

The Weakness and Ungodliness of Sin

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Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person— though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Rom 5:1–11)

Thank you for your kindly welcome. It is certainly a privilege to be back among you. The verses we have just read from the Bible tell us clearly two important things about our personal salvation.

Sin takes many different forms

They indicate that sin, that common element from which we all suffer, takes many different forms. It can be described as *weakness*, it can be described as *ungodliness*. Those who practise it are described as sinners; or, again, they may be regarded as the very enemies of God. Sometimes one form is more prominent in a person than in another.

God loves sinners

The other thing these verses tell us so clearly is that, whatever form sin takes in each man or woman, the key to our deliverance and our salvation from sin is in this fact that God loves us, even when we are still sinners.

Sin takes many different forms

Weakness

Let us consider together this evening, briefly, how this works out in actual human experience. I begin with that form of sin which is weakness.

I suppose, if we wanted to illustrate to ourselves the weakness of sin, we could do no better than to think of two men of whom we read in the Bible: Peter the Apostle, and Pontius Pilate who crucified our Lord.

Peter is a big man, a big burly fellow, a man whom you would have thought had endless courage. Peter was the man who was prepared in the dark, with only one sword, to face a whole gang of soldiers; a man who would have been prepared to rush into a battle and go down fighting; a man of tremendous physical courage.

And yet, all unsuspectingly, sin had worked in Peter, like a worm gnawing at a beam of wood. When a strong beam, that looks heavy enough to keep up a roof, is rotted through, it breaks.

Cowardice had left Peter weak

Sin had worked in Peter's heart, and left him weak. He would have dared to stand and face a band of soldiers, but in front of a little maid he was afraid for his life to confess the Saviour. Deep down in his heart he believed that Jesus was the Son of God, but defenceless, without any arms, he was afraid to face the laughter of a barrack room. Just to stand there and take it was more than Peter could do. To cover up his confusion, he swore all the words he knew to try and prove he wasn't a Christian.

I wonder if you have any fellow feeling for Peter? I wonder if I am speaking to a man or woman here, young or old, who in your heart of hearts believe that Jesus is the Christ, but you've never yet confessed him. The real reason is that sin has left you weak. I don't speak as being superior to you—there's never been a bigger coward than the one who stands before you.

There have been many men who would have died valiantly in battle and faced the gun barrel unflinching, but they would be scared stiff to enter a room and confess that Jesus was their Saviour. In that, they are weak. It isn't true to think that, if somehow we were bigger and more influential, we wouldn't care what people said.

Pilate was the man who was responsible for the crucifixion of our Lord. He was a public figure, not some unknown, uneducated fisherman like Peter.

Indecisiveness had left Pilate weak

Pilate was in charge of all the troops in Jerusalem, the General Officer Commanding. But with all that power under his thumb, at heart he was weak. While he was with the crowd, the crowd moved him. As he listened to their booing and their cheering, he was chilled to the heart: he daren't go against them. So, to try and make up his mind, he left them and went in to the Saviour and talked to him.

In the presence of the Saviour, he was convinced that Jesus was right and he trembled as he listened to him. Surely this was the Son of God here, and he must deliver him. That's how he felt when he was with the Saviour; but five minutes later when he was outside in the crowd, once more the crowd got him scared. He was torn this way and that way, and couldn't make up his own mind. He was a weak man.

Many men and women have been like that. Inside a gospel meeting, as God's word is read and God speaks to them of reality—of truth, judgment to come, heaven and hell—they say, 'Yes, that's right, I know it's right and I ought to be saved'.

For a while they feel all convinced, but five minutes outside the door with their ungodly companions and those impressions are gone. At the end of the week maybe they begin to think again. They vacillate from one position to another: weak men and women.

I wonder if I touch a secret chord here. I say again, I'm not here to boast that I'm any better than you; I'm tarred with the same brush. But sin has done a dreadful thing to the human heart: it's left it weak, perilously weak. With eternity at stake, there's many a person who can't make up his or her mind because they're blown here and there, afraid of what other people will say, or think, or do.

What is the key to that situation?

God loves sinners

Oh, thank God, there is a way out of that impasse. There's always a way of being saved from the weakness of sin and the awful consequence to which it could lead a man or woman. It is found in the love of God: 'But God shows his love for us in that while we were still [weak], Christ died for us' (Rom 5:8).

