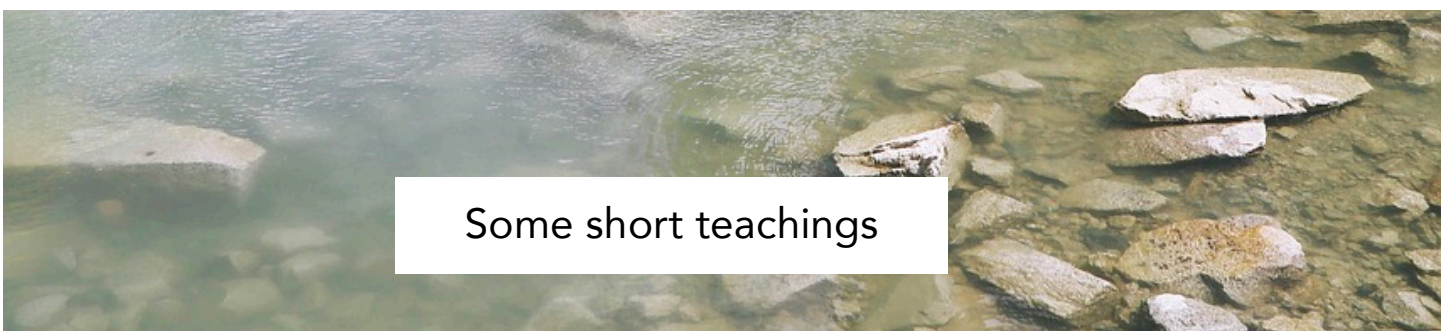




Lead me in your **truth** and teach
me, for you are the **God** of my
salvation...



Some short teachings

*Keep hold of instruction; do not let go;
guard her, for she is your life.*

- Proverbs 4:13

The following booklet is a hotchpotch of readings. I hope that they are spiritually beneficial to you and, above all, I pray that the Lord is honoured by them.

Initially, this booklet found its origin in the sudden change of life that occurred around March 2020 as a result of COVID-19.

As I write this, the state in which I live is in the midst of its third lockdown, with large parts of the state under "stay at home" orders. The Bible reminds us that "*there is nothing new under the sun* (Ecclesiastes 1:9)," yet for my generation these are unprecedented times.

On the contents page, you will notice that pages 22 to 30 have a darker background. That is because I consider these chapters to be most vital. They are on union with Christ, what Christ's death achieved and what Christ's resurrection achieved. I pray that you will read those most carefully.

God is sovereign over all things and I pray that these troubled times may result in many humbly turning to Him and finding life in Him.

God bless,
Graham Barnes

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Plagues, pandemics and disasters

*God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.*

*Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble at its swelling.*

- Psalm 46:1-3

As a Christian, the first question of the Heidelberg Confession, written in 1563, is very reassuring:

Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own, but belong— body and soul, in life and in death— to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

Christians have often been caught up in plagues, pandemics and disasters throughout history. In 1527, the plague broke out in Wittenberg, Germany. Martin Luther stayed and continued preaching through the Pastoral Epistles. Soon after, his one-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, died. His wife, Katherine von Bora, wrote with thankfulness to God for giving her Elizabeth, even for such a short time.

Later, Martin would address the issue of plagues, in all their complexity. Amongst his advice, he said, *"Yes, no one should dare leave a neighbour unless there are others who will take care for the sick in their stead and nurse them. In such cases we must respect the word of Christ, "I was sick and you did not visit me... [Matt. 25:41-46]. According to this passage we are bound to each other in such a way that we not forsake others in distress. Instead, we are obliged to assist and help them, as we ourselves would like to be helped."* One of Luther's governing principles was that, *"A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."*

Death is a horror to God's creation (Genesis 1:31). In a sense, death defiles God, for He is the God of life and creation (Numbers 19:11-22). Every disaster or plague is a reminder that we are in the valley of the shadow of death and that death, indeed, is the last enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26). One day we will all die and must stand before God (Hebrews 9:27). May that humble us and drive us to Him in prayer. We trust in a God who is sovereign over all things and good by His very nature. This is the reason why Psalm 46 is such a tonic to our souls: it reminds us of the strength and power of God when all around collapses.

During World War II, Martyn Lloyd Jones was at Westminster Chapel in central London, despite the dangers. A war is not the same as a plague or a pandemic, yet they share some commonalities. Lloyd Jones preached several sermons during this time on the issue of war, saying,

"In times of peace and of ease we think that we can pray, that we know how to pray. We are assured and confident, and we feel that we are living the religious life as it should be lived. But when trials come they reveal to us how weak and how

helpless we are... That, in turn, drives us to God, and makes us realise more than ever before our utter dependence upon him. This is the experience of all Christians. In our folly we imagine that we can live in our own strength and by our own power, and our prayers are often formal. But troubles make us fly to God, and cause us to wait upon him."

There is much more that could be said, such as the obligation upon us to show care and prayer for healing (James 5:13-15), but for now may we rejoice even in infirmities, for through them Christ's strength is revealed (2 Corinthians 12:9-10) and if we belong to Christ by faith then we are assured that nothing can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:35-39). There was once a young lady who was dying. As she came face to face with her death, she said this: *"I have little to relate as to my own experience. I have been much tried and tempted, but this is my sheet-anchor: He has said, "Whoever comes to me, I will in no wise cast out." I know that I come to Him and I expect that He will be as good as His word. Poor and unworthy as I am, He will not trifle with me, nor deceive me. It would be beneath His greatness as well as His goodness."*

I pray that you will share her hope in Christ Jesus.

Training in grace

“When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open towards Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously.”

- Daniel 6:10

Each new day, we should remind ourselves of God’s mercies to us (Lamentations 3:22-23). All time is to be redeemed and made the best use of (Ephesian 5:16).

