THE LAST THINGS

Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell



Paul Helm

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THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

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To

Ruth Grotenhuis

and to the memory of

Lew Grotenhuis (1908-1987)

Introduction

It has sometimes been necessary for the Christian Church to defend particular teachings of the faith, often in the face of great opposition. Athanasius defended the true divinity of Christ, Augustine upheld divine grace against Pelagius' religion of self-effort, and Luther's rediscovery of the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone was in the face of the determined opposition of the Roman Catholic Church.

At other times it is not neglect of the true teachings of the faith that nullifies the Christian gospel so much as 'the spirit of the age'. There may rise up an almost indefinable moral and spiritual atmosphere which suffocates the gospel, inhibiting both its intelligible and forceful presentation and its faithful acceptance.

This study is written out of the belief that at present the Church is up against such a 'spirit'. Even in those sections of the Church which have striven most manfully to keep to biblical themes there has been a change in sensibility during the present century. This change in outlook, in the framework of thinking and feeling, has resulted in a shift in the centre of gravity in the Church's message and in those concerns to which people are prepared to give time, effort and money.

What has happened? Concern for the present life has over-powered that for the life to come. In a previous study, *The Callings* (1987), an attempt was made to show in what ways the present life is important for the Christian. The Christian is not called to 'full-time Christian service', nor to a monastic attitude, a life of literal separation from the world. Divine providence has given to each Christian a calling. Through it divine grace is appropriately shaped for the needs and opportunities of each individual, and a person's character is developed. Thus, a Christian's calling, not simply his effectual call by grace but the network of personal circumstances and gifts which constitute his calling in the wider sense, is *purposive*. The goal and end of a person's calling does not terminate in this life, but it makes sense only in the light of the life to come. His calling in this life is part of God's heavenly calling, the call that leads to heaven. While the

Christian, in being called by grace, already has eternal life, such life will fully be realised, blossom and bear fruit, only in the life to come. And the Christian's daily work, intrinsically satisfying and worthwhile as it may be, will also find its fulfilment through the formation of character, and perhaps even in some of the products of human culture, in the city of the New Jerusalem, the new heaven and new earth wherein dwells righteousness.

There are, then, two basic extremes to be avoided. One is to think of this life as a shadow, as not real; to belittle and devalue it to the point where it is not worth living. The other mistake is to think that the present life is everything. The basic fact about the present life is that it is important and valuable in all its aspects because it leads to the world to come.

So this book looks onward, beyond the details of the Christian's daily calling, to the end, that end which gives these present responsibilities their point. And in order to see this end clearly we need to attempt to counter the spirit of the age, which tends to see everything in exclusively 'this worldly' terms.

We can focus this more closely by putting it in terms of a dilemma: is heaven for the believer the completion and climax of this present life, or is it in complete contrast to it? Is life here on earth merely idling in anticipation of heaven, a waiting room, a twiddling of the thumbs? Or is it continuous with the life to come? In *The Callings* we argued that it was continuous, and this present study aims to trace this continuity through to its climax. To do this we must face up to the stark reality of the 'last things': death, judgment, heaven and hell.

In order to do this we need to neutralise certain currently powerful ways of thinking. One of these is a diminished sense of human responsibility, a mood which easily sloughs responsibility onto society, or upbringing, or science, or fate. But personal responsibility is central to the gospel, for if there is no responsibility, if there is nothing that I or anyone else ought to do, then there can be no sin, and if there is no sin then there is no Saviour from sin. So there is need to reaffirm each person's responsibility before God, a responsibility which extends as far as the eye of God can see. Responsibility is not merely a matter of what other people load on to me, nor is it limited to what I am prepared to take responsibility for. It extends to those responsibilities which are sometimes thrust

upon me by circumstances, and those I grow up with and assume imperceptibly. Responsibility extends to those matters, inner desires, motives and thoughts, which are known only to the person who has them and to the Searcher of hearts. Like the Psalmist we each have secret faults from which we need to be delivered *(Psa. 19:12).*

Something else which needs counteracting and neutralising is the refusal to recognise the speed with which time passes, and the connection between the death that we each face, and the judgment to come. Modern people live as if they are on earth for ever, and death, when it is faced up to, is sentimentalised.

But the Bible is emphatic that after death judgment follows, the judgment of God. For we live in a moral order of things; we live in God's sight and are accountable to him. These facts raise important questions about justice, about which there is much misconception, and this also requires discussion. For the justice of God is not the malevolent anger of a despot with a grudge, it is judgment *according to truth*; awesome, but also liberating and comforting.

According to Scripture the judgment of God, the last judgment, will bring a great division. Mankind will then be separated into the saved and the lost. And this claim also runs counter to the spirit of the age, not merely the fact of judgment, but the fact of division; it runs counter to one of the strongest assumptions of modern Christian theology, that the world is one world. For the 'one world' theologian believes that the dominant idea is the unity of the human race. For him, the human race resides in one world, and always will. And it is the work of the theologian and of the church to foster and support this unity, to break down barriers, and to see that this unity is realised in practical ways. On this view, even if there is to be a divine judgment then, whatever happens, the unity of the race will be preserved. Divine judgment can only be, for the 'one world' theologian, restorative in its purpose and effect. There is to be no final separation between members of the human race, no sheep and goats, no lost and saved, no right-hand and left-hand, despite the repeated teaching of Scripture to the contrary. It is unthinkable, for the 'one-world' theologian, that any person could remain unrestored, for then the race would be divided, and divine love would have been vanquished.

By contrast the ‘two-world’ theologian recognises the undoubted biblical testimony, and the teaching of the Christian church in all ages, that divine judgment will bring division. The basic theological fact is not the unity of the human race, a unity to be preserved at all costs, but the purpose and glory of God. That purpose is not threatened by the prospect of the lost, and of two worlds between which there is a great, impassable gulf fixed. Such a state of affairs is not the thwarting of the divine purpose, but it is its fulfilment. Why God’s purpose should be as it is is not for us to question, but that it will end in the division of humanity is the manifest teaching of Christ, and of the entire New Testament. The universal-ism of‘one-world’ theology is another element in the spirit of the age, one which often shows itself within the professing church.

So the judgment of God which all must face inexorably leads either to heaven, for those who are ‘in Christ’, or it leads to hell, for the impenitent. It is necessary therefore to say something about each. The purpose in doing so is not to speculate, or to sentimentalise, but to state as sharply and starkly as possible the plain facts of the matter as Scripture portrays them. What follows is not offered as a series of meditations, like Richard Baxter’s *The Saint’s Everlasting Rest*, but there is matter on which meditation could be based.

Someone the author likes to think of as a fellow-Lancastrian, Isaac Ambrose (1604-1663), wrote a book entitled *Ultima*, meditations on the last things. And another ejected Puritan minister, Samuel Bolton (1606-1654) wrote *The Four Last Things, Death, Judgment, Hell and Heaven* in 1632. And many others have written on the same theme. So this short study is part of an honourable and long-standing tradition. But the aim is not simply to keep up this tradition in the 1980’s and beyond. What the likes of Ambrose and Bolton asserted and reaffirmed was never more needed than today. For the Scriptural teaching on the ‘four last things’ - death, judgment, heaven and hell - contains lessons that we all need to learn and not to let slip.

1: *Responsibility to God*

The past century or more has seen a gentle but sure erosion of certain beliefs which had been taken for granted in the general culture, and particularly in the Christian world. What has almost disappeared from view is not some central doctrine of the Christian faith but something more important than that, namely a set of attitudes and beliefs which form a background to the faith. These beliefs provide a setting in which the Christian message can be more readily understood and, in this sense at least, they make the people who hold them more receptive to that message.

