because Jesus Christ our Lord, who is the Son of God, demonstrated it here on earth. Talking to the inhabitants of Jerusalem city, among whom he had preached and with whom he had pleaded to come and find salvation, when they refused he said, with tears in his voice,

Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . how often would I have gathered your children together, even as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not! (Matt 23:37)

It is possible, ladies and gentlemen, for a human being to finally say no to God. Now, tell me, what do you suppose will happen to those that say no to God? God is, by definition, the sum total of all good. There is no good without God. God cannot, he certainly will not, but he cannot make two paradises. He cannot make one for those that have received salvation and love the Lord, a paradise to be spent with him eternally, and then make another paradise for those who say no to God, so that he can say, 'Oh well, I'm sorry you didn't choose me, but here's a paradise.' That is impossible, ladies and gentlemen. There isn't any good outside God. To say no to God is to be without any paradise forever; there is nothing but the black darkness of hopelessness. It is not because God isn't love; it is precisely because he is love. But somebody says, 'Yes, perhaps grave sinners like Stalin and Hitler are rightly punished, and those that have committed war crimes in Kosovo and West Timor, but you're not supposing, are you Mr Preacher, that we, your audience tonight, are to be bracketed with a Hitler and a Pol Pot? They were outrageous sinners. Yes, we have done our little things here and there, a peccadillo or two, and perhaps one or two more serious things, but on the whole we're pretty decent. You're not lumping us with them, are you? If they deserve hell, you're not suggesting we do, are you? Are you saying our works are so bad that we must be placed in some hell or other eternally?'

The basis of God's final judgment

It's just at that point we need to listen to the verses that describe the final judgment, because I find there is much confusion of thought on the topic. We read that at the final judgment the dead shall be raised and the books shall be opened, for God has his records. They may not be books made of paper and ink, and they may not even be like heavenly computers, vast

though the information is that can be preserved on computers. God has his own records and one of these days, so the Bible says, he shall reveal to people their secrets in that judgment. When God's records are opened, if people say, 'But no, no, I didn't do that,' and, 'I didn't think that,' shall not God play back to them and show them? 'Can you see yourself there, and what you were thinking in the secrets of your heart?'

So people get the impression that when the Bible says that people will be judged according to their works, according to the things written in the books; that the final decision on whether anybody goes to God's heaven or is dismissed to the lake of fire, depends on this. If their works are extremely bad and obnoxious, of course they will join the Hitlers in hell. If, on the other hand, their works are tolerably good, and perhaps on the whole the balance is on the plus side, the credit side, they will be admitted to God's heaven. So the thought that the preacher could be saying that they too might be consigned to the lake of fire strikes them as horribly unjust. Lives may not be one hundred per cent good, but are they not eighty per cent good; or perhaps seventy-five, or sixty?

But you see, there is nestling a misunderstanding. The Bible does not say, 'And when the books were opened, if anybody's works were found to be confoundedly bad, they were cast into the lake of fire.' Only one thing is said, 'There was opened the Book of Life, the Lamb's Book of Life. If anyone's name was found not written in the Book of Life, he or she was cast into the lake of fire.' Now, please listen. Let's try to get this clear in our minds. I repeat, it does not say, 'If anybody's works were found to be spectacularly bad they were cast into the lake of fire.' That is not the criterion. The criterion is this: if any man's name, if any woman's name was not found written in the Book of Life . . . The fact is, ladies and gentlemen, we are all sinners. Some are big sinners, some little sinners, some guilty of colourful and dramatic sins, and most of us guilty of mean, little old sins.