The Bible gives us every reassurance, and command, to rest our hearts in God. Yet it is only through the brokenness of repentance that we experience God’s grace in forgiveness, and He changes us. Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector and despised by others. When Jesus went to Zacchaeus’ house the people grumbled. Yet Zacchaeus was a changed man. Trusting Christ Jesus, he immediately sought to undo the wrong that he had done in the past as best as he could, promising to repay four times anyone that he had defrauded. Jesus stated, *“Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10).”* When I trust in Christ, God’s law, which previously condemned me, now becomes my guiding light. My motive for obeying Him is love for the Lawgiver. He has taken the curse of the broken law from me, and the Holy Spirit living within me gives strength to obey.

Training or discipline is not salvation, but when we understand God’s grace, discipline helps a believer to grow

stronger in the Lord. This is part of the process of sanctification. J. C. Ryle was a good observer of people and he said that it is by a *“lively practical faith in unseen things”* that we see some spiritual battles won, in God’s grace.

With this in mind, let’s be encouraged to pursue the God of our salvation. The following are a few thoughts for you to take up;

- **Meditating upon God’s Word** – the Scriptures exhort to let Christ’s word dwell in us richly (Colossians 3:16). Richard Baxter tells us to, *“Chew the cud, and call up all when you come home in secret, and by meditation preach it over to yourselves.”* Let God’s Word make it’s home within you warmly and sincerely.
- **Frequent, secret prayer** – prayer does not make us a Christian, for even the most self-righteous Pharisee was a praying man (Luke 18:11)! Yet prayer is one of the sure marks that we are, in fact, Christians. Christ Jesus knew the importance of private prayer: *“rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed (Mark 1:35).”* He also gave us simple instructions about how we are pray: *“when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you (Matthew 6:6).”*
- **Personal and family worship** - we worship God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit as a right response to His greatness and goodness. The Bible tells us to *“stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (Hebrews 20:24-25).”* With this in mind, despite what people may call us, let

us pursue and maintain our personal and family worship of Him, as well as our worship with other believers on the Lord's Day. Let your children see *you* pray and praise God. Example means so much.

- **Walking in the Spirit** – we can grieve the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30) or we can keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:25). By keeping in step with Him, we begin to see His fruit show in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

In all this, Daniel is a shining example to us. He lived under tremendous pressure, being forced into the service of various pagan kings. Yet, he knew and worshipped the LORD, so that even when the knives were out to get him, he maintained his routine of prayer and thanks to God. God is sovereign over outward trials and inward trials. They may bewilder us, and inward trials in particular can be very difficult and painful, yet they are also the means that God uses to refine us. John Newton closed his poem entitled, "Prayer answered by crosses", with God speaking these words;

*"These inward trials I employ
From self and pride to set thee free
And break thy schemes of earthly joy
That thou may'st find thy all in Me."*

Time to ourselves

"...to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."

– John 1:12

"...In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

– Luke 15:9-10

"Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

– Luke 18:17

The prayer of David was honest before God: "*Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!* (Psalm 139:23)" When we are left to ourselves then sometimes our thoughts and patterns of thinking unsettle us. Yet may God use this to draw us to Himself. The Christian aims for a renewed mind that tests and knows all that is "*good and acceptable and perfect*" to God (Romans 12:2).

Friedrich Nietzsche was an influential person in Germany during the decades either side of WWI. He had been born into a Christian home of some sort, but he rejected it all. He couldn't accept that a Christian is *defined* by someone else: Jesus Christ. True freedom, he said, was found only in asserting ourselves. He saw Christianity as pitifully weak and Christians as being weak people who haven't faced up to the real plight of humanity: that we are our own masters, not God.

He proclaimed the death of God, and therefore, everything is permissible. With no God, there are no laws to govern humanity, and with no law, mankind is free to live as we like. Guilt, shame and forgiveness are nonsense as there is no law. If nothing else, Nietzsche at least understood that rejecting Christian belief also meant rejecting Christian morality. He said, *“Christianity is a system, a consistently thought out and complete view of things. If one breaks out of it a fundamental idea, the belief in God, one thereby breaks the whole thing to pieces: one has nothing of any consequence left in one's hands.... Christian morality... possesses truth only if God is truth – it stands or falls with the belief in God.”* He was right, and yet terribly wrong at the same time!

Behind each of the verses printed above is a good and holy God who made us and we are accountable to Him. They make clear the following;

1. That in God's grace, a child of God, is someone who has received Jesus Christ and believed in His Name.
2. That when anyone, aware of his or her sin, repents and turns to God, then the angels in heaven rejoice.
3. That to enter the Kingdom of God, I do not need to do great things, or even have great faith, but I do need to receive the Kingdom of God – and its King – as a little child.

Even a child can know in the simplest way that they need the Lord and that only He can forgive them. They know that to receive Him means to turn to Him and to repent, and with that, to place their trust in Him. For some people, the work of God

within them, bringing them to this point, may take years, yet if it is of God then it will always be genuine.

When we come to saving faith in Christ Jesus, we trust that God's work within us will not be weak or in vain, but that it will be as real as our Saviour's resurrection. We pray that what Paul wrote to the Christians in Thessalonica would also be our experience: *"our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction (1 Thessalonians 1:5)."*

Sadly at the end of Nietzsche's life he went mad and seems to have thought of himself as Jesus Christ. Let him be a warning to us. Our own thoughts can bring us down. Instead, please take up the verses above and think over them again and again. And let us receive Jesus Christ; repent and, with a child-like trust, believe in Him. Then, let the angels in heaven rejoice.

Longing for God and His people

- ¹As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, O God.
- ² My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?
- ³ My tears have been my food,
day and night,
while men say to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”
- ⁴ These things I remember
as I pour out my soul:
how I used to with the multitude,
leading the procession to the house of God,
with shouts of joy and thanksgiving
among the festive throng.
- ⁵ Why are you downcast, O my soul?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God for I will yet praise him,
My Saviour and my God.”

– Psalm 42:1-5

The Psalmist who wrote these words knew two things;
One, that he longed for God with an aching heart.
Two, that he longed to be with God’s people.

