

**Priesthood and Holiness,  
Sin and its Consequences,  
Atonement and Acceptance.**

*Studies from the Books of Samuel*

*David W. Gooding*

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w: [www.myrtlefieldhouse.com](http://www.myrtlefieldhouse.com)

e: [info@myrtlefieldhouse.com](mailto:info@myrtlefieldhouse.com)

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## What does it Mean to be a Priest?

*Reading: Exodus 19:3–6; 1 Samuel 2:12–17*

Let me say what a pleasure it is for me to see such an earnest assembly of people all gathered to study the word of God and expecting to hear his voice.

Our topic is based on the First Book of Samuel and its early chapters—a disturbed period of Israel’s history. Until then they had been ruled by judges and by elders of each tribe, but now they were in moral and spiritual confusion in a period that eventually led to the changeover from rule by judges to rule by kings.

The book of 1 Samuel is especially interesting because it reminds us of the two things that marked ancient Israel: monotheism—belief in the one true God; and messianism—a king who would be anointed by God. This idea lived on in spite of the failure of the kings and was fulfilled in our Lord Jesus, who was of the seed of David.

1. *Monotheism*: By the time of Abraham the nations at large had lost their grip on the reality that there is but one true God. They had gone off in the deification of the forces of nature and worshipped the sun god, and the moon god, and the god of fertility, and the god of wind and wave and ocean strength. So from the time of Abraham Israel was uniquely marked by its belief in the one true God. That relationship was summed up in the covenant that God made with them when they left Egypt and were on the way to their promised land. God came down on Mount Sinai and proposed a covenant: he was to be their God and they were to be his people. That sacred covenant and the documents relating to it were housed in the ark of the Lord that normally stood in the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle. It marked this special emphasis in Israel, faith in the one true God. The early chapters of 1 Samuel are going to tell us that Israel lost that ark! With God’s permission the Gentile Philistines carried it off. This was a shocking thing to happen, since it housed the terms of their relationship with God.

2. *Messianism*. Israel believed that their king was anointed by God, but at the end of 1 Samuel they lost their messiah to the Gentiles. You may decide now that it is a sorry book; but it isn’t all that sad because in both instances it’s going to tell us of revival. The ark eventually came back to Israel, and 2 Samuel will tell us how the messianic king came back at last and was acknowledged in Israel.

You say, ‘Why did God allow the Philistines to come and capture the ark, since it carried the documents that outlined Israel’s special relationship to the one true God?’ The answer to that question is, because of the gross failure of the priesthood in Israel. One of the

consequences was that for the time being Israel lost the ark of God's covenant. If we are going to talk about the failure of Israel's priesthood, perhaps we ought to start by considering what the priests should have been, and what priesthood in Israel meant (Exod 19:3–6). Here is God instituting priesthood in Israel, telling them why he did it and what it meant—supremely what it meant to him, not merely what it meant to them.

Let's pause at that juncture and seek God's help to understand the colossal things that are being said here. 'This is what I want you to tell Israel,' says God to Moses. 'You have seen what I have done, and the plagues and the judgments that I brought on Egypt, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to myself.' What for? The first answer is, for God's benefit! 'If only they will keep my covenant they shall be a specially treasured possession for me.' That's what redemption meant to God. 'All the earth is mine, all its nations are mine,' said God. 'You shall be a unique, special treasure to me.'

Now you might find that a difficult concept. Did God not make the whole universe? God is not hard up for things. Wait until you get to heaven and see the furniture and the oil paintings! Only they will be alive—the oil paintings in heaven are real people. And the galaxies he has, and the millions of human beings. How could that God be given anything more, and count anything a spectacular and unique treasure? 'It will be difficult for them to get hold of it, but do your best Moses,' says God. 'This is what you are to tell them, and make them sense it and feel it—they shall be a kingdom of priests to me, a holy nation' (see v. 6). How could a creature have a more important or significant task or calling, than to entertain the very heart of almighty God and mean something to him?

The last book in the Old Testament tells us another thing about the priests. 'For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge' (Mal 2:7). The priests were there, not only to minister to God. They had another duty, to speak to the people about God. Israel as a whole was to stand in the world for the one true God and tell people the knowledge of him. That is the significance of Israel's priesthood as God intended it.

There is a lovely verse or two in the prophecy of Jeremiah. The metaphor is not mine—this is a description of when God went courting:

'Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the LORD, "I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown. Israel was holy to the LORD, the firstfruits of his harvest.'" (Jer 2:2–3)

A moving passage, isn't it? We must remember who we are talking about. He is the almighty and eternal God, Creator of heaven and earth, this universe and any other universes there might be. He came down to the arid wilderness of Sinai, courting Israel, and now the nation had largely forgotten him. 'I remember it,' says God; 'those early days when you responded to my overtures and you went after me in the wilderness.' The first love of the redeemed—'to this day I remember it and what it meant.' And we remember what the Lord Jesus had to say to the church in Ephesus—'there are many good points about you, but I have this against you, you have left your first love' (see Rev 2:2–4).

What has this got to do with us, all this about Israel being priests? Well, I needn't remind you what Peter tells us, in words taken from the book of Exodus—we too are chosen by God to be a kingdom of priests:

As you come to him [i.e. Christ], a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ . . . But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. (1 Pet 2:4–5, 9)

Our function as priests is to be there to minister, in the first place to God, and in the second place to be a teaching priesthood and tell out the wonderful virtues of God to those around us.

So now we come to consider the failure of Israel's priests, as recorded in 1 Samuel 2:12–17.<sup>1</sup> Let's ponder it and try to take it in. When the Israelites brought their sacrifices, some parts of certain sacrifices were given to the priests. But of course careful rules and directions surrounded the whole thing. All the fat had always to be burned. In some offerings the whole animal was offered and the priests got nothing but the skin, the hide, of the bullock. In the peace offerings the priests got a good portion. However, first of all the priests had to offer the sacrifice to God. As someone has put it—God first, my neighbour second, myself last.

Judge the enormity then of what these priests were doing. When anybody came to offer a sacrifice, while it was being processed the priest would come with a three-pronged fork and stick it into the meat and take it for himself. The idea of the three prongs was that what the one prong didn't get, the others got. If the offerer had said, 'Aren't you going to burn the fat and God's part first?' the priest would say, 'Nonsense, give it to me right now! And if you don't I will take it by force. What do you think I am a priest for?' To him the primary thing was his own satisfaction, his own enjoyment and profit. He was meant to get profit, but not primary profit. That should have been for God. Verse 22 tells us of their outlandish behaviour. There were women who came to serve the practical things of the tabernacle. These young men took them and had sexual relations with them. Ponder what it meant. As priests their priority was supposed to be what God got out of it.