Perhaps you say to yourself, 'I could never be a Christian; I could never face the music; I could never prevail upon myself to make up my mind and stick to it. If I said I was saved tonight, then tomorrow I daren't face my companions.'

You certainly would be lost if it weren't for the love of God. He doesn't wait until your willpower is so strong that you wouldn't care what anybody said. He loves you right now, and is prepared to receive you right now. Before you are any better, he is prepared to have you and count you as his son—right now.

The key is found in the love of God. He has done his very greatest for us all: 'For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly' (Rom 5:6). While all of us were still weak through the results of sin, Christ died for us. You see, it was a desperate situation. If God had waited until we could somehow become strong, then we never would have been saved—we should never have been strong enough. Therefore, in due time, in the very nick of time, Christ died for weak men and weak women.

It means that here and now, without any beginnings of improvement, God is prepared to save us. He is prepared to forgive the past and make us his children right now, without first saying that we've got to improve.

He won't leave us as we are. The God who loves us is prepared to forgive us because Christ died for us, and he will receive us now just as we are, without improvement. But he is a God who will work mightily in us by his Holy Spirit.

What happened to Peter?

Peter quaked in his shoes before the girl on the door and he was afraid of a barrack room of soldiers. That same Peter, a few weeks later, stood up in front of three thousand people in a public square. Uneducated man that he was and unused to speaking publicly, he had the

moral courage to face the rulers of the State who had put our Lord to death, and publicly charge them with the murder of Christ. What had happened to him?

Peter had known the forgiveness of the Lord. In the very moment that Peter denied him, Christ loved him still and went to the cross to die so that he might be forgiven. And the Christ who loved him, kept him. Peter was a weak man, but Christ took him on those terms and came into that man's life and gave him a new power. He gave him his Holy Spirit.

He would do the same for us all. I'm not saying that if we were to trust Christ tonight and be saved, we would never be weak again. I should be going against the Bible itself if I told you that.

That same Bible that tells me that Peter, who stood up on the day of Pentecost and preached that wonderful sermon to three thousand people and more—that same Peter when he was at Antioch got scared of certain of his fellow Christians. Instead of standing boldly for his rights as a Christian, he acted what virtually was a lie (see Gal 2).

Same old trouble! In himself, Peter was still a weak man. But thank God, his salvation didn't depend on his being strong. His weakness may have followed him to some extent to the grave, but Peter rested on a Saviour who loved him and died for him while he was still weak, and guaranteed to save him eternally.

But with all that, the Saviour did work a work in his heart. The man who was afraid of a girl at the door, and in his life now and again slipped back under that old weakness, we are told that he ended his life crucified upside down, defenceless. In the end he went out victoriously, confessing his Lord.

Oh, what a wonderful thing the love of God is that can save a man and strengthen him, and make him victorious, because God loves him, even when he's weak.

Let us get this thing clear. Weak men and women who turn to Christ are received and welcomed and saved eternally. But what about weak men and women who do not turn to Christ? This is what weakness does:

But as for the cowardly, the faithless . . . their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death. (Rev 21:8)

That's what sin does. It makes people scared of receiving the Saviour and confessing him publicly. So scared of other people, that in the end they topple into hell itself. Sin is a cruel thing.

I urge upon anybody here who's not yet saved, that you stop this thing before it ruins you eternally. I'm not asking the impossible; God doesn't ask the impossible. He doesn't ask you to try to be better; he asks you to come to the Saviour right here and now and dare to trust him, weak as you are. He will not only forgive you, not only receive you eternally, but he is able to make you stand in all the circumstances of life.

But with other people it's not so much apparent that sin has made them weak. Sin with them has been one everlasting and continuous coming short. That's what sin is—one of the ways of looking at it. It is forever to be aiming at a goal, and forever to be missing it. Sometimes to come a long way off, an evident miss; sometimes almost to get it, a near miss. But any miss is to come short.

You've determined with yourself that you're going to live according to better standards. You aimed high and you intended to be a decent man or woman. You won't lose your temper the next time the child spills her cup of tea. You're determined to be sweet-tempered and kindly, and not to let your tongue run away with you and scathingly slander Mrs Jones out in the street.

You aimed high, but you've come short and known the bitterness of frustration. You know what it is to kick yourself with disappointment. As you look back over it, you feel a sense of shame rise within you. Coming short—sin has done that for all of us: 'For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom 3:23).