There may be a time for every season under heaven, but *this* is not a good season that he is in. Whatever his situation, he felt far away from God and he longed for the old times of being with God’s people to worship Him. He will not be satisfied with anything in life until that happens. Recently I read a memoir of

someone who was in New Guinea during World War II. He recorded the exact number of days that he was away from home! There is that sense here: *"I am away and I long to be back with God."*

The Psalmist experienced a few other things as well. In verse 3, he says that other people were mocking him, saying, *"Where is your God?"* They seem to think that God has abandoned him or that he was a fool for ever trusting in God in the first place.

How does a Christian respond to this kind of demoralising and unsettling situation? We should remember, *"The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned (1 Corinthians 2:14)."* Yet, even more so, we must do what the Psalmist did in Psalm 42. He is an example for us to follow. Twice he *speaks to himself*, encouraging himself to continue trusting God: *"Come on soul, remember who God is. Remember the promises that He has given you. He is Your Saviour and God and you will yet praise Him!"* He preaches the gospel to himself and reminds himself of the truth. Maybe he has to do that a hundred times a day, but he does it.

As a Christian, I also must speak to myself and remind myself that in all things I belong to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ. Nothing can separate me from the love of God in Christ (Romans 8:39). I may *feel* far from God, but I know that my Saviour truly was abandoned by God at the cross. He cried out, *"My God, my God why have you forsaken me? (Matthew 27:46)"* He did that so that even a sinner such as I would never be abandoned by God. So, in this way I must speak to myself the truth. Martyn Lloyd Jones says that we are most unhappy

when we listen to ourselves instead of talking to ourselves. He says: *"You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself, question yourself...You must turn on yourself, upbraid yourself, condemn yourself, exhort yourself, and say to yourself: "Hope thou in God" – instead of muttering in this depressed, unhappy way, and then you must go on to remind yourself of God, Who God is, and...what God has done, and what God has pledged Himself to do."* To do this helps settle our fears, lifts our spirits and strengthens us in God.

Recently a friend of ours told about riding through the countryside and seeing scarecrows out the front of every second or third home. The scarecrows were armed with sticks as weapons in order to warn off sickness. It is our knowledge of the true and living God that must be our hope. We must speak to ourselves the truth of God. May this help to drive out fear and lift us to Him.

Living in the shadow of the Almighty

¹ He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.

² I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust."

³ For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence.

⁴ He will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

⁵ You will not fear the terror of the night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,

⁶ nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.

⁷ A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.

⁸ You will only look with your eyes
and see the recompense of the wicked.

⁹ Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place—
the Most High, who is my refuge—

¹⁰ no evil shall be allowed to befall you,
no plague come near your tent.

¹¹ For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.

¹² On their hands they will bear you up,
lest you strike your foot against a stone.

We don't know who wrote this Psalm, but we know that the Devil can recite it as well as anyone! In tempting the Lord Jesus he urged Him, as the Son of God, to throw Himself off the pinnacle of the temple in order to test God's protection of Him. But Jesus replied to him, "*Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test (Matthew 4:5-7).'*"

Yet, all because the Devil misused this Psalm that does not mean that it is not true. This Psalm is the prayer, the confession and the hope of every believer. In January 1956, Jim Elliot was killed on the Curaray River of Ecuador. Two years later, his widow, Elizabeth wrote a book entitled *Shadow of the Almighty*. The title comes from verse 1.

What is it that a believer, singing this Psalm, knows?

1. We know that God Himself is our shelter, refuge and fortress. God is the centre.
2. We know that God will deliver and protect us, as a mother hen covers her chicks.
3. Therefore, we will not fear the things of this life or the next.

In all this, what was it that the Psalmist sought for most of all? Not ease, or comfort, or self-fulfilment. It was the fool who said to himself, "*Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry (Luke 12:19).'*" Instead, let he sought for refuge and shelter *in God*.

The bible does not minimize our problems, nor tell us that they will be necessarily solved so that our disappointments will be erased. To make such promises is fantasy. But when we find our refuge in God, then we find the very One that we need for each moment.

It is God's all-powerful and all-good character that assures us that we are safe in His shadow. If we could but see spiritual realities, then we would see that underneath His people are His everlasting arms and they will never fail. It is the cross of Jesus Christ and His resurrection from the dead that assures us that this Psalm is true.

A Christian must learn to pray these things to God, just like the Psalmist did in verse 2: *"I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.""* In doing so, we find that we grow stronger in Him. A Christian who forgets these great truths must focus on themselves, or the things of this world and they will inevitably become an unhappy, miserable Christian, or a distracted Christian who produces little lasting fruit in their life.

William Cowper (1731-1800) knew many disappointments and troubles in his life. Yet, he also believed the gospel of Jesus Christ and he imagined God saying;

*"Mine is an unchanging love,
Higher than the heights above,
Deeper than the depth beneath,
Free and faithful, strong as death."*

Working hard in faith, love and hope

We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

- 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3

Jesus Christ let us know, in no uncertain terms, that should I become a Christian, I must understand that there is a cost: *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it (Luke 9:23-24)."* Nobody should ever say, *"I didn't realise the cost."*

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer looked at the church, he was concerned about what he called "cheap grace." He said:

"Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble, it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him."

When I confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, I must then put off my old sinful behaviour. Old Man Nature must, in fact, be put to death (Colossians 3:5). In its place comes a love for our Lord who has saved us, and a desire to *labour* in all that is good.

In the verses at the top of the page, Paul says that the Thessalonian Christians were;

1. Working in faith
2. Labouring in love, and
3. Steadfast (or persevering) in hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Faith tells of their foundation: faith in God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Love strikes at their motivation: love for God and others. Hope tells of their viewpoint: looking forward to the promises of God. This 'work' is different to other labour "*under the sun.*" In Solomon's experience, without God all work is ultimately empty: "*What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity* (Ecclesiastes 2:22-23)."

But a Christian's labour, whatever our calling in life, is "*in our Lord Jesus Christ.*" In Him all good things find meaning and purpose. What is done to glorify God, even the most menial of life's tasks, is never worthless (Colossians 3:17). Paul encouraged the Corinthians to be "*be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain* (1 Corinthians 15:58)."