I don't know about you, but I have to ask myself why I come to meetings of the Christian church. Is it to get something for myself, or is my prime service to give something to God? I sometimes hear people complain, 'I don't go any more because I don't get anything out of it!' Well, that's a sad thing, but the prime question should be, what did I bring to God—what did God get out of my presence there?

Whose fault was it? There came a man of God to Eli, the father of the priests (2:27)—their names were Hophni and Phinehas. The man of God blamed not just the young men, he blamed their father. 'You let them do what they like, you have valued and honoured your sons above the Lord.' You can see it in Eli's lenient attitude to Hophni and Phinehas: 'I hear very bad things about you—you know you really ought not to do such things!' (see v. 24). Why didn't he boot them out of the priesthood? 'You have honoured your sons above me,'

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<sup>1</sup> In modern terms they were not converted, they were not saved. They were priests, but they did not know the Lord.

says God. 'But I want to remind you, Eli, I will honour and remember those who serve me; and they who despise me shall be lightly esteemed' (see v. 30).

You mustn't be surprised when you subsequently read of the disaster that came upon Israel as a result of the failure of the priests. The Philistines came up to battle, and on the first occasion they beat the Israelites very severely. So the Israelites thought, 'What shall we do?' And then they had an idea. 'Why not bring the ark out of the tabernacle into the battle-lines and it will save us!' But *it* never saved anybody. There is only one Saviour, and that is the Lord himself. No *it* saves anybody. As the ark came into the ranks of the soldiers, Hophni and Phinehas were there. They regarded that ark as a magical box, and you can see what's going to happen now. What with all their immoral goings-on, and all their selfishness and disregard of God, God allowed the ark to be taken by the Philistines. If that's how they regarded it—just as a box with charms in it—God will disabuse them of the idea. It didn't save them. We are not saved by formulae—we are saved by the living God and the living Saviour. So the ark of God was taken, and when it got into the heathen temples God did some miracles to impress upon the Philistines how real he was.

I want now to put the other side of the story. There came a revival. It is interesting to notice that the trouble had come because Eli honoured his sons above God, and the revival began when mothers left their sons to God. But let me explain what otherwise will be very enigmatic. There were three leaders of this revival, and I am not going to suggest that it was almost instantaneous. It wasn't—a subsequent chapter tells us that the time was very long. When people have gone down the slope of carelessness and loss of interest in God, and defy his laws and principles, then revival can be a long time coming. Sometimes so long that it has to allow for a whole generation to pass away and a new generation to come on the scene.

*The first secret of the revival lay with a woman called Hannah.* She was a wonderful soul. Her husband Elkanah was quite religious and went up to the festivals in the tabernacle every time he should. He had two wives, Peninnah and Hannah. I am not recommending that state of affairs! In fact it was quite unpleasant, particularly for Hannah, because Peninnah had children and Hannah had no children. Can you imagine the competition? It's a very hard thing when we have longings that nature itself has put within us, and then fulfilling them becomes impossible. That's a very big burden to bear. And as for Elkanah, he was a foolish husband! When Hannah was depressed he said to her, 'Why are you bothered about that—am I not better to you than ten sons?'

It made Hannah think of the purpose in having children. Was it just to satisfy the urges of nature, or was there more to it? She decided there was more to it. Of course she still wanted a child, but she took it to the Lord. She said, 'Lord, if you could give me a child I could devote him to your service in the tabernacle, and begin to counter the disreputable behaviour of Eli's sons.'

May I ask you a big question? Why would you want to be married (if you are not already)? Just for the sake of being married? It's a marvellous gift, but would you tell the Lord that if it could serve his purposes, that would give it infinite significance? Why would you want to be an architect or an accountant or a mechanic? Just to make money, or is that part of your priesthood? Although it is the way you get your food and clothes, is it also how you could

serve the Lord and make your occupation serve his interests? In practical life, what does it mean to be a priest?

Hannah decided that she still wanted a child, but now she saw the possibility that if the Lord gave her a child it could become significant for God and his kingdom. She eventually had the child, Samuel. She waited until he was weaned, which in those days would have been about four years old, then she took him up to the tabernacle and left him. What a sacrifice that was. How it tugged at her heart—she was acting like a true priest.

*The second revival came with another woman, the wife of Phinehas (ch. 4).* She was with child and about to give birth when the messenger came from the battlefield to announce that the ark of God had been taken, Eli was dead, and Phinehas and Hophni were slain in battle. In those moments, perhaps the birth induced by the bad news, she had a son. The women tried to give her courage, but she said “‘The glory has departed from Israel!’ because the ark of God has been captured’ (v. 21). She named the child Ichabod—‘the glory is gone’. She refused to be comforted and went home to heaven.

You say, that’s pessimism! Well, suppose in your particular church group things weren’t going well and I say to you, ‘How are things?’ And you say to me, ‘Miserable, hopeless and difficult.’ And then you add, ‘But we had a lovely holiday in Spain; we saw some beautiful things!’ Well, I hope you did have a good holiday, but did that make up for the situation in your church? Could anything compensate if the things of God with us were not going as they should? What is our sense of values?

*And finally, the third path of revival* came when the Philistines got distressed at God’s judgments on them for having the ark among them. When the ark was brought into the Philistine temple of Dagon, Dagon fell over. What do you do if your god falls over? You heave him up and put him back in his place! But then the next day he fell over again, and his head and hands were cut off. What was this ark? And was it the God of Israel now that did this thing to their god, to their idol?

So they said that they would have an experiment, and that would solve it. They got two cows that had calves, so their udders were full of milk. They shut up their calves at home in their barns, attached the cows to a cart and put the ark on the cart. Now we will see if Israel’s God is real, for it would be a tremendous force that would overcome the instinct of nature to make those cows leave their calves. The Hebrew, with sublime simplicity, calls them ‘their sons’. Is there a God whose power exceeds the power of natural instinct? The cows went down the road. It wasn’t that they didn’t feel it—they lowed as they went (6:12). They took the ark of God back and left their sons behind.

When they got to the other end the people of Beth-shemesh took the ark, chopped up the cart to make the wood for the sacrifice, cut the two animals in pieces and offered them in sacrifice to God. You say, ‘Poor old cows!’ Yes, they left their sons by a power that is beyond human instinct and ended up on an altar in sacrifice to God.

I’m not to be inhuman; it’s not a bad thing when my heart is full of natural instinct. However, God might call me to go beyond my selfish interest and give myself to him. Indeed, as I read it, the injunction for us all is this:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (Rom 12:1)

It was the beginning of the way of revival from the horrible moral tangle and spiritual disaster that Eli had allowed his sons to produce in Israel, when these three groups of mothers took their sons and in their way put God first. And so may God speak to us through his Word.



