

OVERCOMING DOUBT

by

David M. Young

2020

Libri që e ke propozuar më duket një temë shumë e qëlluar dhe e nevojshme për kishën dhe unë do të pres me gëzim dhe me interes të madh që ta lexoj. Zoti të drejtoftë në urtësinë e tij dhe të dhashtë mençuri.

[The book which you have proposed seems to me to be a very appropriate theme and necessary for the church, and I shall wait with joy and great interest to read it. The Lord guide you in his wisdom and give you wisdom.]

- Dr Femi Cakolli, Pastor, Messiah Evangelical Church, Prishtina, Kosova

Mendoj se ka disa pyetje të rëndësishme në atë libër që shumë të krishterë në Shqipëri kanë filluar t'ia bëjnë vetes, por druhën ngaqë mos i damkosin si jobesimtarë.

[I think there are some important questions in that book which many Christians in Albania have begun asking themselves, but they are afraid in case it brands them as unbelievers.]

- Florenc Mene, pastor i të rinjve, Lushnjë, Albania

an honest assessment on a very difficult issue, clear and concise and, I have no doubt, will be enormously helpful to a young church and to people who have so much to contend with... I value the fact that you allowed me to read it.

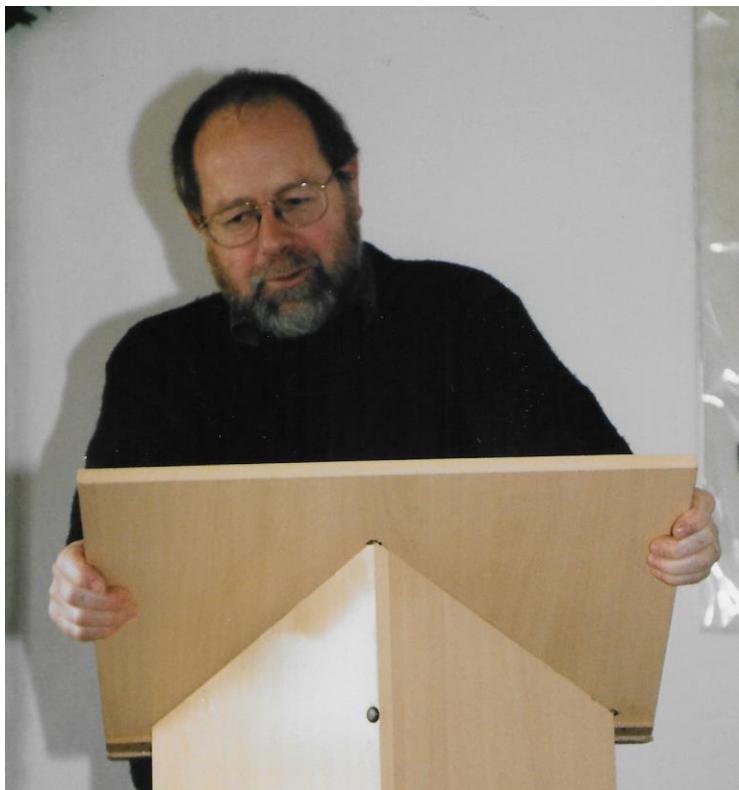
- Esther Hitchcock, former missionary to Eritrea

About the Author

David Martin Young was born on Christmas Day, 1946, in Basingstoke, England. He went to school at Queen Mary's Grammar School, and from there went to read Modern and Mediæval Languages at Trinity College, Cambridge, graduating in 1968. Later he also trained at Cambridge as a schoolteacher in modern languages.

He was brought to faith in Christ through the ministry of the Methodist Church in Basingstoke, and preached his first sermon at the Methodist chapel in Oakley, Hampshire, in January 1965. He was baptised as a believer in Cambridge in 1966, and later pastored the Baptist churches in Hadlow (1974-1976) and Llay (1983-1988), mainly earning a living as a full- or part-time schoolteacher, as both churches were too small to pay a living wage. He was also accredited as a minister with the FIEC (Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches) after successfully completing the London Bible College courses and examinations set by the FIEC for ministerial recognition.

He became involved in ministry for Albania and Kosova in 1973, and made his first trip to Kosova with his wife Margaret in 1974. In 1979 he and his wife hosted what has become the annual weekend prayer conference for Albanian Gospel work. In 1986 he was one of the founders of the Albanian Evangelical Mission (formerly 'Trust'), and worked for the Albanian Evangelical Mission from 1987 until his retirement on Christmas Day 2011.



David Young, Prishtina, 2003

CONTENTS

- Chapter 1 Doubt
- Chapter 2 Trusting the Cross
- Chapter 3 Trusting only the Cross
- Chapter 4 Mara
- Chapter 5 The Widow of Zarephath
- Chapter 6 Job
- Chapter 7 Four Doubts the Bible speaks of
- Chapter 8 Are you like Asaph the psalmist?
- Chapter 9 The Bible's longest Chapter
- Chapter 10 “A God who hidest thyself”
- Chapter 11 Satan
- Chapter 12 John the Baptist
- Chapter 13 Doubting your Salvation
- Chapter 14 Jesus Christ

Bible quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.

Chapter 1 Doubt

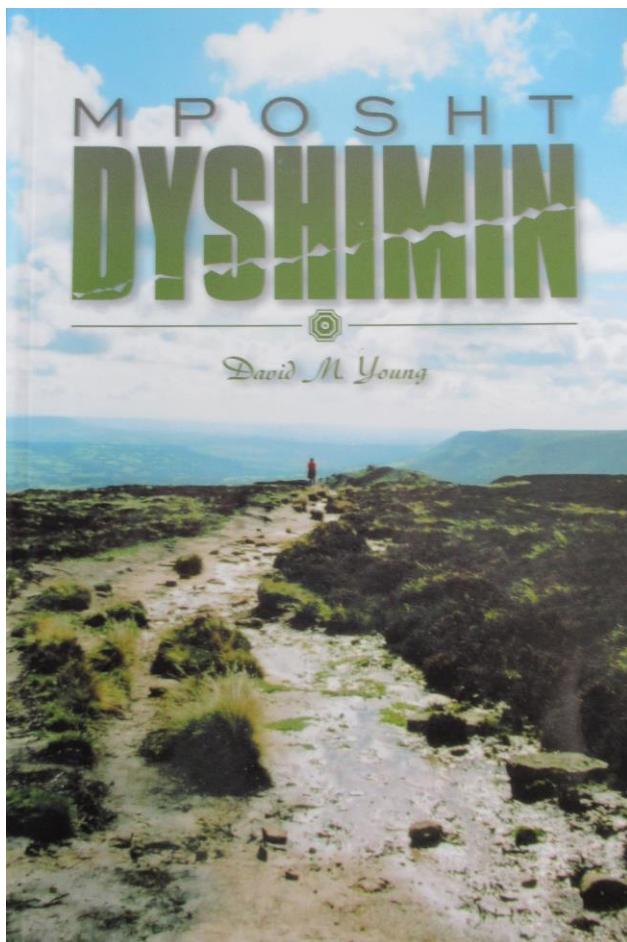
This book is a distillation of thoughts and material from sermons preached at the following places, on the subject of experiencing and combatting doubt:

Acrefair,	Llangollen,
Bradford,	Llay,
Brooke,	Marchwiel,
Cefn Mawr,	Neston,
Coedpoeth,	Oldbury,
Dolywern,	Oswestry,
Farndon,	Overton,
Froncysyllte,	Penycae,
Gjirokastër,	Poncian,
Greenstead,	Pontybodkin,
Gresford,	Rhosddu,
Hethersett,	Rhosymedre,
Hookgate,	Rossett,
Johnstown,	Talwrn Green,
Leeswood,	Weston Rhyn,
Leicester,	Wrexham.

The book was originally published jointly by Vernon Publishing, Tirana, Albania, and Misioni Ungjillor, Wrexham¹ in 2008 in an Albanian translation. The photograph on its cover showed my wife Margaret on Black Hill in South Wales. The path looks

¹ ISBN 978-99943-55-23-5

drab, wet and uncomfortable, and she seems to have reached the end of it and to be wondering where to turn next, or whether in fact there is anywhere to go at all.



Have you sometimes felt like that in your life? Have you felt that God is far away, you are somewhat lost, the outlook ahead and around you is bleak, and you don't know where to go to find God?

I became a Christian more than fifty years ago, but I sometimes sit and wonder whether there is a God; and if there is, whether He is really the God of the Bible; and if He is, whether I myself really savingly know Him.

Actually, I do not find it very hard to believe there is a God, when I look at the delicate and careful design of the world and the universe - both the immense things, like the stars, and the tiny things, like flowers and insect life.

More often, my doubts are about whether this Creator is really the God who is described in the Bible, and whether I am really a true Christian, a child of His by the new birth given by His Spirit to those who believe.

Some years ago, my wife Margaret wrote these words. Looking back to a period beginning in 1991 she wrote of the loss of her faith:

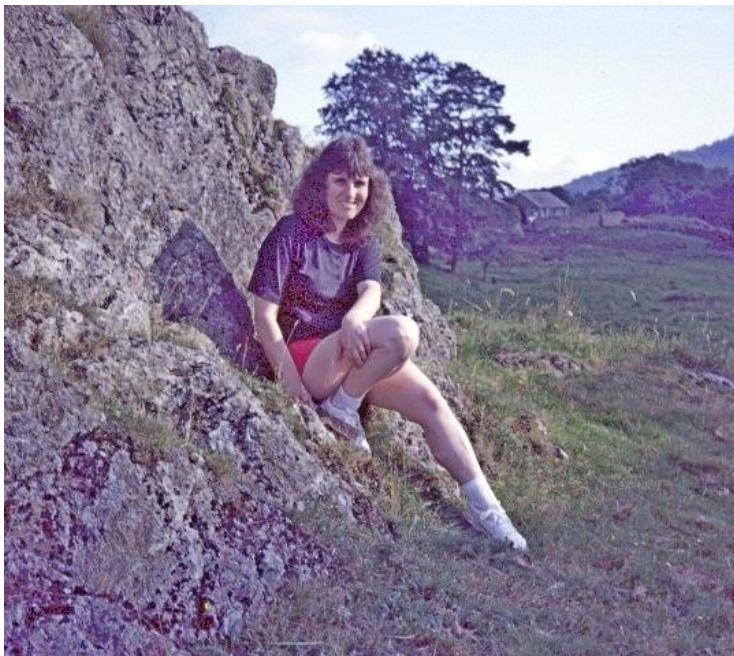
Ten years ago on the 7th January [1987] at 8.50 a.m. I saw my father die. The pain and loss at that moment were almost unbearable, but the consequences of that loss were not all apparent at that time and have only emerged as time has gone on. The loss had happened; he had gone for ever. But it is only as time has gone on that I have appreciated the enormity of that loss.

Loss of faith, to me, has been a similar experience. Anger, pain and a feeling of lostness have all been present, but almost daily new aspects of what this loss really means

come to light - and yet by those still in this faith, whom one would expect to have some kind of understanding of the experience, it seems to have been treated as a whim, as being awkward, with no notion at all of what really has happened. How can those who hold this faith so dear have no idea what their lives would be without it? It has been yet another thing which makes me question the validity of what is claimed.

To me, faith was the offer of unconditional love by God, and one expected at least the shadow of this in his people. And the fact that I so often met with the opposite reaction made me question even more the validity of what I had believed for over twenty years. Those whom I would have expected to go out of their way to console and help were very often the ones who were first to reject.

Just as my father was real, and lived, and affected my life, so I can never deny that God was part of my life too and helped to make me what I am. I have not yet rejected the basic precepts of the Christian faith, and in a way that is where my experience differs from bereavement. There comes a time when you accept that the one you love will never be there again, but my loss of faith has found no conclusion. I feel in an in-between world at times, where there is no rest.



Margaret, 1990, shortly before this extract

This is where the continuous prose ends. She then passes into note form about how to continue the narrative – which sadly she never did. Her notes include loss of security and friends, and the problem of how and why she began to question her faith. She thought of writing about the two conflicting desires within her, on the one hand to assess with honesty the basis of her faith and the doubts that troubled her, whatever the final cost might be in terms of loss of belief and security, and on the other

hand her inclination to exclude the risk of the pain involved in loss of faith by deciding not to ask such questions.