The verses above should encourage us to view life in the same way as the Thessalonian Christians did. Rightly understood, the Christian life is one of work and labour in faith, love and hope. At times this will be difficult, and even heart

breaking. Adoniram Judson laboured for the gospel in Burma, but when his wife died in 1826 he nearly went mad with grief. In God's grace he was restored and continued on. At times we can feel like packing it all in. But Paul encourages us by saying, *"Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up (Galatians 6:9)."*

Above all, it is not a dry labour. Charles Hodge rightly says, *"religion which is reluctant, or forced, whether by fear or by stress of conscience, is spurious ... obedience if rendered from a dread of punishment, or from mere regard to appearances, is very different from that which flows from respect and love; and unless the service we render to God flows from the heart, it is no evidence that we are His children."*

So too, our labour is not a working to maintain our salvation. Our salvation has been achieved by Christ's death and resurrection. Rather, in gratitude to God, let us labour on, assured of what Jesus Christ has achieved for us, in faith, love and hope.

Union with Christ

A name is an identity and an identity shows where we belong. In the New Testament there are many names that are used to identify those who belong to Christ Jesus;

- **"Christians"** - used only three times in the New Testament; Acts 11:26, Acts 26:28, 1 Peter 4:16. Possibly it was first used as a slur!
- **"Believers"** – someone who believes the Word of God as He works within us, e.g. Acts 16:1, 2 Cor. 6:15, 1 Thess. 2:13.
- **"God's elect"** – those chosen by God, e.g. Rom. 8:33, Titus 1:1.
- **"Saints"** - meaning "holy ones" or "consecrated ones," e.g. Romans 16:2, Phil. 1:1.
- **"Disciples"** – used only in the Gospels and Acts to refer to the Twelve and later followers of Christ, e.g. Matt. 10:1, Acts 21:6.
- **"Nazarene"** – Christians were called the "sect of the Nazarene" in Acts 24:5.

Yet, by far the most common way to describe Christians is that we are *"in Christ."* In fact, Bruce Demarest counts 242 times the words *"in Christ"*, *"in the Lord"*, *"in Him"* etc. are used in the New Testament. We can rightly say that generally when the New Testament writers, especially Paul, identify or describe who they are, it is as people who are *"in Christ."*

What does it mean to be *"in Christ"*? For us, we use the word *"in"* or *"into"* as a way of saying that we like something or someone. Yet, the New Testament use of the words *"in Christ"* is immeasurably richer than that! In short, to be *"in Christ"*

means that we are so united to Christ that our salvation is only *in* Him and we live now *in* Him. We use the word “united” at a wedding to describe the new husband and wife: united together. So the believer is united or wedded to Christ through faith.

This breathtaking truth has an astounding impact on how we understand ourselves and how we live in the here-and-now. My prayer is that we will understand in a greater way what it means to be *in Christ* and that as a result our knowledge and wonder at what God has done and promises to do through His Son in us would grow more and more.

Below are some verses that speak about being *in Christ* (notice that the first five all come from Ephesians 1);

- **In Christ Jesus, God began His work of redemption even before creation** – “[the Father] chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him (Eph. 1:4).”
- **In Christ Jesus, God has given us all that we need** – “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Eph. 1:3; also Phil. 4:19).”
- **In Christ Jesus, our salvation is assured** – “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace (Eph. 1:7).”
- **In Christ Jesus, creation will be reconciled** – God has made “known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (Eph. 1:9-10).”

- **In Christ Jesus, our eternal reward is certain** – “In him we have obtained an inheritance (Eph. 1:11).”
- **In Christ Jesus, we are made brand new people** – “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come (2 Cor. 5:17).”
- **In Christ Jesus, the righteousness that we need for salvation is given to us** – “For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).”
- **In Christ Jesus, our anxious hearts find peace** – “do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:6-7).”
- **In Christ Jesus, God will never stop loving us** – “For I am sure that neither death nor life... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:38-39).”
- **In Christ Jesus, we are no longer in Adam, but will rise to a resurrection body** – “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive (1 Cor. 15:22; also Rom. 5:17).”

O Gracious God, we are filled with joy and gratitude when we think of all that we have in Christ Jesus. We glorify You because of these wonderful truths. Amen.

Life in death: What did Christ's death achieve?

In 1927, T.S. Eliot came to some kind of Christian belief. His friend, Virginia Woolf wrote to her sister of the news: *"I have had a most shameful and distressing interview with poor dear Tom Eliot, who may be called dead to us all from this day forward. He... believes in God and immortality, and goes to church. I was really shocked. A corpse would seem to me more credible than he is, I mean, there's something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God."* You would think that believing in God was a fate worse than death!

John Lennon imagined that a world without Christ would be a kind of bliss. Charles Simeon was terrified of taking the Lord's Supper when he thought about its meaning and his own life before God. For some the cross is an example of costly love, but nothing more. For others, the Bible's claim that the Father sent His Son, knowing that He would die, is akin to abuse.

Yet, for the Apostle Paul the cross of Christ is vital. There is no hope for the world apart from the gospel, and the cross of Christ is the centre of that message. Paul was determined *"to know nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2)."* He knew the cross was foolishness and a stumbling block, but his message was *"Christ crucified (1 Corinthians 1:23)."* For Paul, the cross drives Christian behaviour, especially humility (Philippians 2:8). The cross demonstrates the costly love of God for His people: *"you were bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6:20)."* The cross is the only point of boasting in his life (Galatians 6:14). Paul even says that he was *"crucified with Christ"* and Christ now lives in him (Galatians 2:20).

The question to ask from all this is what was achieved at the Calvary? Why did the Son of God leave the thrones of glory

for the humiliation of the cross? What did the cross of Jesus Christ accomplish? When Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus laid His lifeless body in the tomb what changed? People often look for meaning in a person's death. What of Christ's death?