## The Difference between the Penalty of Sin and the Consequence of Sin

*Reading: Galatians 6:1–8; 2 Samuel 12:7–14*

At the start of this study I want to make clear what I mean by the semi-technical terms, *penalty* and *consequence*, by means of an analogy.

Here is a young Christian businessman of around thirty years of age. He gets called to a business conference in London, and at the party that follows he yields to temptation and gets drunk. As he moves out from the party room he gets his step wrong, stumbles and goes head over heels right down the stairs to the foyer. He so smashes up one of his legs that the doctors decide they must amputate it. When he comes to, he confesses his sin to the Lord in deep and genuine contrition; the Lord forgives him there and then on the spot, of course. But what about the leg he's lost? If he prayed, 'Lord, make the leg grow again,' what do you think the Lord would do? Perform a miracle and make the leg grow again? Or would it be the fact that, though he has forgiveness of the *penalty* of sin, the *consequence* will last for life? You say, 'But one day the Lord will come, and if he is dead, the man will be raised again; and if he's still alive, he'll be changed to have a body like the Lord Jesus, and he'll have two legs then.' Yes he will, forever! What about the consequences now? For the time being I'll just change my phrase to 'the temporal consequences of sin' ('temporal', meaning until the Lord comes).

Now I suggest that there is such a difference, so let us consider first what the New Testament has to say on *the question of the penalty and the forgiveness of sins*. I would remind you of verses that you know very well, to which all of us cling in times of our need throughout life. 'We have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins' (Eph 1:7 NIV; cf Col 1:14). 'Through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses' (Acts 13:38–39). And our blessed Lord, who is to be the judge on the great white throne, has told us explicitly: 'Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life' (John 5:24).

And if we needed it, according to the new covenant God has undertaken and given his word of honour: 'For I will be merciful towards their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more' (Heb 8:12). We need to be just a little bit careful about the meaning of the term

*remember* in that verse. When God says he will not remember our sins and iniquities any more he does not mean that he will eventually forget that we have ever been sinners. I don't think you will forget it either! When you hear the choirs of heaven singing, 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain,' will you have to ask, 'What does that bit mean — why was he slain?' Won't you know? And when God sees the nail prints in our Saviour's hands will he find himself saying, 'I can't think what he has that for?' No, God will not forget that we have been sinners, and neither shall we. But thank God for his absolute assurance that he will not get out his judgment book, open the page, read the long list of our sins, and then serve out the punishment for them. He has promised never to do that. He has wiped the slate clean, says Colossians 2:14—obliterated the guilt of our sins. As far as the penalty goes, he will never bring up our sins and iniquities before us. Let me emphasise it therefore: in anything I am about to say I am not undermining the question of our forgiveness, our assurance or our acceptance with God. But now let me quote two passages in the New Testament that point out that there is a difference between the pardon that we have for the penalty of sin on the one hand, and the consequences of sin on the other.

Firstly, Galatians 6:1–8. You can see the gracious way that Paul phrases it: 'Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted' (v. 1). The implication is, and we need to bear it in mind, that if you were tempted like this brother has been you might have fallen just as he did. Then Paul continues:

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbour. For each will have to bear his own load. One who is taught the word must share all good things with the one who teaches. Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. (vv. 2–8)

It is a law of nature that you reap what you sow. God himself has built it into his universe and into our lives. Hence the warning, 'the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.' We are not to be deceived, 'God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.'

I come from an agricultural background, and in my youth it would pay the farmers to sow barley rather than wheat. There was much more profit on the barley. But suppose there was a Christian farmer, and he had promised the owner down at the mill that this year he would sow wheat. At first he thought he would keep the promise and sow wheat. But when it came near, and he looked at the prices in the newspaper for wheat and compared it with barley, he yielded to temptation and sowed barley in his field. Like barley does, it took a while to come up. When it had a little green leaf and then it grew, he saw that it was really barley and his conscience smote him. He had not been true to his word and so had disobeyed the Lord—what should he do now? So he confesses it before the Lord: 'Lord, I said I would grow wheat and I have sown barley. Lord, please forgive me.' And of course the Lord would forgive him: 'if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins' (1 John 1:9). But suppose the man then prayed, 'Lord, make this barley grow up into wheat' —do you suppose the Lord

would do that? Or would the man have to face the consequence of his disobedience? Forgiven, with no penalty—but what he would reap would be barley, not wheat. God doesn't necessarily change the consequence.

And so we are going to look back now into the Old Testament to the book of 2 Samuel for a very famous example of this. This is the story of King David after he had come to power. God is open and honest in his Word. You remember at a certain time David took the wife of one of his heroic soldiers, Uriah, and committed adultery with her. The prophet comes to rebuke David for what he has done, and from that sad passage we see two things at once. When David was convicted of his sin by God's word through Nathan the prophet, David sincerely and contritely confessed, 'I have sinned against the LORD.' Nathan said to David, 'The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die' (2 Sam 12:13). There was no penalty. It was true then as it is true today: 'if we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sin, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'

But then notice the 'however': 'However, because by this deed you have given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also who is born to you shall surely die.' (v. 14 NKJV). This was one of the consequences of his sin, and there were other consequences, which we shall come to presently. Nathan told him that the child born of this adulterous union would die. David went in before the Lord and lay on the ground, fasted and prayed, afflicted his soul and pleaded with God that the child should live. When the servants came to offer him food he wouldn't eat or drink. At the end of some days the child died, and when David learned of it he got up from the ground, had a bath, dressed himself in new clothes and asked the servants to set on a meal in the palace. The servants couldn't understand it; they must have thought it was very curious. They said, 'While the child was still alive he humbled himself on the ground, and fasted and prayed. Now the child has gone, he gets up and resumes normal life' (see v. 21). People usually mourn after a child is dead. David explains it:

'While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, "Who knows whether the Lord will be gracious to me, that the child may live?" But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me.' (vv. 22–23)

Notice what David said: 'Perhaps the Lord will be gracious to *me* (not the child) and spare me this sorrow'; but the Lord didn't, and David had to face the consequences.

Let me just say a little about the nature of David's sin. You say, that's obvious—at least to anybody that can read English. Yes, but at the heart of it what was involved? David sinned at his strongest point. He was a lovely fellow, not only courageous in battle, as with Goliath; but when he came to the throne he was exceedingly merciful. He was marked by a virtue that in Hebrew is called *hesed*. It's a little difficult to translate it into English, because it has a number of connotations. It can mean 'kindness', or 'loving kindness'. It's a word that God uses of himself, and what a delightful word it is. God's loving kindness is over all his works. And David was exceedingly kind—loving, kind.