All of us are sinners, and if the book of our records were opened before God, we would find, as the Bible puts it, that we have all sinned, and we still come short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). Therefore, if God's justice were to have its un-prevented way, all of us must be consigned to bear the penalty that our sins, many or few, deserve. Here is the wonderful news. Here, on the very brink of hell is the glorious gospel preached, when all are sinners, all could be saved. This is the glory of the Christian gospel. This Book of Life is the list of the redeemed. Yes, they were sinners, but in repentance they came to the Lord Jesus as their hope of salvation. Repenting of themselves and their works, and owning themselves lost and hopeless and helpless, they put their faith in the Lord Jesus as the Saviour who died to put away their sins, to cleanse their hearts and bring them forgiveness and eternal life. And upon their receiving Christ, their names are put in the Lamb's Book of Life. That is the glory of it, and the wonder of it. And before anyone is consigned to the lake of fire, listen, this Book is opened. Can his name be found? Can her name? What is her name? Let's see it again to make sure, can the name be found in the book? It suggests a search, doesn't it?

'If the name is not found written, they are cast into the lake of fire.' The very words force us to pause, ladies and gentlemen, and to consider an immediate question. Is my name written down in glory? Is my name written in the Lamb's Book of Life? You say, 'How would anybody know? Don't we have to wait until the final judgment until we find out?' Oh no, my good friends, God isn't like that. You should not think of God as some torturous tyrant

keeping us in anxiety over this eternal matter. People whose names are written in the Book of Life can know their name is written. Listen to the blessed Lord Jesus talking to his disciples that had received him as the Lamb of God, and had found in him forgiveness. The disciples had just come back from a preaching tour and in the course of their preaching they had cast out demons, and they were getting very excited at what wonderfully successful preachers they were. The Lord, so to speak, patted their apostolic heads and said, 'All right gentlemen, yes, you're getting excited but, comparatively speaking, it's a small matter that the spirits are subject to you. Don't rejoice in that, rejoice rather in this; that your names are written in the citizen list of heaven' (see Luke 10:17–20). What joy must have flooded their hearts at that moment when they heard from the lips of the Lord Jesus himself that they were enrolled in the citizen lists of heaven. He had told them so, and they knew it.

Can I be sure of heaven?

The great Apostle Paul says at the end of one of his letters, 'Give my greetings to . . . my fellow labourers whose names are in the book of life' (Phil 4:3). He says it casually, as though it was one of those ordinary things. Believe it or not, that is so—it is the birthright of every believer in Christ. The Holy Spirit so fills a believer's heart with assurance that their sins have been forgiven and God has accepted them, that they are right with God and heaven is their home. The believer knows it. It is one of the sure things of life, more certain than the weather. Their names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life, and they shall never perish. They shall be with God in his heaven for all eternity. I confess to you, friends, that as far as I personally am concerned, since I have grasped that matter, if I were not certain tonight that my name is in the Lamb's Book of Life, how could I give sleep to my eyes? How could I lay my head upon a pillow? How could I attend to anything else before this matter was settled and I was absolutely sure that my name is in the Book of Life?

You say, 'I don't think I'm bad enough to be sent to perdition, but I don't feel good enough to be sure, absolutely sure, that my name is in the Book of Life.' Forgive me, but I'm not altogether surprised. You see, when people think, 'Am I good enough to have my name written in the Book of Life?' they are still thinking that somehow they have to earn salvation by doing their best to behave, doing their best to keep God's law. But that again is false, and God himself tells us so. 'By the deeds of the law,' says Scripture, 'no flesh shall be justified' (Rom 3:20). You say, 'If I can't be saved by keeping God's commandments, why did he give the commandments in the first place?' Well, God tells us why. He says, 'The law was given to expose sin. We know that whatever things the law says, it says to those that are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and we be proved guilty' (see Rom 3:19–20). You say, 'That's a hard thing, isn't it?' Well, not necessarily. We need to be saved and it could be that we need to be woken up to the fact that we need to be saved.