Her experience is far from unique. A lot of Christians have doubts. People in the Bible certainly did - Job, John the Baptist, Thomas the Apostle, to name only three - and you will read about them in this little book. In fact, probably you also have your doubts, otherwise why would you be reading this book - unless it is learn how to help others who are struggling with doubt?

Doubt can make you think deeply about your faith, what you believe and why, and this can help you to discover more depths and more strength in the Christian faith than you previously knew were there. It makes you very aware that you need to discover more about God, and finding Him more deeply can move you to a fuller commitment to trust, obey and serve Him. Doubt can do this - if you are able to find victory over it.

Doubt is a strong opponent, but working your way through it can be one way of proving the truth of the riddle in the Bible, "Out of the strong came forth sweetness." This book is written to help you find that victory.

Chapter 2 Trusting the Cross

Doubt takes many forms, and first of all we are going to look at the feeling that “I am not good enough to be a Christian”; the sense that you are too bad, have too many sins and shortcomings, to be able to believe that you really have become a Christian and have begun a new life in Christ, or that you really could.

The next chapter will examine the opposite feeling - that you are too good, and don’t really need God’s forgiveness for all your sins to make you a new creation.

But more of that later. First, a word for those of us who find it hard to believe that someone like us can really be a born-again Christian, a child of the true and living and holy God.

The problem and the answer centre on the Cross where Jesus Christ died for us. We all acknowledge some need of the Cross, for example when we take Communion, or the Lord’s Supper - the Eucharist (which is the Greek for thanksgiving) - when we thank Jesus for dying for us, and God the Father for sending Him.

But some believers find they cannot bring themselves to believe that the Cross was really the answer to all their sins: they have too many, whether lots of different sins, or the same one repeated, often reluctantly, over and over again. Or maybe one huge and really bad thing we did perhaps years ago. No, we feel, the Cross was good, but it can’t cover all of that.

Some manage to be hopeful, but no more than hopeful. Yet God says in His Word the Bible, through John: “I write this to

you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5.13). You see, God doesn’t want us just to be hopeful: He wants us to know.

There is a man in the Bible who came to Jesus asking for a particular blessing, and his prayer was, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9.24). His belief got him so far, but it couldn’t get him all the way without additional help from the Lord.

Some cannot even find that much hope. Like the Apostle Peter, they see Jesus, see themselves, and feel that the two can never be close to each other: “He fell down at Jesus’s knees, saying, ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.’” Like him, there was a preacher in England called Robert Roberts, who wrote this:

It was in the month of June, 1754, that I joined the [Methodist]² society; and about six weeks after, I experienced that peace which passeth all understanding. The love of God was shed abroad in my heart, and His Spirit did bear witness with my spirit that I was His child. And now I blessed His holy name that ever I was born. I loved Him who had first loved me; and with joy declared His goodness to my fellow-travellers, and we rejoiced together.

In a few weeks after I had found peace with God, I began to see and feel the depravity of my nature in a greater degree than I had ever done before. At first I was dejected and cast down; then I began to doubt that I had deceived myself in concluding that the Lord was

² “Methodist” is the name given to a group of Christians which began in England in the 18th century and is now spread through many different countries.

reconciled to me; and, my comfort decreasing, by and by I entirely cast away my confidence. And now a horrible dread overwhelmed my soul; and, to increase my distress, Satan threw his fiery darts at me, which stuck fast in my mind, particularly blasphemous thoughts. For some months such thoughts crowded into my mind as are not fit to be mentioned, and which could only proceed from the prince of darkness. The enemy then suggested that I had sinned against the Holy Ghost, - that there was no mercy for me, - and that these thoughts were not from him, but arose from my own heart. This affected me more than anything I had ever felt: to think that I should have such thoughts against that blessed God who had been so kind to me, and whom I desired to love and honour for ever, pierced me with inexpressible anguish.

In a short time I gave up all hope of mercy and deliverance, and sunk into utter despair. I had no rest day or night. I fasted, prayed, and used every means of grace constantly, and resolved to serve God as long as I lived, if He did sent to me hell when I died. I conversed with the most experienced of the children of God I met with, but could find none who had drunk so deep of the wormwood and gall as I had done. However, they did all in their power to comfort me; they told me that God was with me, and would deliver me. I often thought that both God and the whole creation were against me; and concluded, that I should have been happy had I been anything but a man; and was ready to say, "O that I had never been born!"

My great distress continued about nine months; and the Lord was pleased to sanctify it to me. I clearly saw I must be saved by grace, or not at all. The Lord then graciously manifested Himself unto me, as my Lord and my God, in a powerful manner. He overturned my unbelief, and all my doubts and fears.

This man thought he was too bad to be a true Christian, and many serious people have felt like this for a long time. Mankind was already sinful long before Jesus came to save us, and God had an invitation and a promise even then. He still has: “Return, faithless Israel, says the Lord. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, says the Lord” (Jeremiah 3.12).

Many years later than Jeremiah, when people still feared they might have sinned too much for God to cleanse and forgive them, he moved his servant John in the Bible to write: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1.9).

It doesn't say you have to confess to a priest - though sometimes it is helpful to take someone into your confidence and ask him or her to pray with you as you seek God's mercy for the sins which trouble you. It is quite in order to confess your sins direct to God in secret prayer. No-one else needs to know - unless, of course, there is someone to whom you have to apologise, or with whom you have to put matters right. That is part of being truly sorry.

God's mercy is for you, if you are truly sorry for your wrongdoings. There was another preacher in England, this one called William Hunter, who also felt he had been too bad for

God to accept him. He felt that he had continued in living in sin and without God for too long a time; that he had missed his opportunity to come to God. He tells us that:

I attended the preaching on all occasions, and felt much sweetness therein, and love to those that I believed were devoted to God.

I went on in this way for some time, till my companions began to take notice of me, and call me Methodist. Some of them set upon me one Sunday, and cursed and swore bitterly at me, telling me I was going to leave the Church, and the religion I was brought up in. This had a strange effect upon me. I gave way to them; I was overtaken by my old sins again. The Spirit of the Lord departed from me: my heart became as hard as a stone. Darkness covered my mind again, and I was as senseless to the things of God, as though I had never known anything at all about them.

I went on in this wretched state many months, living totally without God in the world. Through the advice of a young man, I went to hear preaching again. A great light was communicated to my understanding by the word, and it pierced my conscience like a sword. I felt my inward parts to be very wickedness; all the sins of my life stared me in the face, and lay as a heavy burden upon my conscience. I roared for disquietness of heart, and wept and made supplication. I was convinced I could not help myself, that I could not do anything to reconcile myself to God; and I had many fears lest the day of grace was past. O, the distress of soul I went through for many

months! It was as though I had been forsaken of God, and hell was already begun in me.

I continued mourning after the Lord, and at length He heard my cry. One day, as I remember, I was reading in a book, where the writer was answering that objection concerning the day of grace being past: the Lord was pleased to send me deliverance and I could truly say, “The Lord is my life and my salvation; whom shall I fear? Thine anger is turned away, and Thou comfortest me.”

So we have seen that some people are hopeful but not sure that the Cross was enough to purchase forgiveness for all their sins; others feel even worse than that - too bad altogether for God to love and accept them. But maybe you are different from those two sorts of person: maybe you are troubled by one particular sin which you do but which you hate and wish you didn’t do, and you are afraid that you have used up all God’s grace for that one sin, even if He would be willing to forgive other things you have done.

Look at Peter again in Matthew 18.21-22. He came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” He obviously thought (as I am sure I would) that if someone wronged me again and again seven times, probably in the very same way, it would be a great and difficult thing to forgive him seven times. But Jesus answered, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.” Jesus wants us to forgive people that many times, *because He wants us to be like Him*. Because He is willing to forgive us that many times, if we are truly sorry, for the same sin, just as we are invited to pray, “Forgive us our trespasses, as

we forgive them that trespass against us.” Because He died for that sin, as well as all others, on the Cross.

Other people don’t suffer from a repeated sin which they hate but which defeats them. Some have done one really bad, huge, enormous thing in the past - maybe long in the past - which was wrong, and they feel that every other sin could be forgiven, but not that one.

I think of the former school teacher in a village near Gjirokastër who was ordered by the Communist party to lead the children of the local school in pulling down the village church in 1966. Forty years later, in retirement, he was struggling with the part he played in this. He asked a missionary: “Who is guilty - the one who gives the order or the one who carries it out?” The missionary answered him thoughtfully and caringly, and their conversation then continued like this:

Teacher - A teacher who disobeyed the Party would lose his job and end up working in the fields or worse. What was I to do?

Missionary – Certainly it was a difficult choice.

Teacher – Can God forgive such a sin?

Missionary – There was once a man named Paul who hated Christians and made them suffer greatly. But by the grace of God he became a Christian and God used him greatly, even making him an apostle. Let me ask you: Do you believe that Christ is the true way?

Teacher - I believe that Christ taught the truth. He taught that people should do good things.

Missionary – But do you believe that he died for your sins and rose again?

Teacher - I've never seen anyone rise from the dead. Why haven't we seen someone else rise from the dead?

Missionary - The difference between anyone else and Jesus is that he is God's Son. Do you think it was difficult for God to raise his own Son from the dead? Is that too hard for God?

Teacher - The younger generation may come to have faith but the old proverb says 'an old branch cannot be bent'.

Missionary - God who made the trees can make an old branch bend.

Teacher – Is that possible?

Missionary - With God it is.

The apostle Paul had persecuted the church before he became a Christian. He was involved in their imprisonment and even death. Years later, he wrote: “I am the foremost of sinners; but I received mercy” (1 Timothy 1.15-16).

And the Apostle Peter wanted to keep his own safety by denying the Lord, Jesus, when Jesus was arrested: “He began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, “I do not know the man” (Matthew 26.74).

Afterwards he wept bitterly for what he had done, and when he met Jesus after Jesus's resurrection, Jesus forgave him and reassured him of his commission. What grace!

There is no better way to close this chapter than by reading some of the things God has said about man's sin and God's mercy:

He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities. For as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. - Psalm 103.10-11

Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. - Isaiah 1.18

I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins. - Isaiah 43.25

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities... he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. - Isaiah 53.5, 12

Who is a God like thee, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger for ever because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion upon us, and he will tread our iniquities under foot. - Micah 7.18-19

He [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." - John 1.29

I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more. - Hebrews 8.12

If you believe in Jesus Christ, are sorry for your sins and willing to turn away from them with his power which he will grant you, you may give up every doubt that you are in any way too bad for God to forgive, and you can fully put all your trust in the Cross where Jesus died for you, believing its worth is great enough for all your sins. And you will find peace with God.



Christ on the Cross – Anglo-Saxon image at Daglingworth church

Chapter 3 Trusting only the Cross

We saw two things in the last chapter:

- that we all acknowledge some need of the Cross of Christ for our salvation
- but some people feel too bad, in various ways, to be able to trust it wholly for their forgiveness.

This chapter is for a different set of people who do not put all their trust in the Cross for their forgiveness; it is for those who will not trust it wholly, because they feel they are too good, and that they have something to contribute themselves from their own goodness.

There are some people who try to achieve salvation by trusting the Cross plus their own efforts: “they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness” (Romans 10.2-3).

Jesus told a parable in Luke 18 “to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous.” Some people, earnestly living a moral life, feel they don’t really need very much forgiveness from God, because their good deeds will balance out their bad ones, and the Cross will make up any shortfall; but they don’t feel they have to rely only on the Cross - they have something to contribute themselves.

Some people rely on where they are, or where they belong. The Lord said to Ezekiel about the Jews of his day (chapter 11.15):

“your brethren, your fellow exiles, the whole house of Israel, all of them, are those of whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said, “They have gone far from the Lord; to us this land is given for a possession.”” Ezekiel and his fellow exiles had been carried off as prisoners of war to a foreign country, to Babylon hundreds of miles from their homeland in Israel, and the ones who had been allowed to stay in Israel were saying that the ones who were exiles were far from the Lord, because they were far from Israel. But God says that is quite wrong. In the next verse, He says, “though I have scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them … in the countries where they have gone.”