But then in a certain context the word takes on another meaning, and it means 'loyal to a covenant'. You get a superb example of this in 2 Samuel 9:1: 'And David said, "Is there still anyone left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness [*hesed*] for Jonathan's sake?"' The story behind it is this. Jonathan was the crown prince in Israel, but when he saw David do what even he dare not do—go out to fight the giant Goliath—Jonathan's heart fell in love with him. Magnificent warrior, magnificent courage! And when David came back with the head of Goliath in his hand, Jonathan undid his belt (the royal belt, carrying the royal insignia). Jonathan was a crown prince, and in stripping himself of his belt and his raiment Jonathan was virtually handing over the right to the throne to David. And though King Saul, Jonathan's father, persecuted David, Jonathan stuck by him loyally.

When at last it became apparent that David must flee for his life and get away from Saul, Jonathan came out to him and had a farewell message (1 Sam 23:16–18). 'Look, David,' he said, 'I know you are going to be king in my place; but when you have come to the throne and God has put down all your enemies, please show *hesed*, kindness, loyalty to me. Swear to me that you will not cut off my name and my house from the earth.' And David swore that he would do as Jonathan asked. Second Samuel 9 has reached the stage where David is universally triumphant, and God has cut off the majority of his enemies from before him. David says, 'Is there still anyone left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan's sake?' Good old David—loyal in spite of his position. And as a result he invited Mephibosheth, Jonathan's son, to come and eat bread with him at his table in the palace and restored to him all the estates that had been Saul's. Magnificent loyalty!

In chapter 10 we read that the king of Ammon died and was succeeded by his son. 'And David said, "I will deal loyally with Hanun the son of Nahash, as his father dealt loyally with me"' (v. 2). They both were kings: David king of Israel, Hanun king of Ammon. The father of the king of Ammon had been kind and loyal to David, and when he died David sent ambassadors to convey his condolences to the heir who had now ascended the throne. David was marked by loyalty and kindness. Alas, this time the young king of Ammon, Hanun, rebuffed David's kindness in a most shocking way. And when they saw that they had inflamed the nation of Israel by their brutality and the way they shamed David's ambassadors, they asked the Syrians to come and join them and fight against Israel. David was obliged to fight, and it was a war that apparently went on for some two or three years.

So, at the time of year when the kings went out to war, David sent Joab his commander-in-chief to go out with the armies and fight against Ammon in the ongoing war. David stayed behind. Well, I suppose he was getting on for middle age! He was taking it a bit easy. One afternoon he had been having his siesta and he got up and walked on the roof of the house. Nearby he saw a woman, and she was bathing. She was very beautiful. He enquired who she was. She was the wife of Uriah, one of David's heroes. 'So David sent messengers, and took her' (11:4). How was that loyal to Uriah her husband, who was away at the front fighting for David and for his God? Whatever had come over David?

Then the woman told David she was pregnant. He seems to have suffered a panic attack, because he thought he must cover it up at any cost. So he wrote a letter to Joab the commander-in-chief at the front, and said, 'Send me Uriah the Hittite.' When he arrived David asked him, how's the war getting on, and how are the captains behaving, and are you having success

with your tactics, and one thing or another—as though he was really concerned about the war. And then he said, ‘I’d like to see you tomorrow, but you go home now and take some time with your wife.’ He was hoping that nature would do her task and the parentage of the child-to-be would be uncertain. It didn’t work, for Uriah that night went out and slept at the king’s door with the king’s servants who were on guard. In the morning when David learned of this he called Uriah and said, ‘Why didn’t you go home?’ Now listen to Uriah:

‘The ark and Israel and Judah dwell in booths, and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field. Shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do this thing.’ (11:11)

‘The presence of the Lord is in the ark, I couldn’t live with my conscience if I went home and indulged in comfort while the Lord’s armies are fighting in the field.’ What magnificent loyalty! So David said, ‘Come to dinner with me tonight then!’ And that night at dinner, David tried to make him drunk to overcome his sense of loyalty. But Uriah, drunk though he may have been, had a deeper sense of loyalty, and he slept at the king’s door again. It was getting very dangerous for the king. It would all come out, he felt. So he wrote a letter to Joab, sealed it and gave it to Uriah to take back to Joab and to the army. And here was Uriah faithfully carrying out the king’s wish, not knowing that inside it was written his death warrant. Joab was to put him in the forefront of the hottest battle to make sure Uriah got killed.

Can you explain it? What happened to David? He was overwhelmed in what was his strongest point—his sense of kindness and loyalty. When the report came from his commander-in-chief back at the palace, and it ended ‘Your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also’ (11:24), David said to the messenger, ‘Tell Joab not to worry about that, the sword takes one as well as another’—it’s chance! Really? Tell me, what would you have done to David if you had been God? Would you have forgiven him? Well that is what God did. God sent Nathan to him to denounce his sin and when David confessed ‘I have sinned before the LORD,’ the prophet was authorised to say ‘The LORD also has put away your sin’ (12:13). It would almost bring tears to your eyes: ‘Who is a pardoning God like thee, or who has grace so rich and free?’<sup>2</sup>

Pardon from the penalty, but what about the consequences? Nathan tells him what the consequences will be—they won’t be accidental. God has foreseen it and will allow them to happen; so much so that as you read the text you would think God had made these things happen. ‘You have slain Uriah with the sword, David. The sword from now on will never depart from your own house. What you sow, you reap. You took another man’s wife. You did it secretly, I will take your wives and give them to a neighbour of yours and he will do it on top of the palace in the sight of all Israel.’ Consequences! Why did God do that? I submit it to you that forgiveness is one thing, but David must learn now under the discipline of God what disloyalty actually means by experiencing it himself. It is the grace of God that teaches us that, ‘denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly and righteously in this present world’ (Titus 2:12).

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<sup>2</sup> Samuel Davies (1723–61), ‘Great God of wonders!’

We know what happened, so let me just remind you of the stories that follow this in 2 Samuel 13 and the following chapters. Absalom, the son of David's third wife, was a very handsome man. He had a sister and she, like him, was very beautiful indeed. Her name was Tamar. The crown prince, who was the son of David's first wife, was called Amnon, and he conceived a passion for his sister and couldn't think how he would satisfy it. But there was an adviser in the court, a cunning sophisticated man.

He said to Amnon, 'Why are you looking so down in the mouth these days?'

And he said, 'I am in love with my sister, Tamar, and I don't know what to do about it.'

'I'll tell you what to do,' he said. 'Go home and lie down on your bed as though you were sick. When the king comes to see you, tell him you are not very well and ask him to send your sister Tamar so that she can cook some nice food and buck up your appetite.'