There have been some fine men, but the man the Bible holds out as the very 'chief of sinners' is not, perhaps, the type of man that you would have thought. Among many of his equals, he had aimed high. He took the Ten Commandments seriously and aimed to live up to them. In fact, he did it so well, he thought for many years that he'd done it completely.¹

There are many people like that. Then, one day, as they are reading the Bible, or perhaps thinking on a verse that they've read many times but never really thought of, it comes home to them. 'You shall not covet' (Exod 20:17). They are convicted and at once all their dreams are shattered. They know in their heart of hearts that here is one commandment that they've broken. They may try desperately to repair the damage and keep the commandment, but they can't stop coveting and all their proud empires fall.

You see, God's law is not like some people imagine it to be. So many think that it is a kindly thing, a benevolent institution, a system of advice that comes alongside us in life, and says, 'Now, I shouldn't do that if I were you', or, 'I should do that if I were you. This is the way it ought to be done—have a go at that.'

Then, when we aim at the mark and try to keep God's law, people think the law comes alongside and pats us gently on the shoulder, and says, 'You made a very good effort to keep the law, but you didn't reach it one hundred percent. You just missed it by a few fractions, but it was a very good effort. You did very well; you kept it nine times out of ten. That's very, very good; ninety percent is a distinction mark.'

They think it's like that, but God's law is nothing of the sort. God's law says, 'You will keep all the law; you will keep it always; and you will keep it one hundred percent. And so long as you keep it perfectly you will be well.' But, let a person break it just once, instead of saying, 'Yes, nine out of ten, that's very good,' the law comes along and, with all its thunder, curses that man or woman.

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.' (Gal 3:10)

That's God's standard: 'For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it' (Jas 2:10). How easy it is to come short.

You say, 'That isn't fair! A person does his very best, and keeps it nine times out of ten. Are you saying, then, that if he makes one mistake at the end it's all gone for nothing?'

That is the fact.

¹ The Apostle Paul: see 1 Tim 1:15 and Phil ch. 3.

Here's a man, and he has set himself to climb a mountain. He has climbed the earlier slopes well—but then anybody can climb the early slopes, they're child's play. He's done extraordinarily well—he's done the middle bit, and that was difficult. But now, supremely difficult is the last climb. It's almost a sheer face going up straight, and he begins the last wall to the top. Carefully he goes, hand over hand, and the crowd below watch him through their field glasses. Will he make it? He's got to within an inch of the top. He goes to get the last hold and misses his mark. He smashes himself to death on the rocks below. He missed it only once.

I tell you, you may aim at heaven by doing your very best to keep God's law, but miss the last hold and smash.

That's what God's law is like. It's missing the mark. No good pretending that we'll do better next time; we know ourselves too well, don't we? We've missed the mark too many times to think that we could ever promise that we'd never miss it again. Suppose we could hit it every time for the rest of our lives, what about the times when we missed it before? It's like playing a piece of music, isn't it? We play it so well so far, then we make a mistake, and you can't rub it out, can you?

You can't take a mistake out. We've already missed the mark and the law is against us.

Where is the key out of that prison?

Once again, it is found in the love of God: 'But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Rom 5:8). While we were still missing the mark, God loved us. While we were still sinning, Christ died for us.

God is a realist. If he were to ask me to always be good before he would save me, I should never be saved. God shows his realism when he takes a man like me, who couldn't honestly promise never to sin again, and loves me as I am. He sent his son to die for me while I was still a sinner, and takes me on those terms, just as I am. It doesn't mean that he overlooks my sin. The many times that I've tried to hit the mark and missed it, have merely made me marvel at his Son, Jesus Christ, who always hit the mark and never sinned.

They make me marvel at a God who was not prepared to overlook my sin and my shortcomings. In the person of his Son, God the lawgiver paid the penalty of his own law to uphold its sanctions so that I might go free and yet know that God has been honest and upright, and absolutely just. The law has been honoured and I, the sinner, can go free. There's the key.

Haven't you said to yourself, 'I wouldn't profess to be saved, because I couldn't be a hypocrite'. You've wondered about other people who say they're saved: 'I don't know about that Mrs. Jones, you know. She says she's saved, but I saw her do (such and such) the other week. I admit that I'm no better than her and I do those things, but I wouldn't like to say I am saved.'