Have you ever been tempted to feel that your nationality, your cultural or religious background, the family, your membership of a particular church or religious group is what makes you near to God, and that other people are far from God? It is not like that! Just as moral goodness doesn’t balance out the sins you have committed, neither does religious affiliation confer any merit. A sinner must be forgiven, and the only means of forgiveness before God is the shed blood of His Son, Jesus Christ.

God tells us, through the Apostle Paul, that “all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3.23) - you, me, and everyone else who has ever lived. We all need God’s forgiveness.

So how have we all sinned? There are two ways, general and particular. In general terms, Jesus told us we are called to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” and “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Matthew 22.37-39). None of us has fulfilled either of those two commandments.

As regards particular sins, here are some which the Bible lists in Mark 7, Galatians 5 and Colossians 3:

evil thoughts	idolatry
fornication	sorcery
theft	enmity
murder	strife
adultery	jealousy
coveting	anger
wickedness	selfishness
deceit	dissension
licentiousness	party spirit
envy	drunkenness
slander	carousing
pride	passion
foolishness	evil desire
immorality	malice
impurity	foul talk

Not one of us reading (or writing) these words is pure and innocent in the light of those lists; and there are of course other sins as well.

There was a well-known Baptist preacher in England called John Gill. Shortly before his death, when he had been pastor of his church in Southwark for fifty-one years, he said to his nephew, also called John:

I depend wholly and alone upon the free, sovereign, eternal, unchangeable love of God, the firm and everlasting covenant of grace, and my interest in the

Persons of the Trinity, for my whole salvation; and not upon any righteousness of my own, nor on anything in me, nor done by me under the influences of the Holy Spirit; not upon any services of mine, which I have been assisted to perform for the good of the Church, but upon ... the blessings of grace streaming to me through the blood and righteousness of Christ, as the ground of my hope.

The only thing we contribute to our forgiveness is the sins for which God is willing to forgive us, because Jesus died and rose again to purchase that forgiveness for us.

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities... All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. - Isaiah 53.5, 6

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. - 1 Peter 2.24

Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! - John 1.29

We are right to admit we need the Cross - as when we take Communion. But we need to give up every other trust and rely only on what Jesus Christ has achieved for us.

John Bunyan, who wrote *Pilgrim's Progress*, also wrote this:

A broken heart, a contrite spirit, God will not despise, but both thou, and all thy service, he will certainly slight and reject, if, when thou comest to him, a broken heart be

wanting: wherefore, here is the point, Come broken,
come contrite, come sensible of and sorry for thy sins, or
thy coming will be counted no coming to God aright; and
if so, consequently thou wilt get no benefit thereby.



Chapter 4 Mara

This chapter was preached as a sermon in Gjirokastër in 2001. It began by telling the congregation about a woman called Naomi, who once felt that Mara would be a better name for her. Naomi means “pleasant”, but she said to the other women, “Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has afflicted me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?” Mara means “bitter”.

The people we considered in previous chapters doubted the full strength of the Gospel message because they looked at themselves and thought they were too bad to claim it, or too good to need to rely on it alone; the people we are going to consider in this chapter doubted God’s goodness when they looked at their *circumstances*. I think that may have happened to some who will read these words: you may sometimes have felt like Naomi, that life has become bitter. But God has provided ways of dealing with our doubts.

In the Book of Exodus we see more people who felt like that, this time all of them together. It was a shared feeling. They had received a call from God, and after a struggle they obeyed it. But it led them into a bitter place, yet (as we shall see) their bitter situation became a blessing.

In Exodus 3.18, God told Moses that Moses and the elders of the people had to go to the King of Egypt and say to him, “The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, we pray you, let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness, that

we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.” In Chapter 5 Moses and Aaron go to the King with this message, and in 8.27 they say to him, “We must go three days’ journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to the Lord our God.”

You and I can also receive quite clear directions from the Lord. In their case, going into the wilderness, against the opposition of the King, was no easy matter. In Chapter 5 they had to struggle against the King’s resistance and opposition. They were brickmakers, and he made their work harder for them by no longer supplying the straw they needed for the bricks. From now on, to punish them for asking permission to go and sacrifice to God, he made them gather their straw as well as make just as many bricks. They were scattered throughout all the land, gathering stubble for straw; and the taskmasters beat them to keep them at the work.

They also had to struggle against their own feelings, as we often have to. In verses 20-21, they told Moses and Aaron it was Moses’s and Aaron’s fault, and that they had made them offensive to the King and the taskmasters. They feared it would end in their being killed. By Chapter 6 their spirit is broken (verse 9). When they did eventually leave, they were afraid the Egyptians would chase them and re-capture them, or that they would die anyway on the journey back to Israel.

It is quite likely that you will have a struggle with your circumstances or your feelings - or both - when you start to obey God’s call to you.

But by Chapter 15 they have set out. They felt a great sense of triumph and expectation:

I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously...
The Lord is my strength and my song, and ... I will praise
him... Thy right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy... Thou
hast led in thy steadfast love the people whom thou hast
redeemed... The Lord will reign for ever and ever.

Once you have overcome all your opposing circumstances and the fears and resistance in your hearts, it feels great to be moving forward in obedience to the Lord's will.

But we come to verse 22: "Then ... they went into the wilderness." God's call now seems bitter: "They found no water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter. Therefore it was called Marah [Bitterness]."

Now they are doubting their future and what it will lead to. This is a time of testing: will they continue to follow and obey the Lord? Will they try to go back to Egypt? or even try to devise some other means of not continuing the journey to which God has called them? For verse 25 says, "There the Lord proved them." "Proved" means "put to the test": he wanted to see how they would respond, and He said to them, "If you will diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord your God, and do that which is right in his eyes..."

What if you come to a situation where you have lost your strength, health, joys, comforts, friends - will you continue to trust the Lord and to go his way?

In the event, Moses cried to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a tree which he threw into the water, and the water became sweet. Why was the water bitter? Mineral salts can make water

bitter. Maybe the Lord wrought a miracle, or maybe it was a pungent, aromatic shrub which covered the bitterness. I have read that Arabs use a barberry bush for this purpose. We are not told how God did it, or why he used the tree. Some think it was a symbol of our Lord's Cross where he died to redeem us: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Peter 2.24).

Whatever the explanation, God promises that if they will continue to obey him, he will heal and protect them: "If you will diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord your God, and do that which is right in his eyes ... I will put none of the diseases upon you which I put upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord, your healer" (verse 26).

They did move forward; at this point, they obeyed God. And the very last verse of the chapter says "they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees; and they encamped there by the water."

Here is a verse from a hymn by John Wesley (1703-1791) which he wrote based on the hymn *Ich habe nun den Grund gefunden* by Johann Andreas Rothe (1688-1758):

Though waves and storms go o'er my head,
Though strength, and health, and friends be gone,
Though joys be withered all and dead,
Though every comfort be withdrawn,
On this my steadfast soul relies,
Father, thy mercy never dies.

If we overcome our doubts by exercising the obedience of faith, we eventually move on to new and further blessings.



Johann Andreas Rothe

Chapter 5 The Widow of Zarephath

There are callings to some special work or ministry which come from God to the Christian; you may also have read my book *Where next? Some biblical principles for finding God's guidance* about how to discern God's will for you. We shall see in this chapter that it is quite possible to obey your calling and to serve God faithfully for a long time, and later to fall into doubt and despair.

There are callings which come via the church, even though they originate in God's will - things like teaching in the church, preaching, or being a deacon or elder. And there are also what I might call more ordinary or mundane callings, such as you do at home, at work or in the community, or in practical service at church.

These "mundane" callings are just as much from God as the more conspicuously "spiritual" ones, and they are just as important in His eyes. When you are living out such an ordinary calling according to God's will for you, you will have peace in your mind and heart that your circumstances and service are God's appointment.

When I was a schoolboy, a hymn we used to sing at school assemblies was George Herbert's *Teach me, my God and King*, which contains the couplet:

Who sweeps a room as for Thy laws,
Makes that and the action fine.

What you do “for Thy sake” (as Herbert’s hymn puts it) will be a vital part of the fellowship of the church. The hospitality you offer will be useful, your witness for Christ will be prayed for, the gifts you exercise will be appreciated. The money you give will help the life of the church and will be a blessing to people in need. God will notice and approve of your kind deeds to people who suffer, and even (as He requires of us) to your enemies.

One such “ordinary” servant of God was a poor widow living at Zarephath, whom we read about in 1 Kings 17.

There was a prophet of the Lord called Elijah, and it was a period of drought and famine. God told the prophet to go to this widow; God had in fact already prepared her for Elijah’s coming, for He says, “I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” All she had when he arrived was a handful of flour in a jar, and a little oil in a jug. It was to provide her and her son with their final meal, after which they faced only death from starvation.

Elijah asked her to make him a little cake first, before preparing something for herself and her son. He added a promise from God for her, that the jar of flour would not run out, and the jug of oil would not fail, until the day that the Lord sent rain on the earth.

This must have put the widow into a very difficult dilemma. For one thing, as the only surviving parent, she had a responsibility towards her son, and this was all the food they had. For another, she herself was fully expecting to starve. But God had commanded her! So “she went and did as Elijah said” (verse 15). It was a huge step of faith and obedience; if it failed, she faced disaster.

Now you or I may be called to take a step of faith and obedience to the Lord. It may be in first obeying the call of the Gospel, for that is one way in which the Bible describes becoming a real Christian: “a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith” (Acts 6.7). It may be obeying God’s call to a specific service, which could be life-long. It may, as with the widow, be by its nature something which is in itself quite ordinary, like offering hospitality even though it proves costly to you.

She fed the prophet as he asked, and God saw and honoured what she did. Elijah, the widow and her household ate for many days, whilst the flour and oil did not fail, as God had promised they wouldn’t.

Likewise, when you and I obey God and take that hard step of faith which our hearts or minds have so much resisted, we may have evidence for a long time of God’s approval, acceptance and love.

But “after this”, as the Bible puts it (verse 17), even though she was still serving faithfully, everything started to go wrong for her, for her son became seriously ill - so ill that he stopped breathing, and his soul departed from his body. In short, he died.

Now, when such severe affliction came to her, the widow began to doubt. “What have you against me, O man of God?” she challenged Elijah. She assumed that Elijah knew all about her sins of the past, and had come to remind her of them and to cause the death of her beloved son. As I wrote above, it is quite possible to serve God faithfully for a long time, and later to fall into doubt and despair.

Elijah did not argue with the widow, but took her dead son upstairs and prayed for him. “And the Lord hearkened to the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into him again.” And Elijah said, “See, your son lives.”

What was the end result of the widow’s suffering and her doubt? The result was that her faith became even clearer and stronger. She said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is true.”

She already knew all this before, of course; otherwise she would not have fed him with the last of her supplies, and God would not have said to Elijah, “I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” But what she knew beforehand strongly enough to take that first step of obedience, she now knew more deeply, firmly and surely now, after facing up to her affliction and passing through it.

The psalmist says:

Before I was afflicted, I went astray; but now I keep thy word... It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn thy statutes. (Psalm 119.67, 71)

And God says through Isaiah:

Behold, I have refined you, but not like silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another. Isaiah 48.10-11

Doubt makes you face up to your difficulties, uncertainties and questionings, and by doing that, provides an opportunity for your faith to grow and become stronger. In times of doubt, you

can learn which parts of your belief about God are weak and vulnerable, for doubt exposes them and tests your belief. This presses you to think deeply about what you believe, and as you press through it makes your faith stronger. The answers to the questions raised in times of doubt - often caused by some affliction - strengthen your relationship with your heavenly Father, whom you can trust, and whom you are always learning to trust more. Doubt is strong, but “out of the strong came forth sweetness.”

But there is a footnote I would like to add. In the widow’s time of doubt, despair and affliction, someone prayed for her situation! You can read Elijah’s actual prayer in verses 20-21. It will be good if you can take Christian friends and other servants of the Lord into your confidence, share with them the difficulties you are struggling with, and ask them to pray for you.