David agreed to do that and went back and told Tamar to come to Amnon's house. When she got there and had made the cakes he raped her, but then he hated her and turned her out and bolted the door and exposed her to public shame. When David heard of it, I don't know how he felt. Why hadn't he seen through it? He had told Tamar to go there—why hadn't he seen through Amnon? He wasn't ill, it was simple lust and David had facilitated it. David was very angry.

Tamar's brother Absalom didn't say a word, but nurtured revenge in his heart for two whole years. He was determined to get his own back on Amnon, so after two years he went to see the king and said that he had sheep shearers on his estate.<sup>3</sup> So Absalom asked David if he and the king's sons would come to the sheep-shearing party. David said that he wouldn't come, as it would be an impossible expense for Absalom. So Absalom said, 'Let Amnon come.' Did the king have second thoughts—'Why should he go with you?' (2 Sam 13:26). But Absalom was good at talking, and he pressed the king. In the end David gave permission for Amnon to go along with all the others of the king's sons. When the party was merry Absalom commanded his troops to murder Amnon. How do you suppose David felt? They had implicated him in it—he had actually given permission for Amnon to go. Why didn't he see through it? Why didn't he see through himself that night, when he walked on the top of the palace and saw Bathsheba?

Having murdered his brother, to escape the wrath of the king, Absalom went into voluntary exile. After two or three years the king grew soft at heart. Amnon was dead, and really he liked Absalom. He was a fine fellow! So the king was persuaded to have him back and eventually kissed him. But there was no 'I am sorry' from Absalom—nothing but defiance. The king kissed him, and almost the very next day Absalom was plotting a revolt against the king to seize the throne.

When Absalom asked one of his chief advisers how to go about it, Ahithophel said, 'I'll tell you what, Absalom. I should take your father's concubines that he has left in the house and spread a tent on the roof of the palace in the sight of all Israel. Make it such a shocking thing that Israel will see that there is no chance of reconciliation between yourself and the king' (see 16:21–22). Will he stop at nothing? Is there no sanctity that will put the brake on him?

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<sup>3</sup> Sheep shearing time was a time when they made merry—like Harvest Home in Britain. They had parties and their friends joined in the fun.

'Tell me what I should next do,' said Absalom to his adviser.

'Give me a few troops and we will go down, now David is fleeing, and before he gets established anywhere we will slit the king's throat. There is no other leader around, and the nation will come back to you.'

'I think that's a very good idea,' said Absalom.

As David himself said earlier, 'My own son seeks my life' (16:11).

Disloyalty—why did God allow it? David was forgiven as soon as he confessed his sin, but he would need to be disciplined. Isn't that why God allowed it? David would need to be made to feel the evil of disloyalty in his very inner soul.

I have dwelt at length on these unhappy incidents. They stand in Scripture for our learning, to warn us, for at heart we are no better than David. We need constantly to ask forgiveness, assured that 'if we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins' (1 John 1:9). But we should remember there is a difference between the pardon for the penalty of sin and the consequences of sin. By permitting the consequences, it is not that God is being tyrannical and hard-hearted. He allows consequences that in his grace he may teach us by experience to deny fleshly lusts. It remains true that whatsoever a man sows, that shall he reap. If we sow to the Spirit we shall reap everlasting life.

You say, 'I've already got everlasting life!' Of course you have—if you have trusted in Christ you have already got it. A child of five years old has already got physical life and mental life, but it will need a lot of education to develop enjoyment of it and all its potential. The moment we trust Christ we have eternal life and can never lose it. Thank God for it, but we shall need a lot of training to develop its potential. And where we go wrong our gracious Father allows us to feel the bitterness of sin, so that we might be prepared and strengthened to resist what otherwise might run riot in our lives.

I cannot let the matter rest there. I must stress the fact that after this David recovered and did a lot of wonderful things in his life. Particularly in old age he spent his last years preparing treasure of every kind for the building of the house of God, which was built in the days of Solomon. The house was exceedingly magnificent (1 Chr 22:5), and David's later days were very profitable. So, lest we should think that we have done wrong and strayed, and that's us finished, there is restoration. Peter denied the Lord, but the Lord had prayed for him that his faith shouldn't fail.

I have talked about the temporal consequences of sin. Some of you might like to ask whether there are any eternal consequences, but I have said enough for now.

## The Substitutionary Atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ

*Reading: 2 Samuel 14*

The substitutionary atonement of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ is a foundational doctrine of the Christian gospel, but it has been criticized many times in the past and still is, not only in the world at large but even in religious circles. We shall therefore return to the books of Samuel later in our discussion to see how it may help us in the matters concerning forgiveness on the one hand, and the punishment of sin on the other.

But let's start by celebrating one of the glorious features of our Christian gospel. Upon repentance and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ we are not only forgiven instantaneously—'justified from everything from which [we] could not be justified by the law of Moses' (Acts 13:39 ESV mg)—but immediately we are given access into the divine presence and know ourselves welcomed before God. We have access into the holiest (Heb 10:19) and know his loving arms of embrace and the kiss such as the father gave the prodigal when he returned from the far distant land.

So, let's celebrate this wonder. 'Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God,' and not only peace with God but 'access by faith into this grace in which we stand' (Rom 5:1–2). We may stand confidently without fear of being dislodged. Talking of our blessed Lord, who came and preached peace to those that were near (his Jewish people), and to those who were far off (us Gentiles), Paul says, 'through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father' (Eph 2:17–18)—immediate access and an assured welcome in the presence of God. And lest our hearts grow fearful Hebrews 10 reminds us that we not only have access into the holiest of all, we have boldness: 'let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water' (v. 22). What a glorious thing that is.

Unfortunately, there are some believers who do not yet enjoy that glorious sense of access into the divine presence. I was with such a study group some years ago, and they felt you couldn't be sure of heaven. I said to them, 'That's very odd because I was there today!' They said, 'How could you have been there today?' I meant to provoke them, of course. But that's what it says: 'access into the holy place'—in the context that is the holiest of all, 'through the blood of Jesus', knowing ourselves welcome. Why is it that some believers don't have that sense of access and welcome? Because it is their thinking that Jesus died so that we might be



forgiven, and our sins are forgiven up to the moment. But there remains the big future, and what should happen if we fall short. Since we can't be sure of that future, then we cannot be sure of heaven. Against that there are these wonderful assertions of holy Scripture.

If we then enquire how we can have this access—on what basis, and what has happened to make it possible—the answer according to the New Testament is that the Saviour has suffered the wrath of God against our sin. Christ has suffered the full indignation of God that our sins have provoked. He suffered it on the cross, and because he suffered it in total 'there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Rom 8:1).