If you think that being saved is the same as claiming to be perfect, it isn't, you know. Being saved is owning that you are a sinner and that you can't save yourself, but trusting a God who loves you while you're still a sinner.

And curiously enough, this is the way out of sinning. It begins when we can fall back on a God who loves us while we are yet sinners, and, because Christ has died, can assure us that there is no condemnation. When we trust him, therefore, he gives us his Holy Spirit to begin

the battle with sin on new terms and on a new ground. Do you not find the love of a God like that tugging at your heart? You may come and cast yourself on a God like that, just as you are.

This is the only way out. Let me remind you that if we do not find refuge in a God who has given his Son for our salvation, we shall never find forgiveness. Therefore, we shall never receive the gift of God's Holy spirit, and we shall go on missing the mark. To miss the mark at last, is to miss heaven and fall into hell.

Ungodliness

With other folks, it is not so much weakness; not so much that they've honestly tried to hit the mark and missed it. It's something sadder. These people are called *ungodly*, and we naturally recoil from the term. It means, literally, people who have no respect, no reverence for God and no reverence for their fellow men. People to whom nothing is sacred.

There are men and women like that. God himself is not sacred to them, nor our Lord Jesus Christ. The times they do mention him are times, in their vile temper, where they swear and curse. Even his name is not sacred to them. Truth is not sacred; they would tell you a lie as soon as they looked at you, and they would tell a lie to get themselves out of a difficult situation. They've no reverence for truth. The only thing they reverence is their own skin, their own selves, and they wouldn't hesitate to tell a lie.

They've no respect for human rights. To make a bit of money, they wouldn't mind cheating a widow. Human feelings have no weight with them. It's self that is gratified. Their own bodies are not sacred; sex is not sacred. Health itself is not sacred; they'll constantly drink themselves blind drunk.

In the end, those who don't hold God in reverence don't reverence themselves. They come to despise themselves and there's nothing sacred in life at all. Sin is an ugly thing, and all of us are tarred with that brush, are we not? We can't point a finger of scorn at the prostitute on the street, if we've ever told one lie, if even once we've been selfish. Is there any way out? Where shall we find a new standard of values for people like that? Ah, we find it in the love of a God who loves them, but is still holy.

If I were to think of the most ungodly man I had ever heard of, the man who lacked reverence to the last degree, I think I would choose Judas Iscariot. What a horrible man he was.

Friendship wasn't sacred to him. He had been admitted to the very friendship of Christ himself, and it wasn't a sacred thing. He was prepared to betray his friendship for thirty pieces of silver.

Trust wasn't a sacred thing to him. They trusted him, he was the treasurer and held the money bag. What did he care about the faith they placed in him? If he got the chance to pull a fast one, he pulled it.

God wasn't sacred to him. God sat at the other side of the table, and what did he care? He sold him for thirty pieces of silver. He was a man that would have sold God out of his universe.

Where shall we find a new standard of values for men like that? It is in the love of God, that loved even a Judas. On the very night in which he went out to betray him, our Lord

handed Judas that sop of friendship and pressed it upon him, if only Judas would repent. (See John 13:21–30.)

God's standard of values

In the last analysis, this is the only sane standard of values for life and for eternity, from a God who loves the likes of you and me. Why does he love us? I can't tell you that; save only that that's what God is like. The love of God is the most precious thing in the universe. He loves us because he will love us; he loves us, not because there's some goodness or attractiveness in us—there is none, yet he loves us still.

The thing that gives a diamond its value, you know, is not its inherent quality—it's just a bit of glass. The thing that gives it its value is that people admire it.

Why are you valuable? Why am I valuable? For the simple reason that God, for some reason, loves us. And God's standard of values is that, rather than you and I should perish, his own Son died for us.

Oh, how sacred a thing you are to God. God's standards of values are so big that his own Son would suffer the very pains of hell, rather than you should perish, so sacred are you to God. My dear good man, my dear good woman, if you pass by the love of a God like that, you shall go out into an awful jungle of a hell.

Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practises falsehood. (Rev 22:14–15)

'Blessed are they that have the right to go in at the gates of that eternal city'—why 'blessed'? Because outside is every possible desecration you could think of.

It's no mere platitude that the love of God is the biggest and most valuable thing in the universe, and it's open tonight to every man and woman, however bad. It's the secret of our way out. It doesn't ask you to be better, to start with; it asks you to change your mind and repent, and to come and receive God's love in Christ. He will begin to create new life, and give you new standards of values.