What are these attitudes and beliefs? They all centre upon a person's awareness of his own responsibility, and especially his accountability to God, his Creator and Lord. The idea of personal accountability has always been ridiculed by some, and ignored by many others, and yet it was possible, at one time, to take such beliefs for granted both in public life and in Christian preaching. But not so now. Because of this change the communication of the Christian faith is made immeasurably more difficult. For if there is not an awareness of personal responsibility then there can be no recognition of personal sin, and no need for belief in a Saviour from sin. And if there is no awareness of accountability to God then there can be no recognition of judgment to come and hence no need to fear or to be warned of such a judgment. Instead of the once-common belief that our human lives lead naturally and inevitably to the place of divine judgment, there has grown up the view that human life leads nowhere except to that great modern unmentionable, the grave.

It is possible to speculate upon the causes of this modern erosion of the sense of accountability. Perhaps it is due to a misunderstanding of science, to the belief that everything can be explained in mechanistic terms. Or perhaps it is due to the prominence that has been given, at least since the time of Freud, to the supposedly dominant role of the unconscious in human behaviour. Or maybe it is due to an over-emphasis upon the place that the social environment occupies in the explaining of human behaviour. Perhaps the change has been due to all these factors, or to something that we have failed to mention. And yet since, from the earliest recorded accounts of Christian teaching and preaching *(Acts iy:*

31-2), people have been prepared to opt out of responsibility, there is nothing essentially novel about this attitude.

What is new is the extent to which such attitudes have taken root throughout society and have penetrated the Christian church. There are many signs of this. One sign is the shift away from an emphasis upon personal sin to what is called 'structural sin[5], the belief that a person's life before God can be explained, or explained away, by his 'structures' - his family, his workplace, the clubs he joins, his neighbourhood. Another piece of evidence of the erosion of personal responsibility is the increasing emphasis being placed in the Christian church upon the 'pleasure principle'. The Christian faith is proclaimed not so much because it is the sure deliverance from 'the wrath to come' but because it brings happiness, zest, joy and personal prosperity.

Who can doubt that a person's environment plays an important part in his development, and that the ignorance that may arise because of circumstances diminishes a person's responsibility? (*Luke 12:48).* And who can doubt that acceptance of the Christian message leads to happiness and personal fulfilment? *(Rom. 14:17; Eph. 4:15).* But such matters are so emphasised at present that they distort or drown the central issues which the Christian gospel addresses. And in the process the happiness and personal fulfilment which Christ gives themselves become distorted, so that the promised 'happiness' is not that which flows from the reconciling mercy of God, but something else which is altogether shallower and less recognisably Christian. But what is particularly tragic is that the fundamental fact of human accountability before God is lost sight of.

It is a basic principle of the Christian faith that mankind is made in the image of God, with reason, will and conscience. A person is able to think, to plan, to speculate and to act in the light of known alternative courses of action. Besides the powers of reason and action a human being also has a moral sense or conscience. This is seen, most obviously, in the way in which we readily hold *others* to account. We are keen to praise or, more often, to blame. And we are willing to take credit for our own efforts. It is also seen, less obviously, in our reluctance to take blame for our own actions and to think up excuses, and also in our tendency to take responsibility for others when this is unwarranted.

Personal responsibility does not mean that a person is responsible only for himself, but it means at least that much. To be an adult human being is to take responsibility for one's actions and for their intended consequences, and not to be shielded by parents, or by a school, or by the state. Without such a conception of personal responsibility human society would be impossible, because no-one would be accountable for anything. It is a paradox, at least to the modem mind, that such responsibility is part of human worth, for responsibility is not something to be evaded, but to be recognised. Individuality as a person is partly expressed by the fact that for certain matters that person, and no-one else, is accountable. If things go wrong, then he is to blame, and if there is success, he is to be praised.

LIMITS

But are there no limits to what a person is responsible for? There are two kinds of limits. One is provided by the fact that sometimes a person is responsible not only for himself, but for others as well. So personal responsibility is not an expression of sheer self-interest to the complete exclusion of the interests and needs of others. A father is responsible for his children, for their health, shelter, education and general nurture, and a grown child is responsible for his aged parents. Besides such family responsibilities, which are often unsought, a person may accept other duties in business, or in the church, or in leisure-time. Finally, a person has responsibility for his neighbour, especially in cases of obvious need such as those made forever memorable by the parable of the Good Samaritan.

It ought, perhaps, to be emphasised that a person may have responsibilities which he has not chosen. Each of us has parents. We did not choose to have parents, and most certainly did not choose the parents that we have. Yet we have responsibilities to them, to honour and to care for them as long as they are alive and we are able to help. And although we may have chosen to have children, we did not choose the particular bent and dispositions of our children. Nevertheless we are responsible for tackling the problems that our children create. Unless we are refugees or immigrants, we have not chosen to be born in, and to be citizens of, our nation. But as citizens we have responsibilities of law-abidingness. And so it is not true that the only duties that a person has are those which he has freely chosen.

The other way in which one person's responsibilities are limited is by the obvious fact that other people have responsibilities as well. Because you are responsible for your children, I am not; because I am responsible for being club secretary, you are not (unless, of course, there is joint responsibility, as in marriage or in business). Just as human society is possible only if people in it take responsibility, so it is possible only if limits to such responsibilities are recognised. If a person's responsibility knew no bounds then he would be the oppressor of others, who would in turn be tempted to oppress him. And so I cannot, in general, be responsible for what a person does with the money that he earns as a result of us trading together. A bank-clerk cannot be responsible for what his customers do with the notes that he issues, nor a bus-conductor for what his passengers propose to do when they leave the bus.

Where the boundaries are to be drawn around one person's responsibility, and what the shape of the boundaries ought to be, are matters of continuous debate. This fact, at least, shows that the sense of the importance of human responsibility has not gone from society; nor could it have gone, however eroded and impoverished that sense may have become, so long as people live together in societies.

SCRIPTURE AND RESPONSIBILITY

As these paragraphs make clear, human responsibility is in fact recognised by everyone, whatever they may say to the contrary. And this bears out the teaching of Scripture, that the 'natural man', the man who does not have the benefit of divine special revelation, or who rejects it, nevertheless recognises the fact of human responsibility. And yet what is generally recognised apart from Scripture is also underlined by the teaching of Scripture. This can be seen if we note, briefly, the biblical teaching on the/aci of responsibility as well as its *scope.*

The fact of human responsibility is everywhere assumed in what Scripture teaches. The very idea of sin against God depends upon it, for sin is personal transgression of the law of God. If there is no personal responsibility in wrong-doing then the idea of personal guilt and unrighteousness makes no sense. And although at first sight Scripture teaches truths which may appear to undermine human accountability, Scripture nevertheless upholds it. For instance, Scripture teaches that God is sovereign over all his creation, and that everything

that comes to pass in history, from the fall of a leaf to the fall of a world leader, does so in virtue of the eternal decree of God *(Eph. i:ii).* Nevertheless, such an awesome fact does not diminish human accountability. For men and women who are accountable live in accordance with their own reasons and plans, insofar as these are not thwarted by the lives of others. Yet they fulfil the decree of God in so doing, unbeknown to them. So Cyrus, a heathen king, is nevertheless the 'servant' of the Almighty in carrying out his purposes for his people Israel, even though such a thought was far from Cyrus's mind *(Isa. 10:7).* And while Joseph's brothers intended his banishment 'for evil', the Lord intended it 'for good' *(Gen. 50:20).*

God's decreeing of sinful actions does not taint God - he is not the author of sin - nor does it in any way diminish the responsibility of men and women. In a similar fashion although Scripture teaches that each of us is 'in Adam' and so inherits a sinful nature from him, yet this does not take away our accountability (*Rom*. 5). No person can justifiably blame the decree of God for his own mistakes, nor can a person excuse himself because he is 'in Adam'.