That indeed is one of the first results of the gospel. The Epistle to the Romans, which is the New Testament's detailed exposition of the Christian gospel, begins by telling us why we need to be saved. The first reason it gives is this: 'For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men' (1:18). To be sure, there are many other reasons why we need to be saved, but in Romans this stands first. Then the gospel tells us how this wrath of God has been met for those that trust the Saviour, and Paul outlines how it can be:

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. (Rom 3:23–25)

Propitiation is a long word, and it would be good if there were a more modern equivalent. But the particular emphasis in the term *propitiation* as used in the New Testament is this. God doesn't take our sins lightly, and what Christ has done and what he has suffered has dealt with the holy indignation of God.

When the Bible talks of people being reconciled to God, commentators often suppose that it means that God changes our hearts through the glorious message of the gospel, and therefore we come to see that he welcomes us. But while that is true, the other thing is true. For us to be reconciled to God, Christ had to put right what was troubling God himself—the offence that our sins caused to almighty God. So the death of Christ was a sacrifice, what the Bible calls *propitiation*, and his death answered the holy indignation of God against human sin and satisfied his wrath.

If we would like a particularly lucid and brief summary of that, we could do no better than Galatians: 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"' (3:13). Christ was crucified on a cross of wood. In the Old Testament, people that had committed some grave sin, such as murder, would be put to death, generally by stoning. But if the crime that a man had done was so hideous, after they had put him to death they hanged his body on a tree as a spectacle to earth and heaven. By sundown they had to take him off the tree and bury him. The fact is this, cursed is everybody that (in that sense) hangs on a tree. Does it not touch our hearts as well as our consciences that our blessed Lord was hung upon a tree under God's curse so that we might be forgiven? He bore for us the indignation that our sins provoked in God. God was satisfied and raised him from the dead. God delivered him up for our trespasses and raised him again to show that we who trust him are in the clear—'he raised him again for our justification' (Rom 4:25).

And therefore, as it comes to the climax of the first major argument in the epistle, Romans 5 assures us:

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. (5:8–9)

No fear in the future, therefore, of the wrath of God. As I understand it, that is the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement of our blessed Lord Jesus, which he made at Calvary when God laid upon him the iniquity of us all. As the ancient prophet put it:

But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. . . . Yet it was God's own purpose to crush him; he has put him to grief. (Isa 53:5, 10)

But as you will know there have been and still are many objections to this doctrine of the wrath of God. *First of all we can consider those that come from Christendom in general.* In the days when I was an undergraduate reading Classics, I became aware that among the theologians there were those who objected to this whole notion that God laid his wrath upon our blessed Lord on account of our sins. They said we had the wrong idea of the wrath of God. The wrath of God that the New Testament talks about is descriptive of what could happen to you or to me. For instance, if you came by a live coal fire and you were stupid enough to put your hand into the fire you would get burned. You can't say that's God's fault, or it happened because God was angry with you. It is the way that God happens to have made the universe, and our world in particular, so that if people accidentally or stupidly put their hands into a burning fire they will suffer. And this is what the theologians wanted to say the word *wrath* meant—they will suffer the wrath. If you don't know what you are doing when you are fiddling with high-powered electricity, watch out that it doesn't burn you to a cinder. If it should happen to do that, it isn't God getting angry with you; it's simply the way he has made the universe. It is a lovely universe, but it isn't everywhere safe, and you have to treat it with caution.

So they said that was what the wrath of God was. It wasn't his personal anger against sinners, and certainly when Jesus Christ died he didn't die suffering the wrath of God for our sins. What did he die for then? Well, where 1 John 2:2 says that Christ is 'the propitiation for our sins', the New English Bible puts a different metaphor altogether—'he is himself the *remedy* [which is a medical term, not a legal term] for the defilement of our sins'—avoiding the notion of the wrath of God.<sup>4</sup>

Many have followed that idea, so we are reminded these days that we ought to forgive everybody. Whether they repent or not, it is our Christian duty to forgive them because Christ has set us the example. When he was crucified he prayed, 'Father, forgive them,' so we should forgive everybody. And in fact, God has already forgiven everybody. According to this

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<sup>4</sup> The Revised English Version (the 1989 update of the NEB) translates the verse as 'he is himself a sacrifice to atone for our sins'.

theory, the cross of Christ tells us that you can treat God just how you like—abuse him and persecute him and hang him on a tree—and God still loves you and has already forgiven you.

But that is not true. Our Lord's famous words, 'Father, forgive them,' if we will only read them in their context, were spoken at that precise moment when the Roman soldiers had driven nails through his wrists and ankles. It was then that he prayed, 'Father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34). They were Roman soldiers, and this was their duty. They had crucified many and here was but one more. They crucified him too, without even realising what the term *Messiah, King of the Jews* meant. It didn't bother them; they just didn't understand. 'Father, forgive them,' said Christ, 'they know not what they do.' It was a very different thing for the people who did know what they were doing. So God hasn't already forgiven everybody, but there is forgiveness available. 'Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe [having heard the message] is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God' (John 3:18). That is the gospel in the New Testament.

I mention one more objection from the Christian community, and it raises very serious questions about its author. In an evangelical paper some time ago an otherwise evangelical editor said that if it were true that God bruised his Son—punished his Son—then God ought to be prosecuted for child abuse. That borders very near on apostasy, when holy Scripture itself says in the words of the prophet, 'it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief' (Isa 53:10).

*But let us look at further objections that come from the level of moral philosophy.* There are three theories of punishment generally held:

1. *Retribution*—for some misdeed or crime that someone has done.
2. *Reform*—the punishment helps to reform the criminal.
3. *Deterrence*—the punishment will deter him from ever doing such a thing again, and everyone who hears of it will not even try to do it.

In the days when capital punishment was being debated, many philosophers denied the function of retribution. They said that it was nonsense. Here's a man who has murdered his fellow—it's an act of violence. 'That's bad enough,' they say, 'but how does it help if the State commits another act of violence and executes the murderer? And why should anybody be put to death for breaking some abstract rule that Parliament may have passed?' They wanted to get rid of the whole notion of retribution.

The debate over capital punishment has long since passed, yet even when it comes to imprisonment for serious offences there are those who say that the second function doesn't work either. It doesn't reform the prisoner to put him in prison, so don't put him in prison. And then they come out with statistics that suggest that putting somebody in prison doesn't deter the man himself—he's just as liable to do it again. Nor does it deter other would-be criminals who copy the same kind of offence and find themselves in prison.