Sin makes us enemies of God

The saddest thing that can be said about sin and what it does in the human heart, is that it makes a person an enemy of God: the very God that made them and gave them breath, their brains to think with and their hands to act. In the end, sin will take those very creatures of God, and make them enemies of God. That's not a rare thing: people who don't intend to get saved have no time for God. Why are they his enemies? What's he done to them?

I speak softly and tenderly to any heart here that feels bitter against God. You've had some tragedy in your life, maybe; you are plagued with a major illness, or a terrible bereavement, and your heart feels so sore that you could call God your enemy. I speak tenderly to you. I don't suggest that there is a simple explanation to your trouble. But we shouldn't have had a body in which to be ill, should we, unless God had given us a body?

If I were to give you a bright, shining, brand new car today, and five years from now it went irretrievably wrong, would you feel bitter against me because the thing went wrong?

You'd say, 'Well, I got five years out of it anyway.'

Our wisdom is limited. Listen to what God said to Job when Job was feeling sore (Job ch. 38). 'Job,' said he, 'do you know better than I? Do you make the sun get up in the morning? Could you control the sea? Have a go at arranging the stars! Could you do it better than I?'

We have to shut our mouths, don't we? If God's done it wrong, we couldn't do it better. But we needn't over-fret our souls too much, because it was while we were still enemies that God's Son died for us.

I'll tell you why men and women are enemies of God. It happened because our great first father, Adam, with all the delights of Eden, rebelled against God. He insisted on having his own way, he transgressed and he fell, and ever since his race has been cursed by a nature that is an enemy of God. Put a command of God in front of me and I kick, simply because I was born a sinner.

You say, 'That isn't fair, then. If I'm a sinner, and I am an enemy of God because I've got an old wicked nature that I couldn't help, I just got it when I was born, then it isn't fair that I should be condemned for it.'

Oh, listen. You're never going to be condemned because you've got an old nature that kicks against God. God says, 'Look here, I love you, and even though you've got a nature that's against me, and is my very enemy, I love you still. I'm prepared to give you a new heart, and take that enmity away, for I loved you so much that while you were still an enemy, Christ died for you.'

People are free to refuse or to receive God's love

If some men and women will be condemned at last, it's because they refused the love of a God that loved them while they were still enemies. But it's open to us this very night to lay down our rebellion and our hard thoughts against God, and come and receive the love of a God that not only gives us forgiveness here, but assures us of present eternal life, of his heaven and home at last, and all that God can give us. If we choose to keep away, we may kick and we may fight, but we're doomed to failure.

Khrushchev has let off his bomb. My, it was a big bomb.² But the little Tornado aircraft that flies across the world is infinitely small, compared to God's fiery indignation that will come soon. Fancy, tiny men and women fighting against an infinite God. That's insanity, that is suicide,

What shall we do? As our hearts are touched, what can we do this very night but to fall back on a God who loves us. If never before, come repentantly and believe his love, and receive his Son as your sacrifice and Saviour.

² *Tsar Bomba*, (Russian: 'King of Bombs'), by-name of RDS-220, also called Big Ivan, Soviet thermonuclear bomb that was detonated in a test over Novaya Zemlya island in the Arctic Ocean on October 30, 1961. The largest nuclear weapon ever set off, it produced the most powerful human-made explosion ever recorded (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

Shall we pray.

Father, we bow to praise thee at the end of our thinking together, for the wonder and the realism of thy love. We thank thee that it has not escaped thee what we are really like. We thank thee that thou art not deceived; thou dost read our hearts and know us better than we know ourselves. We praise thee that, knowing the very worst about us, thou dost love us just the same.

We praise thee for thy Son, our Lord, who, while we were yet sinners, died for us. For those of us who have found in him our need answered, who already rejoice in thy love and its great salvation, we do praise thee and give thanks. Earnestly we pray that if any here are yet outside, and have never come to thee, never confessed their need, never received the Saviour, oh God, open their hearts we pray, that they may come running to him, to find him as good as his word; find someone who will take them as they are, and not cast them out.

Forbid that any here who have heard thine invitation should slip away out, through weakness, or sin, or ungodliness, or enmity, and end at last beyond thy love and beyond all hope forever.

To this end, bless thy word we pray. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has 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.