And of course, you will pray for your friends when their faith is being assailed. That is part of Christian love and brotherhood.

* * *

But the story doesn’t end there. Long after the death of Elijah, of the widow and of her son, we read in Hebrews a grand chapter about the glowing testimony of people’s faith in Old Testament times:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen... Women received their dead by resurrection ... we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.

One whose son was raised from death was this very widow.

Jesus himself pointed to her as an example and as proof that the Gospel would come not only to Jews but to Gentiles throughout the world. In Luke 4 we read:

He opened the book and found the place where it is written, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor”... But in truth I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah ... and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow.

Zarephath, where the widow lived, was in Sidon, and the Sidonians were Phoenicians, otherwise known as Canaanites. The Old Testament prophets denounce them for their pride and violence, and the evil influence of their false religion, their idolatry. The widow who obeyed God and who, with the prayerful help of God’s servant Elijah, overcame her suffering and doubt, became a proof and an example on the lips of Jesus, showing that the Gospel of Christ would flow out beyond Israel, beyond the Jewish people, and would embrace all races, even those who had been at enmity with God. Even me, and even you.

So never forget: your Christian service matters, whether it is obviously spiritual, or whether it seems mundane; your faith is an example to those who observe you; and as a believer, you are a testimony to the Gospel which Jesus brought into this world for our eternal salvation.



Zarephath, where the widow lived, is labelled as Sarepta on this map retrieved and modified from Wikipedia.

Chapter 6 Job

If any man had reason to look at his circumstances and to doubt God's existence, love or trustworthiness, it was Job, a wealthy man whom we read about in the Old Testament!

First of all, his oxen and donkeys were carried off by enemies, and all but one of the men working with them were killed. Then his sheep were burned in an unnatural fire, and all but one of his shepherds were also killed by the fire. Then almost the same thing happened with his camels - they were stolen by three companies of Chaldean raiders and all but one of the men with them were killed. Then all his sons and daughters, who were together in one brother's house, were killed when a strong wind blew the house down. Finally, adding pain to sorrow, Job himself fell seriously ill, afflicted with loathsome sores from head to foot, which he tried to scrape off with the shard of a broken pot. So much sorrow and pain had overwhelmed him that he wished he could die. In his misery, he sat down among ashes.

He and his friends looked at his calamities, and looked for an explanation. He asked: "Why is light given to him that is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who long for death but it comes not?"

As happens so often in such cases, he began to think God must be punishing him for his sins: "Why dost thou not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity?"

Sometimes our problems and burdens are truly a wake-up call from God, prompting us to examine our lives and to ask

whether some sin is blocking God's favour and blessing. It is right to ask whether that is the situation. Job's misguided friends thought it was in his case: "Is it for your fear of him that he reproves you, and enters into judgement with you?"

Judgement! How some people love to look at others' trials and pronounce that they are God's judgement upon them! And how slow we should always be to announce judgement against someone else! Often it is not the explanation; it wasn't with Job. Nonetheless, Job began to feel that God hated him, and didn't want to have a relationship with him: "Why dost thou hide thy face, and count me as thy enemy?"

Neither Job nor his friends knew the present spiritual situation, nor the future. First of all, before any of Job's trials fell upon him, both good and fallen angels were watching him, as we read in Job 1.6-10 and 2.1-3, where the angels are called the sons of God, with Satan present too. Satan knew all about Job's happy situation, his health, his family, wealth and prosperity. In the New Testament, Ephesians 3.10 tells us that God's wisdom is shown to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places through the church, that is, through God's people. These were all watching Job, though it seems that he and his friends had no idea that it was so.

Men also would see. Those who lived at the time and knew Job saw how things happened; but thousands of people later have "seen" it by reading about it in the Bible. Job and his friends had no idea that this would be made into a book and kept for thousands of years.

Reader, you and I do not know the full story when we suffer, any more than Job did - though if we are Christians, we have a much fuller revelation than he enjoyed.

But there is something else they did not know: Job still had a bright future before him. In chapter 42 we read that the Lord restored the fortunes of Job and gave him twice as much as he had before. He became very rich, he had ten more children, he lived to a ripe old age, and finally died “an old man, and full of days”. When he was suffering, he had no idea that things would end like this, and he could not therefore take it into account when wrestling with his sorrows.

There is something more important than the restoration of his wealth and even his family which happened to Job. In chapter 42.7-8 God three times calls Job “my servant”. How warm, how precious, how beyond all other worth is it for God to acknowledge us as His! But there is more even than that: God twice tells Job’s misguided friends that Job has spoken right about God. In all Job’s anguish, doubt, searching and struggling, when everything looked so gloomy that death seemed the best solution, in God’s eyes he was speaking right. He was honest, and true.

Job did not know his future; nor do we, when we suffer. Though we do know that rest awaits us with Christ after this life, and then the resurrection to eternal glory. Job felt abandoned by God, even hated by God. But God loved him and finally manifested Himself to him. As He will to you, if you determine to trust him, come what may.

Think once more of the temptations that come at times of grave suffering. Job said all this, and much more:

- You may feel that God hates you. Job said, “The arrows of the Almighty are in me; my spirit drinks their poison; the terrors of God are arrayed against me.”

- Or that God is angry with you: “He has torn me in his wrath, and hated me.”
- Or that God’s character is not love, but cruelty: “Thou hast turned cruel to me; with the might of thy hand thou dost persecute me.”

Like Job, you may have misguided friends who tell you God must be punishing or chastising you for some wrong of which you are unaware. Hearing such advice, Job prayed, “Teach me, and I will be silent; make me understand how I have erred. How many are my iniquities and my sins? Make me know my transgression and my sin.”

As I wrote above, it is right to ask God this, in case this really is the explanation; sometimes it is. But I can assure you of this: that if you ask sincerely, willing to hear and obey, God will surely tell you if you have sinned against him. He won’t leave you feeling you must guess, feeling you have no light or insight amidst your wonderings and confusion. He will tell you exactly what you have done wrong.

Sometimes our worst temptations come through those who ought to be our best helpers. Job’s wife, of all people, urged him to give up his trust in God. “Curse God, and die,” she urged him. Your family are not always the best advisers; sometimes they may try to turn you away from God.

Job answered her, “You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips. You and I too must learn to trust God and not give way to

doubt about his existence, character, love, his plan for us or his wisdom, when times of severe trial come.

Job's "comforters" did not give him the sympathy, understanding and support he needed, even though they regarded themselves as teaching him God's truth and God's ways. Unfortunately, people's doubt about the Gospel is often caused by other people who profess to believe and live by the Gospel, but who are harsh, callous, sly, dishonest, discourteous and even illegal in the things they do - even in the things they do to other Christians. I have heard an argument for doubt that runs like this:

1. The Gospel claims to transform people into saintly characters
2. People I have met who profess belief in the Gospel are worse in their treatment of others than many decent non-Christians
3. Therefore, the Gospel's claim is false, and the Gospel is not true.

Now of course this is false logic; it contains what is known as a 'non sequitur', which is Latin for 'it doesn't follow'. Its facts are true: the claim is made that the Gospel changes sinners into better people; and there are many Christians whose lives are a disgrace to the Gospel they profess. But that three-point argument leaves out two other considerations: (1) there are many Christians whose lives do give evidence of the transforming power of the Christian faith, for they are kind, considerate, loyal, self-sacrificing; and (2) those whose substandard lives give rise to doubts in people who live, work or worship with them may either be giving a false profession of faith (i.e. they are not really God's children), or they may be

people who are progressing, but only very slowly on the way of a changed character, and have not yet got very far.

It is also worth noting that some of the worst characters in the Bible, including those who arranged our Lord's cruel death, were religious leaders. The fact that a man is a minister, preacher, pastor, priest, bishop or is called by whatever title he may carry is no guarantee that he is inwardly a sincere Christian, humbly seeking to imitate and obey the Lord. Many are hypocrites. They love positions of power in the church, they love to stand in front of others and preach or rule, they enjoy the authority to make dispositions over other people's service, regardless of the problems and heartache their harsh decisions cause. All this they have in their hands - but they are not true, humble, sensitive followers of the Lamb of God.

Do not assess the truth and value of Jesus Christ by those who bring shame on the claims of his Gospel or on the Bible. The Bible only works if we obey it. By their harsh, callous and self-glorifying lives such men and women are very far from obeying the Bible and are no measure of its truth. The only way they show its truth is by being today's examples of the cold, uncaring religious leaders we read of in so many of the pages of both the Old and the New Testaments. Look at the Lord - the Lord himself, him only, and decide whether you wish to love and obey *him*.

And of course you may also take encouragement from sincere, godly Christians of noble character who *are* attempting consistently to live by his principles. Their lives point to the reality that can be known in him: though they too will sometimes fail.

When Job's troubles came (1.20-22), he fell upon the ground and worshipped. And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." He did not sin, or charge God with wrong.

Job held on to his faith that God had a purpose for him, and we must learn to do the same. "He knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come forth as gold. What he desires, he does. For he will complete what he appoints for me; and many such things are in his mind" (23.10, 13, 14).

In this world, you will have times of trouble. It is also written in the Book of Job that "man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward." And the New Testament, in Acts 14.22, assures us "that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."

If we walk with God, our trials can be turned into a blessing for us. The Epistle of James says:

Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing... Blessed is the man who endures trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him.

May the Lord help us to trust him in trials as well as in times of manifest blessing.

Chapter 7: Four Doubts in the Bible

Some of the doubts that afflict us arise from our own personality and experience, but they acquire a religious nature - that is, they make us doubt the character of God, or our relationship with him. The way we learn to regard other people as we grow up can become the way we expect God also to act towards us. Very often, we instinctively feel, even if we don't think it in our minds, that God will treat us in the same way as other people have treated us. And some people, whether intentionally or not, may have failed to treat us well or wisely.

When I was a boy at school, my parents were proud of me and wanted me to do well. Most of the time, I did do well, at least in the subjects I was good at; and in the British system, as I grew older, I was allowed to drop the subjects I wasn't good at. I tried my best, worked hard, and often succeeded in getting good marks and a good position in the class.

But sometimes, for whatever reason, it went wrong. Maybe my work wasn't successful; maybe other boys cheated and unfairly got better marks than mine, giving me a low position; perhaps certain topics were more difficult for me; maybe I just didn't always put in the required effort. But when I got low marks, or a low position, I became afraid to go home. Not that my parents would beat me or punish me in any way, but they just expressed disapproval - their words, their faces, their reactions.

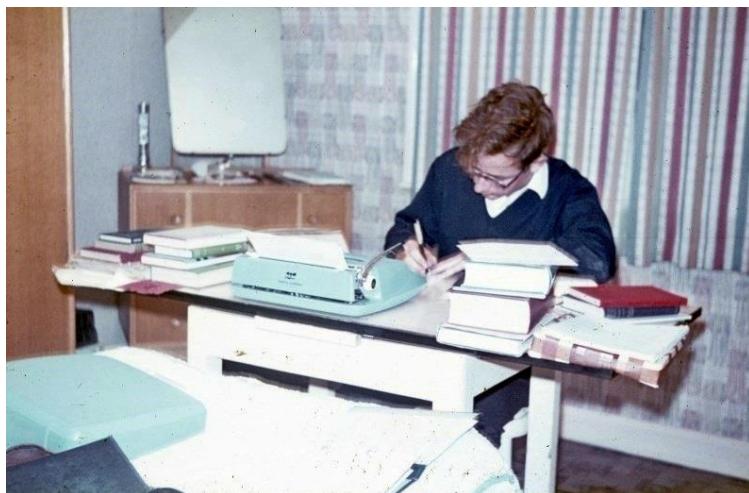
When my work was good enough, they were pleased with me; but when it wasn't, they weren't. I still find it very difficult to believe with my heart that God is any different: if I work hard

enough at pleasing him, and do well enough at it, he will be pleased with me; if I fall short, I shall be out of favour with him.



growing up, 1963, age 16

When I got to about the age of 13, I had a special friend. He and I were very close, and did a lot together. Then another boy came to the school whose parents had moved to my town, Basingstoke, from somewhere else, and that was why he joined the school. Little by little, my friend came to prefer the new boy's company to mine, and I lost my best friend. I began to feel that you can't rely on people; they turn away from you.