C. S. Lewis argued very potently against these ideas. He said that the first one, *retribution* was key to the others; for retribution says that the criminal really deserved it. Whether the

punishment cures him or not, or whether it deters him or anybody else or not, the fact remains—he deserved it, and therefore the punishment is imposed. C. S. Lewis argued that if you do away with that notion of retribution—that is, the man deserved it and is being paid back for doing it—then the other two become exceedingly dangerous. If the criminal doesn't deserve the punishment, what right has anybody to punish him as a *deterrent*? Pause and think that one through.

For stealing your car, a criminal is put in jail. The charge is that he deserves it because he stole, and that is against the law. Suppose we don't agree that he deserves anything, just for breaking the law. Have we any right, then, to punish him so that it shall be a deterrent? If he doesn't deserve it, I could take an innocent man, such as some of you, and say to the public, 'He doesn't deserve it, but I am going to punish him because this is what would happen to you if you did such and such.'

You say, 'It's not a question of deserving anyway.' The French used to subdue rebellions in the army that way. They would number the people one to ten and so forth—and then they would say 'every tenth man, stand out,' and he would be shot whether he was a rebel or not. As the French would say, *pour encourager les autres*—'to encourage the others'. It may be bad, but it has been done, and if you get rid of the notion of deserving you could just use innocent people and punish them in order to deter others from doing anything bad.

And as for *reforming*, if punishment is meant to reform somebody let's consider the situation. In Russia in days gone past those who did not believe in Marxism, and Christians in particular, were said to be worthy of imprisonment. They were put into mental hospitals because the diagnosis was that they must be astray in the head to disagree with Marxism. So they were being reformed, cured, of this unhappy state of mind. In that case of course, there was no question that they would be there for so long because they deserved it—they were there until the doctors cured them. And who should tell when that would be? So if they were in prison until they died, the doctors were still doing their very best to cure them and reform them. If you start by taking away the notion of deserving something then, said C. S. Lewis, you are on very dangerous ground indeed.

These then are some of the swells that go on in the oceans of world opinion. But the Christian gospel, if we are faithful to it, stands by the substitutionary atonement of Christ. He bore our sins and the wrath due to them in his body on the tree, so that God might be just—for the penalty has been exacted—and yet the justifier of all who believe in Jesus.

Now we go back to the books of Samuel, where we found an ancient argument against punishment in 2 Samuel 14. Let me just sketch in the background. This was in the reign of King David. Some years earlier a prince of David's line called Amnon had developed a passion for a princess, who was in fact the sister of Amnon's brother, Absalom, and Amnon raped her. The story resumes two years later, when Absalom was allowed to invite the sons of the king, Amnon among them, to sheep shearing out at his farm. In revenge for his sister, Absalom ordered the murder of Amnon, and the king was horrified and distressed when he heard of it. Absalom ran away into voluntary exile for three years (which shows that it was a case of deliberate murder).

The sense of loss at Amnon's death grew fainter in David's heart, and his advisers told him that he couldn't keep up that sort of thing forever. Absalom's appearance was absolutely magnificent—he had a haircut once a year, and he had so much hair they weighed it in the scales. He was a bright, commanding man. He would go places! David was finding his heart going out to Absalom. Joab, his commander-in-chief, saw which way the king's heart was ticking and he thought up a scheme to persuade David that it was all right to bring Absalom back, even though he had murdered his brother.

He got a wise woman from Tekoa to come to the palace, dressed as a widow as though her husband had been a long time dead. (Don't forget this is all pretence!) So she came with her request to the king.

When the woman of Tekoa came to the king, she fell on her face to the ground and paid homage and said, 'Save me, O king.' And the king said to her, 'What is your trouble?' She answered, 'Alas, I am a widow; my husband is dead. And your servant had two sons, and they quarrelled with one another in the field. There was no one to separate them, and one struck the other and killed him. And now the whole clan has risen against your servant, and they say, "Give up the man who struck his brother, that we may put him to death for the life of his brother whom he killed." And so they would destroy the heir also. Thus they would quench my coal that is left and leave to my husband neither name nor remnant on the face of the earth.' (2 Sam 14:4–7)

Particularly those who had a farm or some inheritance had a horror of dying and their name being blotted out as though they had never existed. So these two sons fell out and they argued and fought each other, and one son accidentally killed the other. Now their kinsmen are coming and saying, 'Deliver the murderer up and we will kill him as well.' But if they do that, she would have lost two sons. She had no more sons; her husband was dead, and the family name would die off from the estate as though they never had been. 'This punishment business is stupid,' she said. 'It doesn't do the dead man any good if you put the other to death. It will do the family a lot of harm.' Do you get the argument? This punishment business is stupid!

And the king said to the woman, 'Go to your house and I will give orders concerning you' (v. 8). But she wasn't going to take just one answer; she was going to make her point. The king was going to be tied down before he realised it, so he couldn't get out of it. 'And the woman of Tekoa said to the king, "On me be the guilt, my lord the king, and on my father's house; let the king and his throne be guiltless"' (v. 9). What did she mean by that? She senses her suggestion, that a murderer be spared, was not altogether square with the law or with people's conscience, let alone the Bible. So she said, 'Thank you for saying you will deal with this, and you will not let anyone touch my son. I'll take the blame for it, Sir.' That was generous of her, talking to the king like that. 'You needn't fear that it might be illegal; I'll take the blame for it!'

The king said, 'If anyone says anything to you, bring him to me, and he shall never touch you again.' Then she said, 'Please let the king invoke the LORD your God, that the avenger of blood kill no more, and my son be not destroyed.' He said, 'As the LORD lives, not one hair of your son shall fall to the ground.' (vv. 10–11)

Her words are very deliberate, and she is tying the king down. If he swears an oath in the name of almighty God, he can't go back.

Then the woman said, 'Please let your servant speak a word to my lord the king.' He said, 'Speak.' And the woman said, 'Why then have you planned such a thing against the people of God? For in giving this decision the king convicts himself, inasmuch as the king does not bring his banished one home again.' (vv. 12–13)

That took some courage, you will have to give her that. To tell the king that he was guilty! But this was the whole point—none of that rigmarole was true, she didn't have a husband and two sons. All this was made up by Joab to get the king to say, 'Yes, woman, I will see to it that your son who is the murderer is not punished,' so that Joab could make his point to the king: 'Then why are you insisting on keeping Absalom at a distance? He's afraid you will punish him if he comes home. Why are you keeping him away?'

The woman continued, 'If you say it's all right for my kinsmen not to execute the murderer of my son, then you are guilty if you don't bring back Absalom. You must bring him back and assure him that he won't be punished.'

That's what she's arguing, and now she gives her reason. 'We must all die; we are like water spilled on the ground,<sup>5</sup> which cannot be gathered up again' (v. 14). 'Amnon is dead, and punishing Absalom won't bring him back. We are as water spilt on the ground, you can't gather it up again—it won't do the dead man any good if you punish Absalom.'