Yet in a parallel way to the one we noticed earlier, Scripture teaches that a person may have responsibility for others, and attempts to escape such responsibility are condemned *(Gen. 4:9).* Likewise Scripture explicitly teaches that a person's responsibilities are limited by those of others. For example, Paul teaches that the Christian is to pay his taxes *(Rom. 13:6)* and that he is to do so, apparently, without questioning the purposes to which those taxes are put. This is not because it does not matter how tax-revenue is used but because carrying out such purposes is not, according to Paul, the tax-payer's responsibility. From Paul's teaching we may conclude that the magistrate has definite responsibilities which are distinct from those of the private citizen, and provided that the citizen is not made to sin by the magistrate's rule he is to fulfil all the impositions laid upon him by the state, remembering that the magistrate is, in turn, responsible to God *(Rom. 13:4).*

While we have so far been concerned about a person's responsibility to others, and have glanced at the biblical position on this, it is impossible to separate the Bible's teaching about this from what it teaches about a person's responsibility to God. Responsibility to God is, partly at least, exercised through the various other

responsibilities we have been touching upon. Part of the sickness of the modern Christian church which is due to the erosion of the belief in personal responsibility, has carried with it, inevitably, a weakened sense of personal accountability to God. According to Scripture it is because a person is accountable to God that he has responsibility for himself and for others in the ways we have been outlining.

God is the witness of every human relationship, every case in which a person discharges or fails to discharge his duties. Each human life is lived before God. Not only are we to recognise areas of responsibility because God has commanded them, but one reason for a person exercising these responsibilities is that he has a fundamental responsibility to God. He works hard at his job because he has a master in heaven *(Eph. 6:9).* He is not a man-pleaser, but a servant of Christ *(Eph. 6:6).*

There is a more alarming sense in which God is a witness. He knows the secrets of men's hearts *(Psa. 44:21),* their secret faults *(Psa. 19:12).* He knows our secret sins as well as our limitations and weaknesses *(Psa. 90:8).* He knows our motives even when our actions fail. Fully to appreciate such facts requires nothing less than a revolution in the way in which men and women customarily think about themselves. For we are accustomed to think of our relationships with other people, and our responsibility for them, only in social terms, in terms of our personal happiness and fulfilment, provided that nobody else is harmed.

Such modern attitudes are particularly influenced by utilitarian ways of thinking, thinking which measures the value of an action simply by its consequences. Will what I propose to do produce benefit and fulfilment, more fulfilment than some other action I might do? This is the paramount question to be asked about any action, according to the modern outlook. And besides sidestepping the question of whether there are actions which are wrong under any circumstances, such thinking makes human motives or desires, the moral sources of human action, of very little importance, indeed of no importance at all. What matters are the public consequences, not the private motives. God, the searcher of hearts, is left out of account. By contrast the Christian ethic places value upon the motive. The motive is that which gives an action its value in God's sight. Motive is not everything, for to obey is better than sacrifice and to hearken than the fat of rams

(i *Sam. 15:22),* but a motive gives the moral direction to an action. The motive is important, and the action itself is important, but the two brought together is most important of all.

Not only the action, but the motive out of which it is performed, indicates its moral character. Is it performed out of narrow selfishness, for display, for human applause, to try to gain the favour of God, for social advancement? Or is it done to honour and glorify God, from a pure motive and with singleness of purpose? The modern mind gives great importance to ‘image’, to the impression that actions convey to others, rather than to the true moral character of the action before God.

If God does not know about our motives then this attitude makes perfect sense. For if all that is known is what is made public, what other people see and hear, then this is all that matters. But the Bible uses the ugly word ‘hypocrite’ for those who cultivate their ‘image’ at the expense of or without regard to inner reality. When Christ warned against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, as he repeatedly did *(Matt.* 23), what concerned him was the Pharisaic fondness for religious image-making, the way in which they conveyed to others a false, insubstantial religiosity.

God not only knows the secrets of the hearts of men, he judges accordingly. It is not as if God merely played the part of an infallible recorder, taking down everything that happens, and every desire. He is not merely a recorder, but an assessor of what he knows. His judgment extends as far as his knowledge. And so, while typically and characteristically a man looks on the outward appearance (how else could he look?) the Lord judges the heart (r *Sam. 16:7).* In weighing a person’s character, the judgment of God, his Creator and Lord, takes in not only what a person does or fails to do, but the inner state which gives rise to the action.

ALARM AND COMFORT

The fact of God’s judgment of the heart is both alarming and comforting. It is alarming because none of us can hide from God. Darkness does not hide us, nor can we flee to a place where God is not (*Psa*. 139). No human deviousness or

subtlety escapes him. He knows every twist and turn of the heart, and judges justly. To anyone who knows anything at all about himself this is an alarming fact, so alarming that it is difficult to live with. It is tempting to look for reasons why it cannot be true that God knows our hearts, or to dismiss the subject from our minds completely. Yet it is a glorious aspect of God's grace, when it comes to the sinner, that it cleanses even from secret faults.

Sometimes it is said that because God knows the secrets of our hearts he judges more harshly than a human judge. But this is not the biblical picture. It is not that God is like a tyrannical thought-policeman, intimidating and blackmailing his subjects. The emphasis of Scripture is on the fact that God judges according to *truth (Rom. 2:2).* The truth about people, including those personal weaknesses and limitations which may excuse them or lessen their responsibility, involves what is unseen to men but known to God.

Such a position is implied by what Scripture has to say about diminished responsibility, as in the teaching of Christ about those who will be beaten with few stripes as against those who sin against the light, who will be beaten with many stripes *(Luke 12:47, 48*).

Although awareness that God knows the secrets of human hearts can be alarming, it is also comforting, because God is incorruptibly holy. He is *straight.* For while the knowledge of God extends to every secret, and his judgment is as extensive as his knowledge, that judgment is according to the truth. It is in accordance with the facts, with the true state of things. There is no bias or prejudice or ill-will about it. So that if God judges that an action is evil, it is because it is evil, and for no other reason. There are no errors, no mistakes.

Why is this comforting? For one thing, recognition that God judges according to truth effectively counters the widespread view that there are no moral truths, that moral questions are about upbringing and culture and nothing more. Most people have been attracted by this view at some time or other. The idea that what is morally right or wrong is relative to a particular culture, so that stealing might be wrong in one culture but permissible in another according to the decision of 'society', is very tempting. It is so convenient. But it is fundamentally unbiblical. The same moral principle might call for different behaviour in different

circumstances, as a parent might treat one child differently from another but for the same reason. But this is not to say that anything goes.

The idea of moral relativism is also comfortless, for it leaves us struggling in the morass of different human opinions and prejudices, with no firm foothold of moral truth. But God judges the actions and motives of mankind according to truth.