When I got a bit older than that, I had another friend, also (like me) called David. He was much more successful with the girls than I was, for I was rather shy and gauche with them. Maybe it was because he had a sister and I didn't, but be that as it may, I was aware of my inferiority in that area. I came to feel that I was not very attractive or able to gain people's love.

And so I came to feel I wasn't very special, not very likeable, not someone who would be acceptable in a pattern of friendships and relationships. I guess I felt that God would treat me the same: I'd have his friendship, company and blessing when I was interesting enough for some reason, but I couldn't rely on that relationship, his acceptance and unconditional love for me.

Perhaps I didn't yet know that God says in Malachi, "Jacob I loved." Jacob was not a very likeable man. His brother Esau, as the elder brother, had the right to an enlarged inheritance and pre-eminence in the family at his father's death, but Jacob's sly quick thinking wrested this inheritance from him. When his father was old and blind, Jacob deceived him, and thereby cheated Esau out of their father's dying blessing as well. In all, Jacob was scheming, ambitious and treacherous. Despite all that, he retained, or gained, some real regard for God, and later he met God in a very real and personal way.

Most people feel deeply unworthy of God's love, either because of the genuinely bad aspects of their character and lives - the things they have done, the nastier side to their character - or because other people have made them feel that they are not worthy of unconditional, reliable, unfailing acceptance, love and commitment. This sort of thing makes us sceptical about God's character of fatherly love, and makes it hard for us to trust him.

In fact, of course, you were made in the image of God, as Genesis tells you. However disfigured or stained God's image within you may have become, God sees it there. He is able to work in you and with you, to restore his image by his grace, and to make you more like his son, the Lord Jesus Christ. But while he is doing that - and it may be a very long process - he already loves you and sees what you will be. Believing that God does

love you, and that his character is love, is a huge step towards overcoming your doubts. In fact, the Bible says “God is love”.

So now we are going to consider four common doubts; we are going to see what the Bible says about them; and we are going to apply our minds to them, using the statements of scripture. Here are the doubts:

- God does not love me
- God has not forgiven me
- God has forgotten me
- God is punishing me.

I wonder whether you are troubled by any of those fears? Or by all of them. Let us turn our thoughts towards them.

“God does not love me.”

Here are some words of the Bible:

For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you. - Isaiah 54.10

God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ...When Jesus knew that the hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ... As the Father loved me [said Jesus], so have I loved you; abide in my love. - John 3.16; 13.1; 15.9

I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. - Romans 8.38-39

...the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. - Galatians 2.20

God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ. - Ephesians 2.5

God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace - 2 Thess. 2.16

In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his son to be the expiation for our sins. 1 John 4.10

...him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood... - Rev. 1.5

Now I said we would apply our minds to these statements. That means that we must *think* about them. They tell us that God's heart is a heart of love towards his children. It is logical that God would not have spoken to you, called you, and started you on the Christian walk, giving you salvation, if he did not love you. To have done that, he must love you! And these verses tell us that it is not something in you that makes God love you, but something in him. "God is love" says 1 John 4.16. Nothing you

do can make God love you more, and nothing you can do to make him love you less. He *is* love.

As John newton, previously engaged in the cruel slave trade, later asked rhetorically about God's work in his life:

Determined to save, he watched o'er my path,
When Satan's blind slave I sported with death;
And can he have taught me to trust in his name,
And thus far have brought me to put me to shame?

“God has not forgiven me.”

We see the magnitude and completeness of God's forgiveness in a number of verses in the Bible, for example:

He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite is according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.
- Psalm 103.10-12

For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is plenteous redemption. And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities. - Psalm 130.7-8 (and if you fear that those words apply only to the nation of Israel, remember that the New Testament tells us that Gentile Christians have been 'grafted in' to Israel.)

Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool... I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud,

and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you. - Isaiah 1.18; 44.22

Who is a God like thee, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He will again have compassion upon us, he will tread our iniquities under foot. Thou will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. - Micah 7.18-19.

When Jesus, the Son of God, died at Calvary, taking away your sins and mine, he fully removed the barrier between us and God. God is not like a child, or indeed some adults, who sulk when they are offended but refuse to tell you what is wrong: God tells us precisely what we have done to offend him, and when we are sorry, confess it to him, ask forgiveness and resolve to put things right, he fully and freely forgives us on the basis of what Jesus did at Calvary, when he took away our sins. It makes no logical sense to think that God would do all that, make all those promises, forgive thousands and thousands of other sinners, then withhold forgiveness from you.

“God has forgotten me.”

If you feel that God has forgotten you, that you have passed out of his mind, then be comforted that people in the Bible felt just the same. David, the Psalmist, asked in Psalm 13.1, “How long, O Lord? Wilt thou forget me for ever?” The unnamed authors of Psalm 42, called the sons of Korah, asked “Why hast thou forgotten me?” (verse 9). Another psalmist, Asaph, asks in Psalm 77: “Will the Lord spurn for ever, and never again be favourable? Has his steadfast love for ever ceased? Are his

promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious?” In Isaiah 40.27 the people say: “My way is hid from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God,” and more bluntly in 49.14: “The Lord has forgotten me.”

God knows that we sometimes feel like this; that is why his Spirit inspired these words to be written and preserved. But God’s own answer (Isaiah 44.21) is, “I formed you, you are my servant; O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me.”

A little later in the book of Isaiah, God goes on to compare himself with a mother. He says that the most unlikely person in the whole world to forget someone is a mother, who will not forget the child she herself brought into the world. He says it *can* happen, but it is very rare. Then he goes on to say: “Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have graven you on the palms of my hands.”

Think of it logically: he planned your redemption, he wrote your name in his Book of Life, he suffered at the Cross to save you. It makes no sense to believe he has forgotten you.

“God is punishing me.”

You may be aware of something really bad that you have done, or you may just feel generally an overall uncleanness and unworthiness, and you believe God is punishing you for your sins.

But the Bible tells us, for example in Isaiah 53, that God has laid the iniquity of us all on Jesus. He tells us, both through Jeremiah and in the Book of Hebrews that “I will remember their sins and their misdeeds no more.” He promises complete

and final forgiveness to all who repent of their sins and confess them to him.

To repent means to turn away from them and to resolve, God helping you, to leave your sins behind you. You are sorry for your sins; you have asked forgiveness. You know that Jesus bore them all at Calvary, and that they were fully punished there in his body. You know God's promise of forgiveness because of what Jesus achieved. It makes no sense to believe that God is now punishing your sins a second time - having first punished them in his Son on the Cross, that he is now punishing them in you. Let the Word of God destroy any such fear and doubt.

* * *

Remember then: your doubts and fears are very common; they are dealt with in the Bible. You need to know your Bible, and to rely on the promises God makes in it. In John's Gospel, Jesus said, "Scripture cannot be broken." Therefore read the Bible.

Also, look for good Christian books to read as well, and listen to preachers who love and explain the Gospel. And in these ways let your mind rule you, and not your doubts and fears: know the promises of scripture and trust them, believe they are true for all people, and true therefore for you.

The photograph on the next page shows Oakley Methodist chapel, where I preached my first sermon, Sunday, 10th January, 1965, on the text "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:6). I preached on the same text again on 5th January 2015, in Wrexham, glad still to believe, half a century later, that God laid all my

sins on Jesus when he died for me at Calvary, and to urge others to believe the same was true also for them.



Chapter 8

Are you like Asaph the psalmist?

When we pray or sing hymns, we often say we want to be close to God, to know and experience him and his presence, life and Spirit in our lives, and we often express a desire for a clear understanding of our faith and a strong grasp on it.

Asaph was a Levite, one of the Old Testament priestly tribe, and in addition he was the chief singer when the ark of God's presence was brought to Jerusalem. King David made him the leader of choral worship in the tabernacle. He also had a reputation as a seer, as you can read in 2 Chronicles 29.30. God's Spirit gave him inspired psalms, and his sons prophesied (1 Chronicles 25.1). What a man! Wouldn't you like to have his saintliness, his knowledge of God, his usefulness in serving God and God's people? I would!

But there is more to him even than all that. In Psalm 73 he attained a revelation which was centuries ahead of his time, for he was shown what is the believer's end, vv. 24-6:

Thou dost guide me with thy counsel, and afterward thou
wilt receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but
thee?... My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the
strength of my heart and my portion for ever.

When Asaph lived, hardly anyone knew about the glory which awaits believers after this life, hardly anyone knew that we have eternal life, that God is our portion "for ever". The Jews

believed in Sheol – a gloomy, shadowy life which people went to after death, which faintly reflected life here. They believed that man continues as a kind of ghost or shade or double:

What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit?
Will the dust praise thee? - Ps. 30.9

I am a man who has no strength, like one forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom thou dost remember no more, for they are cut off from thy hand. ... Dost thou work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise up to praise thee? Is thy steadfast love declared in the grave, or thy faithfulness in Abaddon? - Psalm 88.4-5, 10-12;

The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any that go down into silence.- Psalm 115.16-17

The Jews of Asaph's time believed that this shadowy *post mortem* continuation of our existence was divided according to social distinctions, not moral differences. Various beliefs about what the soul experiences after death developed from about 100 BC, but they were misty till Christ came and gave us a fuller revelation. People's understanding of hell itself only developed from about 100 BC, and was clarified and confirmed in the New Testament.

It is true that you do find occasional glimmers of a better hope in the Old Testament, but they were not part of the people's general faith and knowledge, and you have to look hard for them - for example (if you wish to look them up) in Job (19.25-7), in some other psalms (16.10-1; 17.15; 49.7-9,15), in Isaiah (26.19), and in Daniel (12.2-3).

Then came the glorious revelation of eternal life and glory which was brought by Jesus Christ and mediated through his chosen apostles. Colossians 1:26-27 speaks of “the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints ... how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” In 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 Paul writes, “Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in the moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet ... and the dead will be raised imperishable.” But notice both passages say that up until then, these truths had been hidden, had been mysteries.

But Asaph got there around the year 950 BC, as we saw above, in Psalm 73. 24-26:

Thou dost guide me with thy counsel, and afterward thou wilt receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but thee?... My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.

How did he get there? How might we also get to a sure, clear and firm knowledge of these same mysteries for our own lives and deaths? Well, he got there via suffering and hard questioning.

Concerning suffering, he writes in vv. 14, 21, 26

All the day long I have been stricken, and chastened every morning ... When my soul was embittered, I was pricked in my heart ... My flesh and my heart may fail.

His suffering led him on to some hard questioning about God, and life, and God's ways. In verses 3 to 5 he speaks of the arrogant and the wicked, and comments on the facts that their life is so often healthy, comfortable, successful and trouble-free. In verses 6-8, he notices that this makes them become proud, cruel, foolish and contemptuous. The next verse tells us that they even rail against God. Verse 10 talks about how they attract followers, lackeys and admirers. "Always at ease, they increase in riches" (verse 12).

Asaph wondered, How can a good God allow this? Doesn't it contradict lots of Old Testament promises about God blessing the righteous and cursing the wicked? Is the Bible true? Is God fair? Is he involved in his world at all?

And so Asaph's doubts set in. In vv 2-3 he almost lost his faith, and he envied the wicked their success and ease. In verse 13 he concludes that being a good believer is a waste of time. The whole matter became beyond his understanding (verse 16), and in his relationship with God, or his attitude towards God, he became stupid, ignorant and no better than a beast (verse 22).

But note one thing even then (verse 15): he didn't broadcast his doubts to weak believers or try to destroy other people's faith.

So what did he do to resolve these deep and troublesome problems? In verse 17 we find him seeking the presence of God: "I went into the sanctuary of God."

How can we today seek God's presence and instruction? He has given us prayer and the Bible. Most of us can come to the Lord's Supper, and have other forms of fellowship with fellow Christians (though I realise that some who read this may live in a place where there is no regular meeting of real Christians). We

need to remember the things God has said to us and done for us in the past - this helps us to trust him also for the future. And especially, we need to turn our minds to the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who came to save us for eternity.