And then she had two more things to say. One of them is true; the other is a downright lie. But in the manner of her master, Satan, she surrounds the lie with a large coating of sugar. The last bit is true: 'But God . . . devises means so that the banished one will not remain an outcast' (v. 14). He had devised means in the Old Testament through their sacrifices, and now we Christians know it through Christ.

But what's the lie she wraps it in? 'God will not take away life.' How could David be deceived by an argument like that? The books of Moses had been written by that time and they were full of examples, but it sounded good, and if you wrap the argument together it looks good—God doesn't take away life but devises means by which his banished shall not be separated from him. And when the king heard that bit the penny began to drop. 'Tell me,' he said to the woman, 'did you make this up yourself, or did Joab suggest this to you?' And she said, 'In order to change the course of things your servant Joab did this. But my lord has wisdom like the wisdom of the angel of God to know all things that are on the earth' (v.20). So the king said that he would grant Joab his request, and Joab thanked the king and went away to bring Absalom back.

While Joab has gone we will take the advantage of that to do a little thought experiment! I would like you to come with me now and have a word with the woman's son. Can you imagine him lying on the ground? He's dead, so he can't hear or speak—but I'm just going to pretend that he can.

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<sup>5</sup> We have a slightly different metaphor in English—'it's no good crying over spilt milk'.

'Hello! What's happened to you?'

'I'm dead!'

'So I can see. How did it happen?'

'It was my brother. We had an argument and he hit me so hard that he killed me.'

'I'm sorry to hear that!'

'Yes,' says the dead man, 'but what are you going to do about it?'

'What do you mean, "What are we going to do about it?"'

'Well, I've got my rights. I once had a life and he robbed me of my life—what are you going to do about it?'

'Come on, do be grown up, man—we are as water spilt on the ground that cannot be gathered up; it's no good crying over spilt milk! You're dead now, aren't you? Nothing that we can do will alter that.'

'That isn't fair,' he says.

'Well, that's what your mother says!'

The question will come then: 'Did she ever love me?'

Let's address the question. You and I live on the same road and you observe that from time to time I drive my car very carelessly. Sometimes I drive it under the influence and you decide that this is very dangerous and you come to me and you plead with me—'you must be very careful when you drive, and please don't drive when you have had some drink because you will kill somebody down this road one day.' And, sure enough, one day in that condition I run into your daughter and kill her. Does it matter? Ten years later shall we say, 'She's dead now—does it matter?'

I tell you something; if I were to do that and remain unrepentant God would hold it against me for all eternity. Is he full of revenge, or something? No, because he loved your daughter he will never say that sin against a human being didn't matter. And if God is going to forgive the murderer then he says, 'I must be righteous in doing it. It cannot be thought that I said it didn't matter, the penalty must be paid.' And the marvellous gospel is that God, in the person of his Son, not only decreed the penalty but bore it. 'That God might be just, and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus' (Rom 3:26).

Joab has come back, and he's got Absalom. Says David, 'All right Joab, you have had your way. He can come back and live in Jerusalem, but he shall not see the king's face. I won't have him in my presence!' (2 Sam 14:24). Is that forgiveness? We started off thinking about forgiveness and what it means through the Christian gospel. The Christian gospel declares that upon repentance and faith we have access into the divine presence and the kiss of God upon our cheek. But David said, 'yes he can come back, but he cannot see my face. He mustn't be brought into my presence.' David shows that he has a bad conscience about it. That isn't forgiveness.

Absalom wasn't content with that. Some while later he summoned Joab again and told him to bring him to the king. But Joab didn't come, so Absalom set light to a field of barley that belonged to Joab and forced Joab to come. 'You are to take me into the king,' says Absalom, 'and if the king finds any iniquity in me, let him kill me there on the spot!' (v. 32). That is what you call defiance. He knew that having brought him back the king wouldn't

execute him, and he is going to force the king to let him escape punishment and be accepted at court. So Absalom came to the king, and here are some of the saddest words in the Old Testament story—‘the king kissed Absalom’ (v. 33). There was no, ‘I’m sorry’, never a ‘I wish I hadn’t done it.’ Not a question of, ‘Please forgive me.’ He forced himself into the king’s presence in arrogant denial of the right to be punished.

What did it lead to? It wasn’t long afterwards that Absalom led a conspiracy and drove King David off the throne. (If God didn’t take sin seriously and demand that it should be punished, it would force God off his throne.) Absalom got advisers. One of the best of them said, ‘[Absalom,] the hands of all who are with you shall be strengthened’ (16:21)—the thing that you wanted shall come to you. ‘Yes,’ said Absalom—how’s that for repentance! When he came to Jerusalem he publicly took David’s wives, and eventually one of the king’s commanders killed Absalom. When David heard the news, instead of thanking the people of the army that had risked their lives to save him, he ignored them and went into the upper room above the gate, sobbing his heart out. ‘O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom!’ (18:33; cf 19:4). The people didn’t know what to make of it, and they slunk away ashamed. Joab the commander ran upstairs and told David to come down. ‘These people have risked their lives to save you. Absalom’s troops have killed many of them, and you are making more fuss of the criminal than you are of his victims.’<sup>6</sup> So David had to come down, but what a heart-breaking moment it was. He sat in the gate and the people came by, and he had to thank them for killing his son. It was an impossible position to be in. If he had just been a king and not his father, David could have seen that justice was done—as he had in countless other cases. But he wasn’t just a king; he was a father. If he were a father only and not a king, he could perhaps have found it in his heart to forgive Absalom. But he was a king, responsible for public justice, so it was an impossible situation. David’s heart-cry comes down the centuries to us. ‘Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!’ (18:33).

Here is the great problem of human sin, the wrath of God, and yet the love of God. If God were simply the moral governor of this universe he could have let us be executed and care nothing. But God is our Creator, and he loves us with a Creator’s love. ‘O my people, would God I had died for you.’ But that is the amazing truth of the gospel: God in the person of his Son was ‘delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification’ (Rom 4:25). God’s own Son hung on a tree, cursed under the wrath of God. ‘Would God I had died for you!’—in Christ, our God did precisely that. What a gospel we have to preach, not brushing sin under the carpet, but sin fully faced, the sanctions of God’s law honoured, and because of the atonement through Christ we the guilty go free. The moment we repent we may come into the king’s presence, see his face and sense his kiss upon our cheek, with a whole heaven of access to God and Christ for all eternity.

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<sup>6</sup> It can often appear so in our modern society.



## 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. His international teaching ministry is marked by fresh and careful expositions of both testaments. He has published scholarly studies on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John 13–17, Acts, Hebrews and the New Testament's use of the Old Testament.