Here's a devoted mother caring for her children and she's got a very serious form of the flu. She's not giving up because she feels she's indispensable. Her husband says, 'You must get the doctor.' No, she's not going to get the doctor. She's afraid he'll put her in bed and what's going to happen to the children then? But the husband persuades the doctor to come and see the good woman. He takes out his thermometer and when he has a look at it, his face

turns grave. 'Well,' he says, 'your temperature is over 40°C. You are ill, my woman. To bed you go immediately.' He's done her a good service, hasn't he? She didn't think she was as bad as all that but now the thermometer has proved to the dear lady that she is. That's a good use of the thermometer; but what would you think of the woman if she sat in bed with a shawl round her neck and a hot water bottle in her arms, and she started sucking the thermometer? You'd say, 'My dear, why are you doing that?' 'Well, the doctor says I must get the temperature down to 37°C and I'm doing my best to get the thermometer reading down.'

You'd say, 'My dear woman, you are more ill than you think you are! You don't suck the thermometer to get better. The thermometer was to show you how ill you are. If you want to get better, you must take the medicine.' God's law is to show us we're sinners. The sad thing is we don't take it seriously. We're convinced we're not as bad as people think; but we are—in God's eyes. If you took his thermometer, his law, and took it seriously, it would show all of us that we have fallen short; and that the wages of sin is death (Rom 3:23; 6:23). Your condition is perilous. Why else do you think God sent his Son to die upon a cross? He did it because there was no other way of our being saved. When we've done our very best we should still perish because we have sinned, and when we face that fact and admit it, that's what God means by repentance. When we come to God saying, 'God, we're lost, we've sinned, we've broken your law, we deserve perdition,' it is then that God points us to his Son as Saviour and promises that they who put their trust in him shall never perish. They are cleansed and forgiven, justified and accepted.

The final judgment

When will the judgment take place? The Bible says plainly, 'It is appointed unto men once to die, and after death comes the judgment' (Heb 9:27). Judgment happens after death, not before. God doesn't hold court on our lives every day of the week. He comes after death and, what is more, the Bible is careful to point out that the great final judgment comes not after each person's death, but at the end of the world. You say, 'Why is that?' Well, because of the seriousness of sin. Take a man who habitually got drunk and frightened the life out of his kids for the first four or five years of their lives and damaged them psychologically. The father dies in a drunken stupor and the children grow up damaged. The damage is repeated—perhaps in the lives of their own children. You see, the effects of our sinning don't stop when we die. They go on and on and on. The full gravity of our sin will not be seen until history comes to its end. Oh friend, if we could see the ongoing effect of our sins to the end of time, what a sight it would be. It is appointed unto men once to die, and after that, the judgment, when the whole of life comes up before God. In view of that time, when the whole of life shall come up before God, how could we possibly be saved? But listen, as it is appointed to men once to die, and after death, the judgment, so Christ was offered, once and for all, that is when he died at Calvary, to bear our sins in his body on the tree. He was offered once, that one sacrifice for sin avails to those who trust him, to cleanse them from every sin, past, present and future, to the end of this world.

Oh, it's a marvellous gospel. There is a final judgment, but none of us need perish. Tonight, the door stands open, and the God who loves us and the Saviour who died for us

bid us come. And if we've never done it before, to come to Christ manfully, womanfully, deliberately. You say, 'I don't know how to come.' Well, come anyway. Say, 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, you died for me, a sinner, and I need to be saved. Oh, Jesus Christ hear me and save me now.' The promise of the Lord Jesus is this. 'Him that cometh to me, I will in no wise cast out.' (John 6:37) Since he is to be the judge at the final judgment, according to holy Scripture, he can promise all who trust him, he can give them his final verdict now, give them the comfort and assurance of it. 'Verily, verily I say to you, he who hears my word, and believes on him that sent me, has everlasting life and shall not come into condemnation, but is passed from death unto life.' (John 5:24) What a glorious Saviour and a glorious salvation. May we have the wisdom to make sure we have seized it and received it, before the deadline is past, lest we should face an eternity without Christ, and therefore be lost forever.

About the Author

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