A lot of people experience the doubts and troubles which Asaph writes of at the beginning of his psalm in verses 1-3, but they stop there. They remain in their doubts and difficulties about God and faith and righteousness, and give up the struggle to find the way through to clearer light and understanding, and to stronger faith. Remember, our doubts can be helpful to us: if we press through to a purer understanding and knowledge, they have served us well as a step towards a stronger hold on God, a stronger faith in him.

Asaph came to see that his problems did not give him the complete picture; there was more to divine truth than the matters which his questions were concerned with. He did not yet have “the big picture”. Now, through his searchings, he came to see more of that bigger reality, and he came to see the end of the wicked:

Truly thou dost set them in slippery places; thou dost make them fall to ruin. How they are utterly destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! They are like a dream when one awakes ... For lo, those who are far from thee shall perish; thou dost put an end to those who are false to thee.

It is worth noting that this was not a full answer to his hard questions, but it was enough for him. God will probably not

give you answers to all your questions about the world, life, death, God, salvation, the wicked, suffering, and so on. But if you seek him seriously and sincerely, he will give you enough to overcome your doubts and to continue in faith, in believing in him as your God and Father.

And so Asaph acquired a present faith and future hope. He became assured of God's goodness: "Truly God is good to the upright" (verse 1).

He also became sure of God's presence and guidance: "Nevertheless I am continually with thee; thou dost hold my right hand. Thou dost guide me with thy counsel" (vv 23-4).

And so it was enough to know God and to be His: "Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides thee" (v.25).

He found God's strength in trouble, and was enabled to write, "God is the strength of my heart" (v. 26). He also found hope for the future (vv. 24-26):

afterward thou wilt receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but thee?... My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.

His final conclusion was that "it is good to be near God" (v. 28). You can come to the same conviction and trust in your life, after dealing seriously with your doubts and pressing your way through them. You may not get answers to all your questions, but "it is good to be near God."

This new assurance and contentment gave Asaph a desire to "tell of all thy works", as he tells us in the final verse of the

psalm. Remember, when he was in his time of doubt, he did not sow doubt in the minds of weaker believers - nor should you or I; but now he has come through it all, and his dark time is behind him, he wishes to spread the joyful news of a sure and certain hope and faith in the Lord.

How then should we respond when we read of Asaph's experiences? We should be bold enough to ask for closeness to God, be willing to pay the price of struggling with difficulties till we find it, seeking God's presence to find that experience and understanding. We should learn to live by faith without attaining or being given all the intellectual answers. And let us tell others of God's good character and faithfulness.

It ought to be easier for us than it was for Asaph. We have the *proof* of the Christian's conquest of death in Christ's resurrection, and we have the *experience* of "Christ in you, the hope of glory". If we seek God as Asaph did, we shall know even more clearly than he did: for we shall find it all in Christ.

Chapter 9

The Bible's longest Chapter

I wonder whether you sometimes think that the Bible was written by a lot of old men with long grey or white beards and years of deep searching for God, and knowledge of him, behind them? Well, maybe some of the books were written by such men, but the longest chapter of all, Psalm 119, was written by a younger man. He asks in verse 9, "How can a young man keep his way pure?" And he tells us in verse 100, "I understand more than the aged, for I keep thy precepts." Depth of wisdom is not automatically acquired by the mounting up of the years of our life, but by our submission to God. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and this psalmist gained it earlier in life, as you may also if you are still young: but still can if you are older.

Not that he had always walked with God. In verses 67 and 176 he writes, "Before I was afflicted I went astray" and "I have gone astray like a lost sheep."

But his afflictions made him come to his senses and start to take life and God a good deal more seriously. He writes (v. 67) "Before I was afflicted I went astray; but now I keep thy word," and, "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn thy statutes" (v. 71). In fact the Bible tells us in Hebrews that when God loves someone, he disciplines and chastises him (or her), treating that believer with such discipline as a loving father treats his sons, which in turn "yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it." So we can see already that God loved this young man who went astray.

What form did his afflictions take? People held him in scorn and contempt, they taunted him, derided him and persecuted him (vv. 21, 22, 42, 51, 157). They told lies about him (vv. 69, 86). They wanted to entrap and destroy him (vv. 85, 95, 110). Maybe he moved in high-up circles, for even princes persecuted him (v 161), but it was all without just cause - nothing he had done deserved their hatred. As these hardships continued, they got so bad that “they have almost made an end of me on earth” (v 87). He felt that he could hardly bear any more unjust malice.

He feared that even more people might believe what was being said about him, and that he might be put to shame, and he prayed that it wouldn’t come to that (vv. 6, 31, 39). Sometimes the unfair treatment can even come to you from other Christians.

A man who, as I read about his life, seems to me to have received wrong treatment at the hands of others, but who continued to serve God rather than to turn away from Christianity in bitterness, was William O’Bryan. He was born at Gunwen Farm, Luxulyan, Cornwall, in 1778. When he was a boy, John Wesley, then aged 80, prayed for him in these words: “May he be a blessing to hundreds and thousands!”

In 1795, when he was 17, he came to a deep commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ, and was soon taking part in local evangelistic outreach, inviting friends and neighbours to worship with the Methodists, of whom there were only a few at Luxulyan at the time.

In 1796 William’s father died, and he inherited a farm from him. A year or more later, with love for the Gospel, he gave land for the building of a chapel at Gunwen, and history says that he himself also built the chapel - which I take to mean that he

provided the materials and all expenses, and perhaps worked on it with his own hands.

William felt an increasing conviction that God was calling him to an evangelistic preaching ministry. In November 1808 his first son Ebenezer, born in 1804, died of spotted fever and was buried at Gunwen chapel.

William had contracted the same fever, and he vowed to God that, if God would raise him up, he would go ahead and become a preacher. He recovered from the disease, and found great success in his preaching, being able to form a new Methodist society at Newquay, and to establish regular preaching at St Mawgan, St Mabyn, St Neot and St Eval. He concentrated on villages where there was no Methodism, and God gave him success where others had failed.

By 1810 he had three other children. In that year, he applied to the Methodist authorities to become a full-time preacher, but his application was rejected. Their main argument was his family commitments, and they told him to go home and continue part-time as before. But he felt he could not do that and still be obedient to God.

He offered to live only on voluntary gifts, and not receive the regular pay which other ministers received. He was still strongly opposed, and in November a minister visited Gunwen chapel and excluded him formally from membership.

The Methodists kept the chapel, and William allowed them to have the society he had formed at Newquay.

His desire was to preach the Gospel where he believed the people needed it most. In 1814 he gave up the business he had inherited and devoted himself to evangelism, as he had felt God

required of him. The following year he went to north Devon, and discovered that the area was almost without other evangelical ministry. Avoiding any place with an existing evangelical ministry, he preached in the area around Shebbear and gathered converts together into societies in many surrounding villages. By January 1816 there were 237 members; a year later there were 920; the work spread and growth continued from year to year, and by 1827 there were 8054 members - although over the years many members were lost through migration.

The people associated with O'Bryan took the name of Bible Christians, and they continued as a separate body till 1907, when, with a membership of over 32,000, they united with other similar churches in Britain.

I may be mistaken, for the final judgement belongs only to the Lord, who alone knows all things, and there are often two sides to the same story of dispute. If you read more of his life story, you will possibly conclude that he was a man with character defects. Some found it hard to work with him; he seemed to insist on his own way regardless of contrary wishes, decisions, or advice; he was rejected repeatedly by different people despite God's blessing upon his labours; he was, it might seem, a leader who could work with others only if he was in charge. These things may be true: there are often two sides to the same story, the same disagreement. In fact it is almost as if some callings *require* such a personality.

Yet it seems to me that God's hand was on this man, and that God's Spirit was upon him; many found Christ through his life and work.

Sometimes the treatment you receive from members or leaders of the church can make you feel that God himself has deserted you or let you down, or that he is unable to help. As I wrote earlier in Chapter 7:

Very often, we instinctively feel, even if we don't think it in our minds, that God will treat us in the same way as other people have treated us. And some people, whether intentionally or not, may have failed to treat us well or wisely.



William O'Bryan

It is especially hard to bear when this sort of treatment comes from people who profess to share your Christian faith. It may be that they turn against you and try to destroy your Christian service, which brings your good name into question. They treat you with unkindness or malice when you have done nothing against them: men or women who consider themselves significant as having some right or rule over your work, and have been granted positions of power or authority in God's work.

They may be people whom you have served and prayed for, and they may even be people who have come into the work only through knowing you, and by your invitation, yet they wish to oust you and take over or end your work.

There is worse. Those who love you, including your family, may find such treatment of you from professed Christians still harder to bear than you do, and it may cast them into a severe crisis of doubt and even drive them from the church.

Yet in history many have had to tread this pathway; in the Bible also. You – we – must learn to look to God, and not be deflected from following him by the wrong treatment others deal out to us. May the Lord help us!

This psalmist nonetheless kept his trust in God:

Thou art good and doest good... Thy hands have made and fashioned me... I know, O Lord, that thy judgements are right, and that in faithfulness thou hast afflicted me... But thou art near, O Lord, and all thy commandments are true. - vv. 68, 73, 75, 151

All that doesn't mean that he found his trials easy to bear. He grew impatient, and prayed, "How long must thy servant endure? When wilt thou judge those who persecute me?"

What can we do in circumstances when people are against us unjustly, seeking to trap and destroy us and bring us to ridicule and shame? The psalmist prayed:

With my whole heart I seek thee... Deal bountifully with thy servant, that I may live... revive me according to thy word... strengthen me... Uphold me according to thy promise, that I may live, and let me not be put to shame in my hope... Look on my affliction and deliver me... Let my supplication come before thee.

Whatever else you do when trials cascade upon you, you *must* turn to God in serious prayer.

Secondly, he keeps his heart and mind in the Word:

I have laid up thy word in my heart... In the way of thy testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. I will meditate on thy precepts, and fix my eyes on thy ways. I will delight in thy statutes; I will not forget thy word... Thy testimonies are my delight, they are my counsellors... I set thy ordinances before me... Oh, how I love thy law! It is my meditation all the day. Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path... Thy testimonies are my heritage for ever; yea, they are the joy of my heart.

Get to love the scriptures, and let them nourish and shape your heart and mind.

Here was a man who was not proud and self-confident, but who knew he needed God:

Let me not wander from thy commandments... My flesh trembles for fear of thee... Keep steady my steps... I cry to thee; save me, that I may observe thy testimonies. I rise before dawn and cry for help.

And the writer of Psalm 119 does something else, which I hope you can do, and I hope you do do: he keeps company with fellow believers who also love God sincerely: "I am the companion of all who fear thee, of those who keep thy precepts" (v. 63). This is very important. God has not created a Church which consists of millions of hermits all living out their lonely quests for God, but rather a family, a body, a city. Make the companionship of other Christians a priority in your search for a lasting faith and experience of God. Apart from other benefits, an awareness that others have to go through afflictions and trials and that they manage with God's help to maintain their faith, is an encouragement to us. It helps us to believe that God will also help us through.

We must grasp the fact that our faith, and the things of God, are of more importance than anything else; after all, they endure into eternity after we die, and only by faith and Christian living can we please God in this life. The psalm puts it like this:

Thy promise gives me life... The law of thy mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces... I love thy commandments above gold, above fine gold. -
vv. 50, 72, 127

By contrast the things of this age in this world are transient: “I am a sojourner on earth... Turn my eyes from looking at vanities.” - vv. 19, 37

This is one of the effects which affliction should have upon us: it should teach us that there are things that are far more important than the passing experiences and possessions of this life, precious though this life is as a gift from God.

God has promised, “Those who honour me I will honour” (1 Samuel 2:3). We noted a little while back that over 32,000 people became members of the churches that sprang from the ministry of William O’Bryan and his associates, before it was felt that the time had come to amalgamate with other similar Christians. Below, from Lewis H. Court’s book *The Romance of a Country Circuit* (London: Henry Hooks, 1921) are photographs of two of their churches.