Below are seven points that explain only some of what Christ's death achieved;

1. **Peace with God** – There is hostility between God and us. God is holy and as such, He must judge sin. The holiness of God is such that in the Old Testament the closer a person came to the Holy of Holies in the centre of the Tabernacle, the more dangerous it became. Christ's death has opened up for us access into the Holy of Holies. It is the grounds of our peace with God. *"God was pleased... to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:20)."* Peace with God means that we are forgiven and redeemed from sin's judgment that we deserve. *"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace (Ephesians 1:7)."*
2. **Redemption from futile living** – Our way of living was futile and in the end vain. But through Christ's death, "the ancient tradition of home and nation is broken" and we are set free to live for God. *"You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot (1 Peter 1:18-19)."*
3. **His complete obedience to His Father's will** – Jesus said, *"I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me (John 6:38)."* That included Calvary. In the Old Testament God's wrath is pictured as a repulsive cup of foaming wine (see Psalm 75:8). Jesus prayed, "My

Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will (Matthew 26:39)."
Then He drank the bitter cup to the end.

4. **The very definition of love** – Christ's death on the cross proves the depth of His love for us. There is no greater love than at the cross of Christ. *"By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us (1 John 3:16). "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:10)."*
5. **Reconciliation with one another** – the gentiles were *"without hope and without God in the world."* But the cross of Christ has meant that the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles has been abolished. Christ Jesus has created *"in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility (Ephesians 2:15-16)."*
6. **A new way of living** – When Christ Jesus died, believer, you too died! You died to slavery to sin in order to be a slave to righteousness. *"We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin (Romans 6:6)."*
7. **A worshipping people from every corner of the globe** – John's vision of the throne room of God is glorious beyond words! The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders sing a new song of worship to the Lamb. He is worthy for *"by His blood He has ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation (Revelation 5:9)."*

Life from death: What did Christ's resurrection achieve?

Martyn Lloyd Jones said that after many years of preaching the gospel of Christ Jesus that *"there have been times where in my utter folly I have wondered, or the Devil has suggested to me that there is nothing more for me to say, that I have preached it all. I thank God that I can now say that I feel I am only at the beginning of it. There is no end to this glorious message of the cross..."* If that is true of the cross, it is also true of the resurrection of Christ from the dead!

All four gospels finish with by showing that Jesus Christ is alive, risen from the dead;

- Matthew says that the women at the tomb *"came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him (Matthew 28:9)."*
- Mark says, *"he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining at table, and he rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen (Mark 16:14)."*
- Luke says that the disciples *"gave him a piece of broiled fish and he took it and ate before them (Luke 24:42-43)."*
- John says that the Risen Jesus said to doubting Thomas, *"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed (John 20:29)."*

The Apostle Paul says that if Jesus Christ is not risen – *alive* – then our faith is futile and we are to be pitied more than anyone else (1 Corinthians 15:17-19). If Christ had remained in the tomb then it would have been the end of His career. His teaching

would be admired, but ultimately, futile. He would have been the same as every other person, no matter how great or small.

We have rightly asked what was achieved by Christ's death, so too, we must now ask what, if anything, was achieved by His resurrection? When the women discovered the empty tomb and some of them saw the Risen Lord Jesus for the first time, what had changed? Why is the resurrection the grounds of our hope?

Below are eight points that explain only some of what Christ's resurrection achieved;

1. **The validation that God's promises are true** – David foresaw the resurrection of the Christ in Psalm 16: *"For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption (Psalm 16:10)."* Twice in the book of Acts this Psalm is said to be speaking about Jesus' resurrection (see Acts 2:25-28; 13:35).
2. **Christ's validation that He is the Son of God** – a claim suspended in mid air holds little weight! The Scriptures say that Jesus Christ our Lord *"was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:4)."*
3. **The defeat of death** – His death was for sin, once and for all, but the life He lives He lives to God. Acts 2:24 says, *"God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it (Acts 2:24)."*
4. **The sting of death is removed for believers** – this is what makes a believer's funeral so wonderfully different to other funerals. Death is painful and sad, yet it is not without hope for a believer. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul addresses death itself, almost tauntingly, and says, *"O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and*

the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:55-57)."

5. **The promise of a glorified body for believers** - however healthy, or miserable we feel now we will die. Yet one day we will be raised to immortality with a glorified body as Christ Jesus our Lord has. 1 Corinthians 15:52-53 tells us that in the twinkling of an eye *"the dead will be raised imperishable."*
6. **Our justification before God** – to be justified means to be put right with someone. Christ's resurrection confirms that His sacrifice for our sin was accepted and we are now justified before God. Romans 4:25 says that Jesus our Lord was *"delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification (Romans 4:25)."*
7. **The certainty of God's coming judgment** – when Paul spoke to the intellectuals at Mars Hill, he focused on God as our creator and God's coming judgment. He says that God has *"fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:31)."*
8. **A whole new way of living for us** – believers are so united to Christ that His resurrection impacts how we live here and now. Paul says that since we have *"been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth (Colossians 3:1)."*

No other people claim a risen Lord! If Christ had remained in the tomb then it would have been the end of His career. His teaching may be admirable, but ultimately, it would be futile. 'Jesus is alive' is our great hope!

Christian clothing: humility

The Bible speaks about “taking off” the old way of living, and “putting on” God’s right way of living. For example, Ephesians 4:22-24 says that we have been taught, in Christ, to,

“put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

Charles De Gaulle (the leader of the Free French Forces during World War II) said that, *“Every man of action has a strong dose of egoism, pride, hardness, and cunning.”* He thought these things could be positive qualities if they achieved great things. So much for humility! In a world that places great value on self-esteem and achieving your goals, humility looks like a shabby, threadbare old coat that is not very attractive at all. Yet for a Christian, humility is essential wearing and the only possible response in light of who God is and all that He has done. Isaac Watts saw it;

*Alas, and did my Saviour bleed
And did my Sovereign die?
Would He devote that sacred head
For such a worm as I?*

Nowhere is the command to ‘put on’ humility more clearly stated than in 1 Peter 5:5-7;

“Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he

*may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him,
because he cares for you.*

Notice two things from these verses;

- **One, that humility runs two directions:** it is before others and before God – yet the two are linked! C.S. Lewis said it well: *“In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that — and, therefore, know yourself as nothing in comparison — you do not know God at all. As long as you are proud, you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.”*
- **Two, it is humility that leads us to prayer.** In particular, pouring out our anxieties before God, knowing that He cares for us. Only a humble heart can truly do that.