From time immemorial people have struggled with ‘the problem of evil’, the problem of how it could be that a good and loving God should permit evil in his creation. The reason why God should have permitted evil is shrouded in the mystery of his inscrutable will. But if we hold in our minds the truth of God’s justice, then however ignorant we remain of the reasons which lie behind the divine purposes, we can nevertheless say that those purposes are just. God is righteous in all his ways (*Psa. 145:17*) and although he deals with different people differently - as is obvious - he never, according to Scripture, deals with anyone unjustly, in such a way that that person would have justifiable cause for complaint. In the face of God’s judgment every mouth will be stopped, not forcibly silenced, but quietened by the recognition of the justice of God’s ways *(Rom. 3:19).* The answer to the problem of evil, insofar as we are able at present to provide one, is not that God is unable to control what he has created, or that his creation shows up a defect in his moral character, being sadistic and vicious, but that God is holy and just. And though faith in God’s justice may be sorely tried when we are confronted by monstrous calamities and personal tragedy, Scripture nevertheless assures us that God does all things well *(Rom. 8:28).* While, like Christ’s disciples, we do not know why God does all that he does, we shall know hereafter *(John 13:7).*

These two things, the knowledge that God has of the heart, and the Scriptural attitude to the problem of evil, are connected. One reason why the problem of evil is a problem to us is that we are ignorant of the most important dimension of human morality - the thoughts and intentions of the heart. We are necessarily ignorant. Much that happens, much that puzzles us at present, may be explained as God’s hostile reaction to the heart. God chastises and judges not only what we all can see, evil actions, but also what is unseen to us but not to God, the evil desires and intentions of men and women. Because of the intervention of divine

providence, such desires are never allowed to reach their full pitch, but are bounded by God's providential ordering.

The modern outlook, much of which is present in the Christian church, has allowed a sense of personal responsibility, and particularly responsibility before God, to become watered down. Men and women no longer regard it as a fundamental fact that each life is lived before God. Coupled with this feature of the modern outlook is another, the tendency for Christian people to assume responsibility for God. We meet the curious situation in which people are not willing to take responsibility for themselves, yet at the same time they wish to take responsibility for God, to shield him from the moral effects of his own activity. This is an attitude which is also to be found in the New Testament times and which Paul, for example, responds to by reminding people of the fact that it is not they, but God, who is the judge (1 *Cor. 4:3,6).* For while we are responsible for ourselves, as we have seen, we are not responsible for God. We do not have to apologise for God, to bear the worries of the world, Atlaslike, upon our shoulders, for it is God's world, not ours. Neither are we warranted in taking God's place and setting ourselves up as judges. God is fully able to take care of himself and of the creation which he has brought into being and which he keeps in being. We may freely leave God's things to God.

GOD'S GIFT OF TIME

The loss, even within the Christian church, of the sense that the eye of God is upon us, and that each of us must give an account of himself to God *(Rom. 14:12)* is linked with a changed attitude to time. The modern view, in business and elsewhere, is that time is a commodity, to be bought and sold. Time is the opportunity to be active, in business and in leisure, and the more that can be crammed into it the better. As part of such an attitude the future is often taken for granted and people, even old and very sick people, live as if their tomorrow is guaranteed and that they will live for ever.

The invasion of this view of time into the Christian church partly accounts for the frantic activism of much contemporary church life and the shapelessness of individual lives. The church comes more and more to resemble a business, and the pastor is a manager hired by the board of directors to squeeze the maximum

amount of effort out of the congregation within the available time.

Not all such attitudes to time are wrong. The Bible encourages the planning and proper use of time, while recognising that time is in God's hands *(Jas. 4:15).* And yet if we see no more than this in the biblical teaching we miss what is characteristic about the Bible and time.

The most fundamental aspect of the biblical teaching is the contrast between the everlastingness in which God exists and the time-boundedness of the whole of creation. While God exists 'before the mountains were brought forth', 'from everlasting to everlasting' (*Psa.* 90), men and women live in time, and are subject to the change and decay that time brings. The Lord is untouched by such things because he is not subject to time. As Augustine beautifully expresses it

You made all time; you are before all time; and the 'time', if such we may call it, when there was no time was not time at all.

The span of time that each of us has is a divine gift. As the Creator gives each of his creatures their existence, so the continuation of that existence from moment to moment is his gift, one which, generally speaking, he gives no guarantee of continuing tomorrow. Just as, in our ignorance, none of us knows what a day may bring forth *(Prov. 27:1),* so in our weakness and dependence upon

God, it is not in our power to keep ourselves in existence for a moment longer. It is our duty to keep in the best health we can, and to plan our lives in the light of what we know, and what we believe our duty to be, but these activities do not guarantee tomorrow. And while it may seem quaint and old-fashioned to use the expression 'God willing' to qualify our plans *(Jas*. 4:15), that phrase expresses a fundamental feature of biblical piety and spirituality. James teaches this clearly when he rebukes those Christians who plan their futures without reference to the will of God, without the support of which all planning is idle. It is useless simply to utter the *words* 'God willing[5] but it is nevertheless a fact that each of us can do this, or that, only if the Lord wills it.

Because time is a divine gift and (from one point of view) a precarious gift,

Scripture urges us to make good use of it, not to waste but to redeem it *(Eph. 5:16).* The book of Proverbs, as well as the New Testament, is full of exhortations of this kind. At first glance such teaching may seem to differ little from the attitude of the modern secular man or woman for whom ‘time is money'. But although they are superficially similar the two attitudes are in fact very different.

What makes the difference is that for Scripture time is not simply a commodity to be ‘managed[5] or to be consumed as fast and furiously as possible, but it is the vehicle of God’s own purposes. God does not simply ‘issue’ time for human use but it is subordinate to his purposes. The ways of God, according to Scripture, have an end, not merely in the sense that they will come to an end, but also because they are purposive. God decrees what shall take place with an end in view. So the passing of time brings that end nearer to realisation. It is possible for someone to disregard this end, and to live in wilful ignorance or defiance of it, but according to Scripture that end is destined to come to pass, whether men and women like it or not. (And even opposition to God is mysteriously incorporated into the fulfilment of God’s purposes.) The passing of an hour or a day is a silent witness to the onrush of God’s purposes.

It is this over-arching divine purpose which makes human life lived in time ultimately significant. There are many activities which are satisfying to those who engage in them, and it would be flying in the face of common experience to suppose that people do not gain enormous satisfaction from what they do, even though they live without Christ. But if we focus, not upon the worthwhileness of separate activities, but upon the significance of our lives as a whole, then according to Scripture human life has a meaning because of its place in God’s purposes. All else would be vanity.

There are other aspects of the Bible’s teaching about human life in relation to time which underline this fundamental idea that time is a divine gift. Scripture stresses the speed with which time passes. This may at first sight seem strange, for how can time pass quickly or slowly? Time passes at the same rate for everyone, and its rate cannot be speeded up nor slowed down. What Scripture emphasises is that time passes much more quickly than we think. We spend our years as a tale that is told (*Psa. 90:9).* Life is a vapour, a smoke

(*Jas. 4:14).* And it is by meditating upon the everlastingness of God that we may come to appreciate more fully the frailty of human existence, the speed with which time goes, the importance of 'numbering our days' and so of gaining a true appreciation of the need to possess true wisdom while there is time and opportunity to do so *(Psa. 90:12).* It is only the fool and the wicked man who think that they will live for ever *(Psa. 49:11).*

While few people would deny that our lives pass quickly we seldom live as if this were really true. Indeed the tragedy of a life without God is that such a person *cannot* live with a full awareness of the fact that life may quickly end. He cannot cope. He is unprepared for death. Because human life is a divine gift, and a divine gift under judgment, it is like grass; like a dream; like yesterday when it is past *(Jas. 1:10*).All these figures of speech, and more, testify to the frailty of human life and to the fact that we all depend upon God for the next breath. Life is soon cut off, and we fly away *(Psa. 90:10).* By contrast God is unchanging, he never slumbers nor sleeps, he is ever young; yesterday, today and forever the same *(Psa. 90:2).*