Whatever rights and wrongs there may have been on each side in the regrettable division that developed between O’Bryan and the Methodist authorities, I think we can say that God honoured him. But he could not have foreknown that; and neither can you know in what ways and to what extent God might honour you, in this age or in the age to come, for your attempts to serve him in obedience.

He may well say to you in the knowledge of all, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.” That, I am sure, is the warm desire of your heart, and the motive for your efforts to serve him – not for your glory, but to have pleased him and done his will.



A Hill-Country Chapel.



A Valley Chapel.

And finally, when the psalmist's own honour had been besmirched and threatened so seriously, after examining all these matters, his deepest desire was not for his own reputation but for God to be glorified:

It is time for the Lord to act, for thy law has been broken... My eyes shed streams of tears, because men do not keep thy law... My zeal consumes me, because my foes forget thy words.

In conclusion, affliction, by waking us up to these things and driving us to examine what really matters, also moves us to desire to walk with God in his ways and to please him. Read verses 1-5 especially of the psalm: "Blessed are those whose way is blameless... who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways... O that my ways may be steadfast in keeping thy statutes!"

And from his own heart and voice comes adoration to the Lord: "My lips will pour forth praise... My tongue will sing of thy word... Let me live, that I may praise thee." - vv. 171-5

Don't sink beneath your troubles and afflictions in times of difficulty, but allow them to wake you up to think about what matters most, and to bring you to a closer and stronger cleaving to the God who loves you.

Chapter 10

“A God who hidest thyself”

The prophet Isaiah says to God in chapter 45 verse 15: “Truly thou art a God who hidest thyself.” I wonder whether you have ever felt that that is just what God is, and just what he is doing; and that you may never find him. We shall examine Isaiah’s thoughts and experience more closely.

The context of his strange statement is in the previous verse: “The wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Ethiopia, and the Sabeans, men of stature, shall come over to you and be yours, they shall follow you; they shall come over to you in chains and bow down to you.” We know where Egypt and Ethiopia are; the Sabeans were in south-west Arabia. The prophet foresees a time when they will offer wealth and voluntary submission to God’s people, and thus of course to God himself. They will come to faith. In fact, we may take this as foreseeing the worldwide spread of the knowledge of God through the Gospel of Christ.

Similar ideas are found elsewhere in Isaiah:

It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” ... And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising... They shall bring gold

and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord. - 2.2-4; 60.3, 6

In those days, we read as we turn back to chapter 45, idolatry will finally be put to shame, and God's people will know everlasting salvation (vv. 16-17): "You shall not be put to shame or confounded to all eternity."

Yet amidst all these prophecies of world-wide salvation and glory, we find Isaiah saying that God hides himself. I think of two questions: how? and why?

How does God hide himself?

For one thing, God has given no proof of his **existence**. The whole of Hebrews 11 talks about the need for faith, not sight, and says (v. 6) that "without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists." It cannot be scientifically proved that God is our creator: "By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God" (v. 3).

The writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes tells us that he applied his mind to know wisdom and to see the **work** of God, but "that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun... he cannot find it out." God's existence, God as creator, God's dealings with men - in all these, God gives no irrefutable proof of himself; they must come to us in faith.

In Psalm 74 we read that "We do not see our signs; there is no longer any prophet, and there is none among us who knows how long. How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?... do not forget the life of thy poor for ever." In his **dealings** with his people in

their nation, again we find him hiding. When God does come in power, how brief are the times of revival!

And finally, in our own personal experience, we often find God has hidden. “How long, O Lord? Wilt thou hide thyself for ever? ... Lord, where is thy steadfast love of old?” (Ps 89.46, 49) And we have already looked at Job: “Oh, that I knew where I might find Him... Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him; on the left hand I seek him, but I cannot behold him; I turn to the right hand, but I cannot see him” (23.3, 8-9).

Even Jesus, when he was on earth, in a sense used to hide himself. He healed a leper, and told him, “See that you say nothing to anyone.” He raised a little girl from the dead, and “he strictly charged them that no-one should know this.” He cured a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and then “he charged them to tell no-one.” When Peter realised that Jesus was the Christ, “he charged them to tell no-one about him.”

At the end of his life, following his glorious resurrection, he did not establish his kingdom on earth, but ascended to heaven and “a cloud received him out of their sight.” “Truly thou art a God who hidest thyself.”

Why does he hide himself?

If you take time searching for something which is hard to find, when you find it, the time you spent searching makes it all the more valuable to you. You are less likely to lose it again! By searching for God, unbelievers do find him, and they value their knowledge of him. And by searching for God in times of doubt, by pressing through all their questions and problems, believers

too are promised that they will find him, and they too value him the more.

Our trust in times which perplex and mystify us makes that trust all the stronger in the long run.

Also, people are wont to say that Christians love God because of the blessings he gives them - peace, joy, maybe prosperity. Satan challenged God about Job, “Does Job fear God for naught? Hast thou not put a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth thy hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse thee to thy face.”

If we lose our happy circumstances and find it hard or impossible to understand why, and still do not curse God but rather worship and follow him, our trust in God is a testimony to the reality and value of our faith and can speak to those who watch us, men, devils and angels: for the Bible tells us they all watch the Church.

In short, our inability to see God at such times puts everything just where God wants it - based on faith. “And without faith it is impossible to please him” (Hebrews 11.6).

* * *

So let's come back to where we started - to Isaiah 45.15. I didn't tell you the whole of the verse. For after saying that God is a God who hides himself, the prophet calls him, “O God of Israel, the Saviour”: “Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour.”

That is the complete verse, and it tells us that this God who is sometimes hidden always remains his people's God. He promised in the Old Testament, "I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people," and in the New Testament, "I will live in them and move among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

Yes, he is always your God, if you believe in him, and always your Saviour. There is a hymn which describes him as "unseen yet forever at hand".

After Jesus's resurrection, the apostle Thomas could not believe that Jesus really had risen from the dead, even though Jesus had predicted it and others had already met him in his risen state. Thomas did not believe it until he too had seen him with his own eyes. Then he proclaimed, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus answered him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." Reader, I hope and pray that Jesus may pronounce this blessing upon you.

And finally, there is one more way in which the Lord hides himself, which I want to mention. He hides himself in this world *in you*. Colossians 3.3 says, "your life is hid with Christ in God."

The life of Jesus Christ is not marked upon Christians, in some external, visible way, but it is hidden within us. He wants us to live a life so consistent with our faith, that our outward way of life speaks to people of the reality of our inward life in Christ. We have already seen that when people significantly fail to do this, it can give rise to severe doubt in the lives of others, and can turn them away from God. But when a Christian does live a humble, godly life of service to God and to others, it is one of the most persuasive factors in drawing others to Christ. The Lord help us to live thus!

Chapter 11 Satan

In Zechariah 3 Joshua the high priest is standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan is standing at his right hand “to accuse him”. In Revelation 12.10 Satan is called “the accuser of our brethren”. What does it mean when we say that the Devil “accuses” us?

The Devil will remind you of your sin in the past, your present shortcomings and defeats, and all the other things which make you seem substandard, and he will try to persuade you that no such person as you can be loved and accepted by God, or that the poor standard of your life and service is evidence that God has never really made you his child.

“The Lord rebuke you, O Satan! ... Is not this a brand plucked from the fire?” That was how God answered the accusations of Satan against his high priest, and how we may answer his accusations against us. We may be worthless in our own estimation, but in God's sight we are worth the blood of Christ, and he has loved and saved us. He has snatched us from the fire of eternal hell - every Christian is “a brand plucked from the fire.”

The price of our forgiveness and redemption has been paid and we can reply to the Devil, “Yes, Satan, you are right in what you say about my failings, but God has accepted me for Christ's sake. I am forgiven. I belong now to him. The Lord rebuke you, O Satan.”

Via his angel, God said to Joshua, “Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with rich apparel.”

Who was this Joshua, the high priest? We read about him in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai and Zechariah. He was one of the leaders of the Jews who returned from exile in Babylonia in about 538 BC. He was one of the leaders who got the altar rebuilt and sacrificial worship started again, and later he led them in laying the foundation of the temple, which had to be rebuilt because it had been destroyed years before by the Babylonians.

Not only that, but God says in Zechariah 3:8-9 that Joshua and his friends “are men of good omen: behold, I will bring my servant the Branch ... and I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day.” This of course is a prophecy of the coming of Christ, God’s special Servant and indeed God’s Son, the one who at the Cross removed the guilt of the world “in a single day” when he died for us all at Calvary, as this village cross reminds us.



Why do I say those words are a prophecy of Christ? Well, even in English we are used to the idea of a family tree, and of a family tree having branches. Isaiah 11:1 says, “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” Jesse was the father of King David, the ancestor of Jesus. In Jeremiah 23:5 God says, “I will raise up for David a righteous branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”

This Joshua, in some ways a foreshadowing of Christ, is the man whom Satan accused - and the Lord rebuked and silenced Satan for doing so. Certainly Satan will also accuse you, and you must learn to trust the Cross of Christ where his precious blood was shed as full and final payment for all your wrongdoing, and to trust that God loves you and has accepted you on the ground of Christ’s work for you and your faith in him.

Learn to compare the Devil’s accusations with the promises of the Bible, and to rely on God and his trustworthiness.

The Apostle Paul urges us in Ephesians 6 to take “the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one.” Such accusations as we have been thinking about are included among the fiery darts he throws at you. With faith in the Bible, and supremely in the Lord whom the Bible teaches you to trust, you can quench them. “The Lord rebuke you, O Satan.”

Chapter 12 John the Baptist

In the New Testament we find one of the greatest men of faith whom the Bible sets before us. In fact, Jesus said that up till that time, no man of greater spirituality had been born. What an example for you and me!

John the Baptist appeared as part of God's purpose in bringing the Christ into the world. The Book of Isaiah foretold him (see Luke 3.3-6) as the one who would prepare the way for Jesus. An angel gave his father Zechariah the same message (see Luke 1.8-13). John's Gospel tells us that he was "sent from God... that all might believe through him."

When he grew up, he exercised a mighty ministry, preaching repentance from sin, and a turning to God expressed in baptism. He warned of the coming of God's judgement and wrath, and preached that people should live good, honest lives.

So powerful was his preaching that "Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan" went to hear him, and many were baptised after listening to his preaching. He pointed people to Christ, and it was he who gave the world those precious words, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

He was a man of prayer, and taught others to pray - as we read in Luke 11.1.

Here was a man who made sacrifices for the Lord, wearing a garment of camel's hair and eating locusts and wild honey.

Even his enemies could not help but sense the reality of his power from God and the truth of his message. Herod the King “feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man”. After he was murdered, it was said that “all hold that John was a prophet”.

No wonder Jesus said of him that “among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist... He was a burning and shining lamp.” He was living a glorious and blessed life, both in his inward spiritual experience of God and in his public ministry.

And then everything seemed to go wrong. He was put in prison because of his stand for morality. And there in prison, before he was put to death, he began to doubt. So he sent word by his disciples to Jesus and asked, “Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?”

How astonishing that this great man, who had prepared the way for Christ and pointed people to him, should now wonder whether he had in fact got it wrong all the time, and Jesus was not really the Messiah after all!

And even more astonishing, perhaps, is the fact that he didn’t really get an answer to his question. Jesus never said, “Yes, I am the one.” He pointed to his miracles and his preaching, and left John to work out his own faith in the light of that.

Then John was murdered. The king had him beheaded, and his head presented on a platter to one of John’s enemies, whom John had tried to turn from unrighteousness.

Was it a tragedy? Well of course, no-one should die a death like that. But the Bible tells us (Acts 13.25) that John finished his course: he achieved all that God had appointed him in the world

to do. If I can do that, then when my death comes, it will not be untimely, nor will my life have been a tragedy or a waste.

And think of this: John never knew how greatly God has honoured him. He died, but his work survived, and Jesus honoured him for it, and for his person. We all admire him.

What can we learn from John? Well, one obvious thing is to believe his message and to put it into practice: confession of sin, repentance, baptism, faith, good Christian living. And like him, we can become people who know how to pray. We can make such sacrifices as God calls us to, and be bold in our service. Finish your course - achieve all that God wants from you.