In the Old Testament, Hezekiah became king over Jerusalem at the age of twenty-five and he reigned for twenty-nine years. He did what was *“right in the eyes of the LORD (2 Chronicles 29:2),”* yet struggled with pride. Interestingly, his pride came at a time of sickness and answered prayer. He did not respond to the LORD’s kindness to him and so drew His anger. Hezekiah had to repent *“of the pride of his heart”* – as did the people of Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 32:26).

When Jesus told the parable about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18:9-14 it was directed towards those who, *“trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.”* The despised Tax Collector would not even lift his eyes heavenward, but beat his breast and said, *“God, have mercy on me a sinner”* – literally, *“the sinner.”*

What does humility look like? Better yet, what is the cure for my proud heart? The cure is knowing God and the humility of my Saviour at the cross. It is this that humbles us more than anything else. His grace makes me rightfully ashamed of my pride. At the cross I realise that I have no other choice but to obey the command and 'clothe' myself with humility before God and others. One hymn prays in this way;

*"I will not enter Your presence lightly
 Forgetting all You've done,
 Lord I remember Your sacrifice, and the price at which this
 freedom is won.
 Oh Spirit now begin
 Come sanctify me, and break this heart of sin
 And let my life become
 A place that Christ might enter in."*

The danger is knowing that pride is sin and that we *must* be humble, but not doing it. Being hearers but not doers. We must clothe ourselves in humility. A humble soul will magnify God, even when we experience His discipline. It will not buck in arrogance. A humble soul, being brought low by God, is gracious to others. Humble yourself under God's mighty hand – learn the difficult lesson that Job had to learn in the midst of his troubles – humble yourself and He will not let go of you, but will lift you up in His time.

O gracious God, break the power of pride within us. Let our daily bread be to remember our natural state, but also the grace that can deal with every sin.

Doubt and gaining a firm foot hold

*Truly God is good to Israel,
to those who are pure in heart.
But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled,
my steps had nearly slipped.*

- Psalm 73:1-2

John Calvin said that when we read the Psalms, *“all lurking places are discovered, and the heart is brought into the light.”* One of those ‘lurking places’ is doubt. Every Christian at some point in their life faces doubts. Doubt is different to unbelief. There is night and day between the doubts that Job had and the unbelief of his wife who said, *“Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die (Job 2:9).”* Doubt is uniquely a believer’s problem. It is looking for light, but feeling like there is only gloom and uncertainty.

Psalm 73 is an autobiography. It tells the story of a man named Asaph whose *“foot nearly slipped (v.2).”* Asaph knew the God of the Scriptures, he knew God’s past victories, he knew God’s promises and His faithfulness to His people. Yet, he nearly threw it all in. The problem began when he started to compare himself with those around him. We all have a tendency to compare ourselves with others and, if we are honest, then we know that not much good generally comes of it. The Devil will find fertile ground in my mind when I begin comparing myself with others.

In Psalm 73, there are three sections;

Section one: the crisis (v.1-16). Asaph looks around him and everything seems wrong. It is like Psalm 1 in reverse! Instead of seeing the wicked being like chaff blow away, he sees them

prospering, and we all know that the world shouldn't operate like that! In Psalm 1 the blessed man meditates on the law of the LORD and flourishes like a tree planted by streams of water, but in Psalm 73 the terrible conclusion that Asaph draws is, *"All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence (v.13)."* What gain is there in following God! It is not worth it. You can almost hear the disciple Peter saying to Jesus in exasperation, *"We have left everything to follow you! (Mark 10:28)"* By the close of verse 16 Asaph is bewildered by the world and the apparent unreliability of God's promises.

Section two: truth found (v.17-22). Suddenly, everything changes and Asaph's ship is righted. He realises that, in fact, far from him being on slippery ground, it is actually the wicked who are on slippery ground. What caused this change in him? He went into the *"sanctuary of God (v.17),"* and there understood the judgement of God upon the wicked. His focus moved from what he *thought* was the truth of things, to what God says is the truth of things. A friend once wrote to Amy Carmichael with this good advice, *"a Christian may feed his doubts, feed his uncertainties until all about him will be cloudy and dark; but if he will feed his faith he will win."* Similarly, when Adoniram Judson's wife, Ann, died from spinal meningitis in 1826 he was a man at the end of his tether. He dug himself a grave by which he would sit. He wrote, *"God is to me the Great Unknown. I believe in him, but I find him not."* Yet when he heard that his brother had come to faith in Christ, it lifted him and he pressed on.

Section three: faith affirmed (v.23-28). Now that Asaph knows the goodness of God, he has found his spiritual feet and he regrets ever doubting God. Verse 22 says, *"I was senseless and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you."* Now the confession of his heart is, *"whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire beside you... God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever (v.26)."*

The following prayer by Benjamin Ramsey (1849-1923) is precious;

*"When doubts and fears arise,
teach me Your way;
when storms o'er-spread the skies,
teach me Your way.
Shine through the cloud and rain,
through sorrow, toil and pain;
O make my pathway plain,
teach me Your way."*

Will I forget or will I wait?

In 1945, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was arrested and sent to several labour camps for speaking poorly about Joseph Stalin in a letter to a friend. By 1983, he had fled Soviet Russia and famously said;

“Over half a century ago, while I was still a child, I recall hearing a number of older people offer the following explanation for the great disasters that had befallen Russia: ‘Men have forgotten God; that’s why all this has happened.’... If I were asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous revolution that swallowed up some 60 million of our people, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat: ‘Men have forgotten God; that’s why all this has happened.’”

In Luke 2, we meet a man named Simon who was righteous and devout. Far from forgetting God, he was *“waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him (v.25).”* He knew that God would come to the rescue and the support of His people, and so, taking baby Jesus in his arms, he praised God saying;

*“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation
that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel.”*

This is the third song praising God that Luke has recorded connected to Jesus' birth. The other two are Mary's song (1:46-56) and Zechariah's song (1:68-79).