Not only can tomorrow never be guaranteed, nor the flow of time be changed or halted, human life can end suddenly, when least expected. Like all these matters, it is obvious enough. Who could deny what experience so plainly teaches? Nor is there immunity to be gained from such facts by being a Christian. For as the sun shines on the just and the unjust, so death carries all away. Weakness and uncertainty afflict the Christian like any other; sometimes more so, according to Scripture *(Psa. 73).*

REGAINING THE BALANCE

Each of the matters that we have touched upon so far in this chapter - the individual responsibility of each person before God, the swift passing of time, and the frailty and uncertainty of human life - has for the most part passed out of that general set of assumptions that people nowadays live by, their 'public doctrine'. Whatever people may occasionally think privately, these matters are not publicly discussed, nor openly accepted. They have been either completely submerged by other things or have become warped, or been caricatured, into unrecognisable forms. Each of these matters, however, is a vital

ingredient in a balanced biblical spirituality. The loss of the conscious realisation of them within the Christian churches is a measure of their worldliness. Equally important, perhaps, is the fact that the loss of these assumptions makes it much more difficult to present the gospel. For the gospel relies upon a set of principles which cannot, at the present time, be taken for granted.

In order to understand once again these largely forgotten truths we must examine them as they are more fully elaborated in the biblical teaching regarding the ‘four last things’ - death, judgment, heaven and hell.

To take such a course is to run counter to the preoccupations and spirit of much contemporary Christianity. We have already noted the tendency of the Christian church at the present time to conduct her business in almost exclusively ‘this worldly’ rather than ‘other worldly’ terms. Although the universal church professes belief in ‘the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting’, the centre of gravity has swung away from seeing this life as a preparation for the life to come, to ignoring, and in some notorious cases, even openly denying the biblical teaching. Reference to the ‘last things’ is more often than not greeted by spokesmen of the Christian church with embarrassed silence, or as an unwelcome diversion from social activism, or from the frenzy of modern commercial evangelism.

It is unfortunate that when evangelical Christians have thought about the ‘last things’ at any time during the last century or so, this has been more often than not in an effort to sort out competing doctrines of the Second Coming of Christ. Clearly, although there is much about the ‘last times’ that is obscure and will remain obscure, it is nevertheless important to gain as full and as exact an understanding of the Second Advent of Christ from the teaching of Scripture as possible. Yet interest in this subject ought never to detract from the fundamental emphases of the Christian message which hold no matter what may be the precise details of the Second Coming. It is regrettable that an interest in the millennium has frequently been at the expense of the recognition that each of us is responsible to God and that time is swiftly carrying us all to death and the place of judgment.

These truths ought to be among the central, fixed points of a truly biblical piety.

It is to be feared that they have not recently been. The chapters that follow are a small contribution to helping the church to shift the centre of gravity of her thinking, and so to regain her balance.

2: *Death and Dying*

The time that bears all her sons away bears them away to death. The human frailty of which the Bible repeatedly speaks is not merely the insubstantiality of a puff of smoke, which vanishes into thin air leaving no traces behind, but the frailty of one who is destined to cease living, whose powers will fail and disintegrate. Such an end, as we well know, is the destiny of us all.

While coming death is obvious, and thus is something which is natural and expected, it is also unnatural. For death brings our life, which is the gift of God, to an end. Just as a person might have to smash his car window in order to get inside, to do something violent and destructive in order to achieve some end, so death has come, inflicted deliberately by the hand of God, but inflicted for wise and holy ends. Death may be natural, and necessary, yet it does not represent the true fulfilment of mankind. It is not inevitable, part of a biological process that could not be otherwise. It is a judgment.

This is borne out by the fact that, with the exception of suicide, death is not sought. We may on occasions wish for it, yet at the same time we shrink from it as something terrible. In the last chapter we stressed the importance of personal responsibility. But death is not one of the things that we are responsible for. It is laid upon us, it is an intrusion.

Christians sometimes say, perhaps with a touch of glibness, that the only death that matters is ‘spiritual' death. They point out that the fundamental sense of ‘death’ in the Bible is condemnation through a loss of the love and fellowship of the Creator. The death of the body is secondary, a result of this more profound separation from God.

But it is not with death in this spiritual sense that we are to be concerned in this chapter; rather it is with the disintegration and death of the body. Of course the two senses of ‘death’, physical and spiritual, cannot be completely de-coupled, because death gains its horror not only from the physical pain and the personal loss that accompanies it, but from its punitive character. It is possible to imagine

a ‘death’ that is an abrupt change in circumstances and is known to herald some amazing transformation into a higher state, like the change of a caterpillar into a butterfly. But our death is not that. Physical death is, in a fundamental sense that we shall explore more fully later, the end. And dying may be painful and distressing, a far cry from being an automatic transition to a higher plane. It is with death in this sense that this chapter is concerned, with the all-too-real business of physical dying, that deep abyss that awaits us all.

The modern western attitude to dying and death is all too obvious. It is to avoid it, to avoid mentioning it, and where mention of it is unavoidable, to use euphemisms and circumlocutions. Death is crudely dressed-up and sentimentalised in this way because it is so fearful and unpleasant. Because of this, and because death is often associated with deep grief and an acute sense of loss, it is sugar-coated, or even plastic-coated, the perfect vehicle for inducing superstition.

It is all too easy to moralise about these modern attitudes to death, to score cheap points by wagging the finger and shaking the head at those who ignore or who dress up dying and death in the familiar manner. If we do this we part company with the restrained spirituality of Scripture. It is equally easy for Christians to indulge in cant. We may say that Christ has conquered death, as he has, but this fact is not a licence to treat dying flippantly or callously, or to mistake the confidence that good health can bring for spiritual strength. Christ’s conquering of death does not relieve the Christian of the need to die, with the pain, loss and grief that accompany it. Christ has not taken away the need to die; he has transformed the significance of dying for all those who are ‘in him’, but the dying remains to be faced. It ill becomes those who are followers of him who groaned and wept at the grave of Lazarus to talk glibly about the death of anyone.

It is to be hoped that what follows in this chapter avoids these dangers. Every effort has been made to avoid them. While we have noted the characteristic modern attitude to death there is no attempt to survey modern attitudes in detail. Our purpose is very different, to try to recapture and to re-present the elements of the biblical, Christian attitude to death, and so to move to re-establish an element of biblical piety which has almost been swept away.

THE INEVITABILITY OF DEATH

Death is inevitable not merely in the sense that it will happen to each one of us, but also because it is *bound* to happen. Many things that may seem inevitable are not so because they are conditionally inevitable and the conditions are placed in our or others' hands. But the inevitability of death is suspended upon factors which are not in our hands but which, the Christian will say, are firmly in the hands of God. They are in God's hands not because we have chosen to place them there, but because death is a *judgment*, a judgment which extends across the whole of humanity. Having been to the Yorkshire coast for my annual holidays for the last twenty years, both I and my friends may think that where I go for next year's holiday is inevitable. But it is not, for it is in my hands to choose a different holiday resort, or to have no holiday at all. But I cannot choose not to die. There are means by which life can be prolonged, means such as general hygiene, diet and exercise, and by which it can be shortened, like smoking and careless driving, but there is no means available to any of us to keep living indefinitely. This is the one thing that 'befalleth' the sons of men (*Eccles 3:19*).