It is not wise to try to see how God is honouring you, or to try to anticipate how he will honour you. Do his will, and be content with pleasing him. Leave your reputation unknown in his hands.

And finally, if everything seems to go wrong, and you begin to wonder whether Jesus really is who you once believed he is - the Christ, the Redeemer, the Saviour, the Son of God: at such times, do not let your questioning overwhelm you and ruin your trust in God, but rather cling on to God in trust, determined to believe him and to please him by your faith. Look to Christ: his birth by a virgin, the sort of man he was, his works of power, his words, his death for your redemption, his resurrection to eternal glory, his ascension to the right hand of God where he makes intercession for you.. Look to him, and you will find that your trust is well placed.

Chapter 13

Doubting your Salvation

Maybe you are rather like me. I don't very often doubt that God exists, and I believe the Gospel is true. What I mainly struggle with is this: am I really a true Christian? If I compare my spiritual experience or my success and blessing in Christian service, I seem so far short of many other Christians. Have I in fact only reached as far as a belief in the head, but not really been born again as God's child in union with Christ?

1 John 3.24 says: "we know that he abides in us." That is what I want to believe and to experience. It is, surely, what every person strongly desires who takes God and eternity seriously, who is concerned for his own soul, his own state before God, and whether he has eternal life in Christ. We all want to be sure that "he abides in us."

Some of the reasons why we fall into doubt are:

- our failure at good living
- our failure in Christian service when others have such fruit and blessing
- our sin, our defeat by temptation
- our spiritual experience and feelings in comparison with other Christians including those who write hymns
- the Devil's accusations about our sin: "God hasn't forgiven you - you're too sinful" or "God doesn't love people like you - you're too bad"
- our poor health.

Put it like this. You just don't feel as full of love, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control as you would like to be and as you know you ought to be. So you wonder if God has really begun an inward work in you at all.

You read biographies of great and powerful servants of God, men and women whom he has used mightily in the past to spread and deepen his church, some of whom I have mentioned in this book, and you see that your own service bears no such conspicuous fruit.



Christian biographies

Or you meet Christians whom God is wonderfully using now in his church and world. You would love to be used for his glory, like them. If he uses *them* like that, and not *you*, you start to wonder whether you are really his servant at all.

Other Christians seem to have such joy and victory in their lives, and to overcome temptation and live lives of purity and holiness. But you know that you fall short. Are you then really a Christian, you wonder.

Yet others have rapturous heights of love and joy, or deep conviction of their sinfulness, wonderful experiences of God's forgiveness, nearness and fulness. They speak or write about them, and you compare your small experience with theirs.

Remember a previous chapter: the Devil will be quick to point out to you your failings and sins. He will accuse you. But God has silenced him, forgiven you, and accepted you in Christ.

Earlier on, we looked at Job, a man who had very deep and difficult questions about his relationship with God, and who came to think for a time that God must be cruel and that God hated him. But do not forget that he was very ill when he fell into these doubts. It wasn't only his outward circumstances that went so seriously wrong. Bodily pain and decline can affect our mental, emotional and spiritual feelings.

One thing that we learn in looking at Job, the psalmists and others of God's people is that it is very important to be honest about our doubts and difficulties. Job was very straightforward about his fears and doubts, and God said he had spoken rightly (42.7-8). God has even inspired the Bible in such a way that the questionings of these men and women are recorded for our help and instruction. Don't think that God will repulse you and be

angry with you for having difficulties; he already knows all your thoughts anyway, before you tell him openly about them in prayer and start looking seriously for an answer, and (if no complete answer comes) for faith and assurance despite the doubts.

God even tells us that in some things Job got it wrong, asking him:

Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge... Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty... Will you even put me in the wrong?

Some of his thoughts were mistaken, but God still says he spoke rightly. He was honest. So should you be: you cannot tell God anything about yourself which he does not already know.

In our desire to “know that he abides in us,” our first and main question must be, Am I fully relying only on Christ’s sacrifice?

If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin... If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness... but if anyone does sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the expiation for our sins. - 1 John 1.7, 9; 2.1-2

Are you trusting that? That is the most important, the fundamental question.

But there are some proofs which the scriptures give to reassure us about the reality of our faith and experience of Christ. For

example, “by this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments” (1 John 2.3). Has your life changed since you came to faith in Christ? You have not reached perfection, but have you progressed towards more honesty, godliness, kindness, and more righteous and truthful living? “You may be sure that everyone who does right is born of him” (v. 29).

You cannot see the kingdom of God without the Holy Spirit; spiritual things are spiritually discerned and recognised. You see, understand and believe the Gospel, the Sonship of Christ, his resurrection, the need for forgiveness and new birth to eternal life. You know that mere moral or religious achievement cannot make anyone a real Christian. You would not know these things if God had not shown them to you by his Spirit.

When the precious name of your Lord, Jesus Christ, is blasphemed, you wince, you grieve. When his truth is dishonoured, it provokes, disturbs and angers you. These things are important to you because you do love him, and you love his truth.

In the past you have had real and convincing experiences of Christ. Look back on them and reflect on them. They were real. God’s gifts are irrevocable; whatever he does endures for ever. Whatever your *feelings* today, the things you have known by faith remain realities.

Then it is said that “we know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren” (1 John 3.14). You enjoy the company of other Christians, talking about the Lord and his work, talking with one another of your experiences of him, helping one another with spiritual difficulties, praying together, worshipping God together. This shows that you are one of

God's true people. "If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us" (4.12).

And it works the other way round too: the fact that other Christians accept me as one of themselves helps me to believe that I really am a true Christian – that I really am "one of themselves". When I cannot believe or trust my own judgement or estimate of myself, it helps to trust the judgement, the acceptance, of other people whose Christian reality I cannot doubt. If I can't trust myself, I can trust them - and they accept me as truly born again.

You grieve over your falls, of course, but you are making progress against the lure of the world - "its idle pomp and fading joys," as John Wesley put it. And you care less than you used to what non-Christian people think of you, and more about your place among God's people and your precious, eternal relationship with God in Christ. This is becoming more and more what matters to you. "Whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith" (5.4). You are progressing in overcoming the world because you are born of God.

Finally, to maintain your victory over doubt, to ensure that doubt does not ruin your walk and service, persist in spiritual progress and growth:

Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he has promised us, eternal life.

And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him at his coming.

* * *

There is a further question which can trouble you concerning your personal salvation, and that is: Do I have to be a member of a particular church in order to be sure of my salvation?

There are churches which teach that only their own sacraments, such as baptism, Holy Communion, chrismation, convey salvation to the faithful, and only their bishops and priests have power to give valid sacraments. Is one of them right? Must I join it in order to be a real Christian?



Roman Catholic church, Brittany



Greek Orthodox church, Aigosthena

Do I have to be baptised in, and belong to, one particular church - maybe Roman Catholic, or Eastern Orthodox, which some would say has a stronger claim to unbroken continuity than the Church of Rome?

No. Your salvation is mediated to you by God's grace via your faith in Christ and your union with him by the Holy Spirit, who was given to you freely by God because of your faith in Christ. "To all who received him, who believed in his name, he became power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1.12-13).

When I wrestled with this question, I found help by asking myself where I could find evidence of God's work in people's lives - of joy in Christ, peace with God, love for God and man, zeal in prayer and service. I read widely in connection with my thinking: the early church Fathers both Latin and Greek, the Celtic Church such as Aidan, mediæval Catholic monks like Ælfric of Eynsham and Bernard of Clairvaux, early reform movements like those of the Waldenses or John Wyclif, Reformers, Puritans, men of the Evangelical Awakening of the 18th century and their successors, the Pentecostal movement. Among them all I have found a love for Christ, gratitude for his redeeming death, faith in his virgin birth, perfect life, resurrection, present reign and future coming as judge.



*Pentecostal church, Armentières, 1970
The text says God is love.*

God has touched and saved people in all of these movements and imparted to them a deep, warm, lasting and true awareness of his love and salvation and made them centred upon his Son Jesus Christ.

No: there is no single organisation on earth which is “the only true church” and which alone can be the channel from God to you for your salvation. Forgiveness, the new birth, eternal life are all in Christ, and (as the Bible says) “you have come to fulness of life in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.”

Chapter 14 Jesus Christ

Finally, if we look at Jesus Christ, we see the pattern which is prepared also for us - a pattern of death and later resurrection to eternal life.

To help us, God has put this pattern everywhere. In Nature, it surrounds us. Think first of the heavens. Psalm 19 says:

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.



Wharram Percy: “The heavens are telling the glory of God”

Which means, the glory and orderliness of heavens wordlessly proclaim God's handiwork. But it is not only God's handiwork in creation that the heavens speak to us about: in Romans 10 the Apostle takes up this passage from the Psalms and applies it also to the Gospel.

How do the heavens point us to the message of the Gospel, and especially to the pattern of death, resurrection and final glory? Well, think of the sun: every day it seems to die; it sinks below the horizon and is followed by darkness and cold; but next morning it rises again, strong and glorious. So did Christ after his death, and so shall we who believe in him.

Think again of the sun, and the way it gives us the seasons. Every year, the sun gets lower and lower in the sky, its light and warmth becoming weaker and weaker, till about 22nd December, the year's shortest day. This gives us winter, and many plants seem to die off, and many animals disappear and hibernate. Then the sun begins to rise higher in the sky. Light and heat increase. Spring comes, and with it a whole range of newness of abundant life bursts forth to our delight. Buds become blossom and later fruit. Flowers grow anew. The sun seemed to die at the year's end; now it has risen again. So shall we, if we hold fast our faith in Christ. As Gregory the Great wrote: "the kingdom of God is aptly compared to summer, because it is then that the clouds of our sorrow pass away, and the days of life shine with the brightness of the eternal sun."³

Think again of the seasons which the movement of the heavens give us, and turn your mind to the seed that is sown. It falls into

³ quoted from "Be Friends of God: spiritual Reading from Gregory the Great" (John Leinenweber, Cowley Publications, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1990)

the ground and seems to die; then, the next year, it springs up, new, fresh, green and full of the promise of life and fruitfulness. “What you sow does not come to life unless it dies... So it is with the resurrection,” wrote the Apostle in 1 Corinthians 15.36-42.

And again, still thinking of the heavens, there are different degrees of glory among the heavenly bodies - sun, moon, different stars - just as there will be a difference between our present bodies and our resurrection bodies. “So it is with the resurrection,” write the Apostle in the same passage.

God has shown the pattern he has planned for us all around us in the heavens and on earth in nature: open your eyes and see it, and believe it!

In Romans 1 Paul writes:

What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them... his invisible nature, namely eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse

“The things that have been made” tell us about God and about his work. They also point to the pattern he has set for us of death and resurrection. Some creatures live in water, some on land, some in the air. It makes sense to believe that not all God’s creatures inhabit the same element, and thus that there can be an earthly, physical life and a renewed one in new heavens and new earth where righteousness will dwell.

Think of frogs, toads, newts and salamanders. Their eggs are laid in water, often on aquatic plants, and they hatch as tadpoles who

live in water and breathe through gills. Later a metamorphosis takes place and the adults emerge from the water. Now they breathe with lungs and live in the air; some even live in trees! So it will be with us through death and resurrection: we shall be changed, and Paul wrote in Philippians 3.20-21 of “the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body.”

You must have seen beautiful butterflies flitting about in the sunshine. They started life as grubs called caterpillars, but from a seeming death in a chrysalis they emerge with wings and a new, transformed life. Here is a further picture of the death and resurrection which is the pattern for Christian believers.

Then there is the adder. It has a skin during the cold deathly time of winter. But in spring it sheds its winter skin and emerges new: another change in nature, reminding us that we shall arise from death changed and renewed.

But most clearly of all, we see the pattern of death followed by resurrection in our Lord Jesus Christ:

Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. ... For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ... Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. - 1 Corinthians 15

Our Saviour died for us, and rose again. Everyone one of us will also die, unless we are still alive at his coming. But we too shall rise to glorious, everlasting life with him; and Christians who are

alive at his second coming will be changed in the twinkling of an eye into the same resurrection glory.

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.
Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.

- 1 Corinthians 13.12