As a herald, Simeon's task was to announce God's purposes for His people and the world. So what was it that caused such a joyful response in Simeon? Three things are clear;

1. In seeing the baby Jesus, Simeon knew he was seeing God's salvation. Centuries earlier, Isaiah declared, "*The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God (Isaiah 52:10).*" Simeon understood God's saving purposes would come true in this child, Jesus.
2. God's truth and salvation – His "*light of revelation*" – was now for all people, and God has not done this quietly, but in the presence of all peoples. As Isaiah said, "*All nations shall come to your light (Isaiah 60:3).*" The gospel truly does transcend all languages, all nations, all peoples and borders.
3. God's truth and salvation is glory to Israel. Again, it was Isaiah who prophesied, "*I will put salvation in Zion, for Israel my glory (Isaiah 46:13).*" The Saviour came through Israel.

According to Solzhenitsyn, forgetting God had disastrous consequences in Russia. It was Simeon who realised that "*the hopes and fears of all the years*" were met in Jesus, the God-man.

Christianity will always look feeble to the world; a baby held by an old man is a fragile image. Yet, we dare not forget the God who in this child has given salvation, light and glory.

Martyn Lloyd Jones was as clear and accurate as ever when he said,

“Our supreme need, our only need, is to know God, the living God, and the power of His might. We need nothing else. It is just that, the power of the living God, to know that the living God is among us and that nothing else matters... I say, forget everything else. Forget everything else. We need to realize the presence of the living God amongst us. Let everything else be silent... We all need to know the touch of the power of the living God.”

We must never forget the humble beginnings of our Lord's life on earth. The greatest humility in the entire world. We must come to Him as the only way to the Kingdom of God.

"I believe; help my unbelief!"

And they brought the boy to him. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." And Jesus said to him, "'If you can'! All things are possible for one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

- Mark 9:20-24

There are few more humbling verses in the Gospels than these; a desperate father crying out for help for his son, feeling like he is drowning and his faith is faltering. Every Christian will know something of the agony within this man. Every Christian will know times where our faith wains and all we can do is cry out to God for help. Elijah knew the heights of faith and then a moment later, he knew the depths of despair (1 Kings 18:36-37 and 1 Kings 19:4-5). It is important to realise that saving faith is not perfected here on earth.

In the incident above, the fundamental problem of the people, even the disciples, was their faithlessness and this went hand in hand with their failure to pray. Nonetheless, the father confesses that he *has* faith, albeit small, and he asks Jesus to give him a heart that more firmly trusts in Him.

From this, we can make three statements;

One: True faith varies in strength - In the words of the Westminster Confession, saving faith *"is different in degrees,*

weak or strong; may be often and many ways assailed, and weakened." In the Gospel of Matthew, four times the Lord Jesus cries out, *"O you of little faith"* and one further time He rebukes the disciples for their smallness of their faith (see Matthew 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20).

True faith is always aware of how inadequate and small it is; yet it yearns for more. This father had the honesty to admit the weakness of his faith to Jesus our gracious Saviour and look to Him for help.

It is important to realise the difference between a weak faith and a false faith. When you become a Christian one of the most discouraging things is to realise that some professions of faith are deceptive. A person may make a bold profession of faith and yet it is not genuine. Jesus said to His disciples, *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven (Matthew 7:21)."* In Pilgrim's Progress, Christian and Faithful meet a man on their travels fittingly named Talkative. He represents someone who substitutes talk, even spiritual talk, for genuine faith and Christian living. For a while even Faithful was deceived into thinking that he was sincere, yet his life was empty of true faith.

The father in Mark 9 did not become a believer when he amassed enough faith. It is not the amount of faith that saves us, but where our faith is placed. Though his faith is faltering, it is nonetheless true and he cries out to our Lord. True faith is true, even though it vary in strength.

Two: True faith will fail at times - Surely, the moment that we feel pride in the supposed strength of our faith is the moment that the Devil rejoices. Remember Peter's bold assertion of loyalty to Jesus: *"Even though they all fall away, I*

will not... If I must die with you, I will not deny you (Mark 14:29-31)." Later that evening he denied Jesus three times.

Sometimes we feel bold, yet often our bravado is misplaced.

Three: It is Christ who keeps us – despite Peter's failure of faith, Jesus gave him this one assurance, *"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail (Luke 22:31-32)."* Again, in the words of the Westminster Confession, saving faith may be weak, yet *"it gets the victory."* All who have been born of God will overcome the world, and the one who overcomes is the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God (see 1 John 5:4-5).

God in His goodness has given us means of grace so that our faith will grow stronger and stronger. These include meditating on His Word, being strengthened by the Lord's Supper and baptism, and prayer, simple yet true. When we grow in these, then we find that Spurgeon's words are true: *"any simpleton can follow the narrow path in the light: faith's rare wisdom enables us to march on in the dark with infallible accuracy, since she places her hand in that of her Great Guide."*

O Gracious God, please sustain and strengthen our faith. We desire to grow stronger and deeper in our trust of You. In this way, please glorify Your Name, Amen.

The mind and God

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

- Romans 12:2

*Whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool,
but he who walks in wisdom will be delivered.*

- Proverbs 28:26

*The simple believes everything,
but the prudent gives thought to his steps.*

- Proverbs 14:15

Ecclesiastes shows us that we have both eternity and madness in our hearts, and that includes our minds (Ecclesiastes 3:11). The mind is a fascinating design, created by God and for God, yet polluted with sin and easily corrupted. H. G. Wells was one of the great humanist thinkers of the 20th century, yet for all his optimism and belief in humanity, his final book in 1946 was called *“Mind at the end of its tether.”*

Paul’s letter to the Romans is far more realistic about humanity and our minds. Romans 1 begins by telling us that our rejection of God means that we are now futile in our thinking. Minds full of knowledge, yet trapped in vain thinking. It is not an intellectual problem that we have, but a moral problem, and even the most brilliant people have their minds bound in this way. Yet, in Romans 12 the Apostle Paul aims squarely at a believer’s mind and commands us to be transformed by the renewal of our mind. God is the great renewer. The Holy Spirit changes our thinking to love God and want to obey Him. This is all part of our reasonable response or “spiritual worship” to

God's mercy (Romans 12:1). God has redeemed us by His Son at the cross from our sin, death and the Devil and now He changes us, so that we go from futile thinking to thinking in line with God's will.