To recognise that death is inescapable does not mean that a person ought not to try to prolong his life and the life of others. Of course he ought; because life is a divine gift, and attempts to prolong life are usually expressions of love to our neighbour or of that proper self-regard which Scripture recognises *(Matt. 5:43).* It should go without saying that we ought to save life, to meet human need and to help to heal and to cure. Death's inevitability ought not to encourage fatalism, the lazy whispering of 'whatever will be, will be'. Such an attitude would be unnatural. It would also confuse together the revealed will and the secret will of God. God's revealed will is that we should do good to everyone, and support agencies which do such good. However, the time of a person's death is, generally speaking, part of God's secret will, for it is appointed by him and known to him alone.

But these best efforts succeed only in extending life. They cannot secure immortality. There is a profound difference between resuscitation and resurrection.

The inevitability of death is now part of the physical fabric of the universe. It is

not as if the Lord has decreed that men and women who otherwise give every sign of living for ever, suddenly have their lives terminated. This does happen; sometimes a person is struck down in the prime of his life by an accident or sudden illness. But as death is itself an anomaly when viewed from the standpoint of the original creation, so sudden death is a double anomaly. For the inevitable end of us all, barring death by accidental or violent means, is death by slow physical degeneration, by processes which are part of the physical structure of all animate life.

This fact needs to be given greater recognition than it usually is by Christians. The manifold physical processes which go on in our bodies, and in the whole of animate nature around us, are regular and natural. They can be scientifically studied, being part of our biological make-up. A body that did not die, or a tree that did not decay, would have to be constituted of very different physical processes from our bodies and the trees that we see. Death is not tagged on to otherwise enduring bodies. Our bodies, from birth, are not built to endure, but to die, and biologists can study the processes of decaying and dying in the same way that they can study any other physical processes.

What does this show? One thing that it shows is that the curse of death of which Scripture speaks *(Gal. 3:10, 13)* affects the physical creation at the most basic level. Whatever exactly happened when the ground was cursed, and when thistles and thorns grew up *(Gen. 3:18*) at least this happened; by a process of 'creative judgment' the fundamental physical processes of creation were skewed, so that what was originally from the hand of God, and good because it was expressive of his love and goodness *(Gen. 1:31*), has come to be, by the hand of God's just judgment, liable to death. The curse of God is not something that is merely spiritual, affecting the soul's relation to God but nothing else; rather it has affected the whole of the animate creation, and has resulted in changed physical processes. So that the divine judgment, recorded in Genesis, 'Cursed is the ground for thy sake . . . thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee . . . unto dust shalt thou return' *(3. 17-19),* is equivalent in power and range to the first creative words 'Let there be . . .' It is a curse of the deepest and most extensive kind.

It is for this reason that, according to Paul, the *whole creation* groans and travails

in pain together until now *(Rom. 8:21),* waiting for the redemption of the *body.* Paul portrays the whole of the physical creation, not only the souls of men and women, as being under judgment, a judgment that will finally be lifted at the time when the work of Christ reaches its zenith at the general resurrection. Christ did not only die for the *world,* mankind organised in opposition to him, he died for the *earth,* for the whole of the cursed physical creation. We shall try to explore some of the consequences of this later on. For the present it is sufficient to emphasise (echoing some words of Augustine) that it is not possible not to die.

THE DAY OF ONE'S DEATH

It is commonly said that life, human life in all its aspects, is the gift of God. If this is so then decay and death are the withdrawal of that gift. And this is what Scripture teaches, that God both gives life and withdraws it. The 'allotted span' of each of our lives is the gift of God. In this sense there is no 'natural' life-span in the way in which there is a natural way to be born, for death is not merely the gradual winding down of life which affects all equally. Whilst it is possible to speak of a natural span of life in statistical terms, and actuaries can advise their clients on the basis of current life-expectancy, such an idea is an average which allows for spans of differing lengths. While a birth can be predicted with reasonable accuracy, the date of a death cannot. And even when the span of life-expectancy has been completed, there may be sudden recoveries and remissions just as there can be the sudden collapse of a healthy person.

It is from such platitudes about life and death that Scripture frequently approaches the subject of death and dying and offers its unique understanding. Put paradoxically, death is certain, and yet it is uncertain. Death will certainly come, but the time and manner of its coming is rarely known to anyone before the event. The Scriptural attitude is based upon three elements.

The first is that death can be sudden and unexpected, something that we have already noted. This is brought out strikingly in Christ's parable of the man who prospered and planned to expand his farm *(Luke 12:18).* His planning for many years is contrasted with the fact that his soul was required of him *that night*, before he had any chance to change his attitude, or to make alternative plans. For he planned without reference to the possibility of his death, and without any

concern about his eternal destiny, his soul's relation to God. In addition, Scripture warns against believing those who cry 'Peace!' when sudden destruction comes (1 *Thess. 5:3).*

An emphasis upon such aspects of the biblical teaching will be thought by many to be macabre, but only by those who have been inoculated by modern culture into postponing the thought of one's death. Yet such an attitude is not a distinctively twentieth-century one but is characteristic of anyone who is preoccupied with this life to the virtual exclusion of what may follow. And given the unpleasantness of death, and the mystery that surrounds it, particularly when this mystery is given further support by an attitude of agnosticism, such an attitude is wholly understandable.

For all practical purposes, such people think that they will live for ever (P*sa. 49:11).* They would not *say* that they will live for ever, but their behaviour says as much, and speaks louder than words. And so the second element on which Scripture builds is that it is usual to put the thought of one's death far from one's mind. Or, if death is thought about at all, it is as the final cut-off point of all human hopes and plans, the ending of human enjoyment. Hence the call to eat and drink, for tomorrow we die (1 *Cor. 15*:32) Enjoy yourself, it's later than you think.

The third biblical element is that one ought to prepare for death, not merely by putting one's affairs in order, but by preparing for the life beyond the grave. Nothing can, at first sight, appear to be more absurd than this. In the middle of life, prepare for death? But to live by preparing for death is not to live with one foot in the grave, as if one were already half-dead. It means rather to live in the recognition that one's life has a natural span, that at thirty-five one is approximately half-way through that span, and so on. In Psalm 90, the great Psalm of Moses, the contrast is made between the timelessness of divine eternity and the frail and passing life of mankind. With this contrast in mind the Psalmist requests that God will teach him and his people to number their days, so that they may apply their hearts to wisdom (*v. 12).* The Psalmist prays that the passing of time may be borne in upon all the people so that they may respond appropriately. But to act appropriately is not to live as if one were as good as dead, to be lifeless, fatalistic and inert, but to bend one's best efforts to fulfil

one’s calling by making full use of the time that one has been given. So that there is a world of difference between the attitude which says, 'I will die shortly, so there is nothing worth attempting’ and that which says, T will die shortly so I must use each day to the full’.

To Live each day as if thy last

is not to be paralysed but to be controlled in one’s activity by the thought that soon, and perhaps sooner than one thinks, one will be ushered into eternity. Or, to use the measured terms of the wisdom of the Old Testament, it is to do whatever one’s hand finds to do, remembering that all planning, and the carrying out of one’s plans, must cease at the grave (*Eccles*. *9:10).*

It was claimed earlier that as life is the gift of God so death is the withdrawal of that gift. Such an idea will seem to be monstrous to many people for, they will say, how can God withdraw his gift of life to many people in circumstances which are so obviously unfair? A person may die violently, or lingeringly, or while a few years old. Why is it that some have long, fulfilling and enjoyable lives, while others live in brief misery? For some cases it is perhaps possible for us to venture to give an answer, but at the end one is left to ponder the unsearchable ways of God. Things are as they are, in the last analysis, because God wills them to be so. And, Scripture says, his ways are entirely just (*Psa. 89:14).* While God has reasons for all that he does, and reasons which are fully consistent with his own character, those reasons are not disclosed to us.