From this draw three lessons;

One, a Christian must be concerned with the mind - The mind is the turf on which most spiritual battles are fought. The mind is vital for true Christian living. John Owen is surely right in saying that, *"The mind is a leading faculty of the soul. When the mind fixes upon an object or course of action, the will and the affections (heart) follow suit."* It is sometimes said that the mind is the way to the heart. Sanctification, that is growing to become more like Christ Jesus, begins with changing how we think. Hence the prayer of the Psalms is our prayer too: *"teach me"*, *"give me understanding"*, *"direct me"* in Your ways, O LORD (see Psalm 119:33-35).

Two, a Christian must guard what goes into their mind -

Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength (Mark 12:30). Part of loving God with our minds is guarding what we allow into our minds and into the minds of our children. In fact, it would be better to be drowned in the sea than to cause *"one of these little ones who believes in me"* to sin (Matthew 18:6).

Jesus also said, *"The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!"* (Matthew 6:22-23) The eye is controlled by the mind. Sloppiness with our minds will not do! That is to invite the Devil to begin his wicked work. A Christian sets a guard at the door of their mind, and the

minds of little ones under their care. All moral filth, crassness, smut, depravity, unrighteous anger and wrongly critical thoughts of others must be kept out of the mind. That is a fight, but we must be in the battle! A carcass floats with the current, but a Christian must swim against the current of society. We must *"take every thought captive and makes it obedient to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:45)."*

Three, a Christian must fill their mind with whatever is good in God - In a positive sense, loving God with our mind means filling our minds with whatever is good in Him. Again, Paul commands us: *"whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things (Philippians 4:8)."* God does not necessarily promise to change our situations, but He does promise to transform our thinking in line with His will. This is part of our spiritual worship (Romans 12:1).

Father, teach us to place a trap before our minds, blocking all that is sinful and not honouring to You. Holy Spirit replace all sinful thoughts and fill our minds with thinking that is honouring to You. For Christ's sake and glory, Amen.

The banquet of consequences

Robert Louis Stevenson, of *Treasure Island* fame, did not have any belief in God, but he was true in saying that, “Everybody, sooner or later, sits down to a banquet of consequences.” It is the same idea that Psalm 1 tells us;

- The blessed man closes his ears to the wicked, sinners and scoffers, but opens his ear to the law of the LORD, mediating on it day and night (verses 1-2).
- As a consequence the ‘delighter in God’s law’ grows like a strong tree planted by streams of water, bearing fruit pleasing to God in season (verse 3).
- In contrast, those who reject God’s ways have nothing to root them in the ground.
- As a consequence, they are like the chaff of the wheat harvest that the wind will blow away (verse 4).

Stevenson’s “*banquet of consequences*” is nowhere more important than in a person’s view of human life. A Christian undoubtedly stands on the side of life, understanding that even when life is broken and painful, it is nonetheless a precious gift from God. It is God who gave us the “*breath of life* (see Genesis 2:7).” For a Christian, this truth forms the basis for our conviction that all human life, including life in the womb, is sacred and should be protected. A child in the womb is not a *potential* human, but an *actual* human. Any attempts to place a start date on life are logically flawed and wrong before God.

Recently, several interesting stories have brought home the “*banquet of consequences*” that comes from rejecting God. Last month, Richard Dawkins (perhaps the world’s most famous

atheist) said in an interview that it would *"be wise and sensible"* to destroy the life of a Down Syndrome child in the womb since *"the amount of suffering in the world probably does not go down, probably does go up, compared to having another child who doesn't have Down's syndrome."*

At the same time, Mrs Heidi Carter, 25, a lady with Down Syndrome herself, is challenging UK law which says that *"a baby without Down syndrome can be aborted up to 24 weeks but a baby like me and James (her husband) can be aborted to birth."* Tragically, in many parts of the Western world, many with Down Syndrome struggle for survival (in August 2017, CBS reported that 'termination' rates for Down Syndrome were 98% in Denmark for 2015; 77% in France; nearly 100% in Iceland).

Behind Dawkins' comments there seems to be the belief that happiness (or at least reducing suffering) is the ultimate aim of life, without any reference point to God. If God is removed, then what sanctity does human life have? If God is removed, then what protection and safeguards are there? If happiness is the highest good, then what defence will the weak have? Fredrick Nietzsche, who was as ardently anti-Christian in his day as Dawkins is today, could at least see the logic of the Bible: *"When one gives up the Christian faith, one pulls the right to Christian morality out from under one's feet. This morality is by no means self-evident. Christianity is a system, a whole view of things thought out together."*

As a Christian, several things flow from this;

First, I must reject a *therapeutic* view of life, or a view of life that says that happiness is the ultimate aim of life. I can

avoid suffering, but not at the expense of disobeying God or failing to love my neighbour as myself.

Second, I must hold fast to the sanctity of human life, created in the image of God. I must obey what the Proverbs tell me to do: *“speak up for those who cannot speak up for themselves (Proverbs 31:8).”* That is never more true than for the child in the womb.

Third, I must understand that where Dawkins sees no value in suffering, I am to trust that God is at work. As hard as it is to understand, suffering is meaningful before God. Paul says that for a Christian, our *“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 (Romans 5:3-5).”* That changes suffering from meaningless to something used by a sovereign God for good, as trying as it may be.

In the final years of her life, Corrie ten Boom faced what was perhaps her greatest prison. She suffered a stroke(s) and was unable to communicate or move. In the words of her biographer: *“The fear of growing old is combined in the human heart with the dread of becoming useless.”* She had served others for many decades, yet now she would have to have the grace to allow others to care for her. Finally, on her 91st birthday her body gave up and she entered into her Lord’s presence.

A *“banquet of consequences”* awaits us all. Let Psalm 1 teach us the importance of right foundations in God and His Word.