This is merely another way of saying that, as Scripture teaches, each of us is in the hands of God. Our lives are not our own. We did not bring ourselves into existence nor, despite what we may sometimes think, can we maintain ourselves one moment longer than the span that has been allotted to us by our Creator. These observations may seem to be cliches, mere words, but reflecting upon them and living in the light of them is, according to Scripture, a part of the centre of true piety.

THE FINALITY OF DEATH

One moment a loved relation is with us, part of a network of affection and

loyalty, a maker of plans, a dreamer of dreams. The next moment, perhaps, death has claimed him, and there is no means by which he can be recovered. This is why grief at death is natural and inevitable, the natural reaction to the loss of love. A part of one's life irretrievably vanishes. There is no activity beyond the grave, as the Preacher says (*Eccles. 9:10).*

Death is final because it brings to an end all earthly plans and the fulfilling of all earthly hopes. Whatever may follow death there is no continuity of those matters which have preoccupied us before we die, those plans which have required our bodies and the co-operation of others, and space and time in which to perform them. Death is not like emigration to another country, or the turning over of a new leaf. What was unfinished at death must remain forever unfinished.

But death is final in a deeper way, for it heralds judgment. Anyone can see that death cuts us off from loved ones, and often suddenly and without warning brings our earthly plans to an end. But it is characteristic of the Christian testimony about death that it warns us that each of us lives in the light of the judgment to come *(Heb. 9:27*). More will be said about this judgment in the next chapter, but here it is vital to appreciate that it is a person's life, from birth to death, that is crucial to his state after death. It is in this further, deeper sense, that death is final. 'It is given unto men once to die, and after this, the judgment'.

So unpalatable is this biblical truth that strenuous efforts are made to water it down. It is often replaced by the vague hope that everything will turn out all right in the end. But in addition there are several articulate, well-developed attitudes to death which, although they are often put forward in the name of Christianity, differ markedly from the biblical account.

One of these maintains that our present life is only the first stage, a stage of education and testing, through which each of us has the chance to grow better. Our life here is a stage of infancy and early growth. Such growth, interrupted by death, will continue beyond the grave until everyone is gathered into the full presence of God. This view is often said to have originated with the early Christian theologian Irenaeus.

However persuasive and attractive such a view may appear, when seen from the standpoint of the Christian faith it has to contend with overwhelming difficulties. For one thing, while the view maintains that all people have free will and that divine love and grace never constrains the human will, it nevertheless also holds that every single person will freely choose to enter God's presence having attained a condition of complete spiritual maturity. An explanation is never offered of why physical death has come about and what its significance is. With such a view, death seems to be a major, purposeless discontinuity. But more important than either of these difficulties is the fact that the theory runs counter to the explicit teaching of Scripture, and of the Christian church when she has been faithful to Scripture. This testimony is not that death marks the end of a stage in the growth of every soul, but that death is due to sin *(Rom. 5:12*), and that a person's state before God at death infallibly determines his state after death; either a state of acceptance and divine favour, or of rejection and divine wrath. And besides, Scripture nowhere teaches the universalism that is such a prominent feature of this scheme. I shall take up the question of universalism later on.

So how a person dies is crucial to his state afterwards. If he enters death benefitting from the imputed righteousness of Christ, with his sins pardoned through the sin-offering of Christ, then at death that person enters life, a life of at-present unimaginable fulness and of glorious service. But if he dies trusting self-righteously to what he is and has done, then he faces God without God and without hope in the world.

A second teaching that denies that death is final is the belief of the Roman Catholic Church, that for some, at least, death is followed by a period of purgatory. The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent state

The Catholic Church . . .taught . . . in this ecumenical Synod, that there is a purgatory, and that the souls there detained are helped by the suffrages of the faithful, but principally by the acceptable sacrifice of the altar.

Such a view depends upon the distinction between venial and mortal sin which has no basis in Scripture. But more importantly for our purposes, it holds out the hope of recovery and restoration of some beyond the grave when Scripture

provides no such hope, but rather the reverse. Scripture nowhere teaches that there is to be a period of moral purifying for anyone after death. The fact that judgment follows death should impart a seriousness to the life of the Christian, a concern to live each day in the light of the coming judgment.

DYING AND THE TEST OF FAITH

His belief that death is followed by God's judgment should make the Christian serious. But belief in judgment after death does not take away the fact of dying: that still has to be faced. Each of us, Christian and non-Christian alike, faces that prospect, and the black unknown that follows.

At first sight there is nothing at all surprising about this, for the Christian is accustomed to a situation in which in the present life he is subject to most of the same limitations as others. Being a Christian does not mean that it is no longer necessary to eat or sleep or dress. A Christian gets tired; he has aches and pains, family troubles and financial worries, joy and grief. The point about being a Christian is not that such matters pass him by but that with God's help he is able to face them differently. And so, if being a Christian does not give a person immunity from common human needs and limitations, why should one think that being a Christian should exempt one from dying?

And yet is there not reason to think that dying should be radically different for the Christian? Why does a Christian have to face this prospect? For a person becomes a Christian, a child of God, as the result of receiving spiritual life, divine life. The conversion of a Christian is a resurrection *(Col. 3:1).* A Christian has passed from death to life *(Col. 3:1),* he is a new creation *(2 Cor. 5:17),* he has overcome the world *(1 John 5:4),* and he already has eternal life *(John 3:15).* And should not someone in such an exalted position come through death like others have walked through a burning fiery furnace, untouched and without even the smell of death about him? If all that the New Testament says about the believer's new life in Christ is true, why does he have to face the weakness and degradation of death and the dissolution of his body?

The answer, in a phrase, is because of the 'not yet' position of the Christian. 'It does *not yet* appear what we shall be' *(i John 3:2).* Although he is redeemed in

Christ, indwelt by his Spirit, and has been given a share in his destiny, the full flowering of that destiny is ‘not yet’. Although Christ has conquered death in his resurrection, and has been glorified at the right hand of the Father *(Acts 2:3),* those who are ‘in’ him, his redeemed church, have nevertheless to share the common destiny of all men and women. They have to die. This fact does not indicate any lack of power on God’s part, as though his intentions for his church have for the time being been thwarted. God’s purposes remain sure. Rather, it is that those purposes have not yet reached the stage at which death is finally to be conquered, when its conquest will be fully experienced and publicly known.

So there is a tension for the Christian, not the more familiar tension of the warring of the ‘flesh’ against the ‘spirit’ *(Gal. 5:17)* but the equally real tension between what is *now* true and what is *not yet* true. It is true that the Christian is now indwelt by Christ, and that Christ has, by his resurrection, become the first fruits of those who sleep the sleep of death in him *(1 Cor. 15:20).* But it is not yet true that the Christian enjoys the sinless perfection of the resurrection life.

From time to time it may seem to the Christian that not only does he not yet enjoy the sinlessness of the resurrection, but that he is never going to. An elderly or physically weak Christian, especially, can be overcome by doubt. His faith may be stifled almost to vanishing point as he sees friends and relations die and as he himself awaits death. He sees godly people grow weaker, lose their faculties, and become pathetic wrecks, scarcely recognisable as the people they once were. He recognises the signs of decay in the decline of his own physical and mental powers. Is this the fulness that Christ promised? Is this the way to overcome the world? Is it surprising if, under such circumstances, a Christian’s faith is sorely tested?

The New Testament recognises the fact of such conflict. Paul says that death seems to gain a victory *(1 Cor. 15:55),* that it has the power to sting(1 *Cor. 15:56),* that it is a sign of weakness and corruption (1 *Cor. 15:42, 43),* that our bodies, because of impending death and dissolution are vile and dishonourable *(Phil. 3:21).* Christ wept and groaned at the tomb of Lazarus *(John 11:33).* Commenting on the inward rage that Christ experienced B. B. Warfield wrote,

The spectacle of the distress of Mary and her companions enraged Jesus because it brought poignantly home to his consciousness the evil of death, its unnaturalness, its ‘violent tyranny’ as Calvin phrases it ... It is death that is the object of his wrath, and behind death him who has the power of death, and whom he has come into the world to destroy.

Sometimes Christian writers have drawn a distinction between *faith* and *reason,* and discussion has frequently arisen as to whether the Christian faith is reasonable, whether it is reasonable that there should be a divine Saviour through faith in whose merits eternal life is obtained, and the like. Others emphasise the distinction between *faith* and *knowledge*, and have raised the question of whether Christian faith is a matter of conjecture, an opinion, a leap in the dark, or whether it is based upon divinely-attested truth. Each of these pairs of contrasting terms has significance, and opens up important questions. But the dominant contrast in the New Testament is not between faith and reason, or between faith and knowledge, but between *faith* and *sight.*

The classic instance is Thomas. Christ said to Thomas that he had the privilege of seeing the evidence of Christ’s death, and of seeing for himself that the one before him was the one who had been crucified. But Christ went on to say that those who had not seen and who yet had believed were ‘blessed’ *(John 20:29).* It does not yet appear what the Christian shall be, John says, but we know that when Christ appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is (*1 John* 3:2). Now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face *(1 Cor. 13:12).* And in many places faith in the promises of God is contrasted with how things presently appear, how they look now, as it is in the case of Noah *(Heb. 11:7),* and Moses *(Heb. 11:24)* and especially Abraham *(Rom.4:18-21).*

The tension that the Christian experiences as he faces the grave is the tension between faith - his faith in the promises of God that he will conquer death - and sight, what he presently sees of death and its destructive effects. He does not see the glory, for he has no first-hand experience of the resurrected, glorified life, and yet he believes. All he sees is what is passing, not the reality to which faith clings. Faith is stretched because the bridge between faith and sight is not yet spanned. Faith is not yet turned into sight.

What is the Christian to do? There is the temptation, into which the Christian mind has frequently fallen, to paint dying and death in false colours, to pretend that it is not the wretched, powerful foe that it is. The Scripture never encourages the believer to take this line of thought, however comforting it may appear to be. Rather the writers of the New Testament offer support to Christian faith in these trying circumstances in at least three ways.

They point to the past faithfulness of God *(Heb. II*). The record of the ways in which God has kept his promises to his people supports the belief that what he has promised to do in the future, namely to bring the believer through death, he will be able to carry out. So that the hope of deliverance through death is not wishful thinking, but is based upon the promise of God which is in turn one of a rich embroidery of such promises, some fulfilled, some yet to be fulfilled.

The New Testament writers also emphasise the power of God to keep his people at the time of their death, to prevent their faith from dissolving away into unbelief, and to assure them of the reality of the unseen world and of the power of God to bring them to it. God is able to keep his people from falling, and to present them faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy *(Jude 24*). He will not forsake them during their times of physical weakness, or mental darkness, but he will be a comfort and support to them *(Heb. 13:6).* So that even though the outward man is wasting away, the inner man, the new nature, is daily being strengthened and enlarged *(2 Cor. 4:16).*

Finally, the New Testament writers point to Christ himself, his action in resurrection and ascension. For Christ, the head of his people, is the one whose resurrection pledges the resurrection of all the members of the body. Because he lives, they shall live also *(John 14:19).* The present trial of the believer's faith is for the stretching and therefore for the strengthening of faith, as the divine pledges are more whole-heartedly relied upon.

DEATH AND BODILY RESURRECTION

But Christ's resurrection is the pledge not only that the believer will 'come through' death, that he will 'survive' in some vague sense, but that he also will be raised from the dead. As has frequently been stated, the Christian church does

not teach that the life to come is the life of an immortal soul; she teaches ‘the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting’.

Paul, in particular, emphasises the resurrection of the body. And yet he does not teach merely that there is to be a resurrection, but that there *must* be a resurrection. The mortal body of the believer *must* put on immortality, corruption *must* put on incorruption (1 *Cor. 15:53).* Why the ‘must’ here? It relates both to the certainty of God’s promise and to the character of Christ’s redemption. The resurrection of Christ relates not only to the resurrection of Christ himself but, as we have seen, to all those who are ‘in him’, to the new humanity of which he, as the last Adam, is the head. The resurrection of Christ is thus a *federal* act, an action on behalf of others, but one which also secures for them personally what Christ personally enjoyed.

Just as, having paid the penalty for sin, it was *impossible* for death to hold him *(Acts 2:24*), impossible because divine justice demanded his resurrection, so it is impossible, for a parallel reason, that any of those who are in Christ should suffer the vanquishment of death.

What is redemption? It is the reconciling of men and women to God through the offering of Christ. The penalty of their sin has been met in Christ. But if the penalty of sin has been met in Christ, then a stage must be reached in the divine purposes for them when the effects of sin are finally eradicated. If not, if the effects of sin could continue for ever, if death should reign for ever in even one of those for whom Christ died, then Christ’s work of redemption would be for ever incomplete. Death would still retain a hold.

One of the major effects of sin is death, not only death in the sense of spiritual separation from God, but also through the consequences of this separation, the death of the body. That is why Paul emphasises in his great argument in 1 Corinthians 15 that the sting of death is sin and the strength of sin is the law (1 *Cor. 15:56).* The wages of sin is death *(Rom. 6:23).* When we go down to the grave and our bodies are dissolved into the earth it seems that death (and therefore sin) has triumphed in a public and final way. For what could be more final than the dissolution of the body, its return to the dust?

But, Paul says, even if we were to suppose that believers survive the death of the body in some disembodied form, death would still have gained the victory, for death would still reign over their bodies, and this *cannot* be. Death occurs because of sin, and so if death is not reversed in resurrection it will follow that sin has triumphed. But sin cannot triumph if Christ has conquered sin, as indeed he has (2 *Tim. 1:10).* So it follows then that there *must* be the resurrection of the body. And only when this takes place will it become apparent in the most public and visible way possible that Christ has redeemed his people by triumphing over death. For when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, *then* shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Ό death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?' (1 *Cor.* 15:55). At that time God will give his people public and final victory through Christ.

Some, like Augustine, have argued that for there to be a true resurrection the very same bodies that have been laid in the dust will have to be raised. He wrote

God, the Artificer of marvellous and unspeakable power, shall with marvellous and unspeakable rapidity restore our body, using up the whole material of which it originally consisted. Nor will it affect the completeness of its restoration whether hairs return to hairs, and nails to nails, or whether the part of these that had perished shall be changed into flesh, and called to take its place in another part of the body, the great Artist taking careful heed that nothing shall be unbecoming or out of place.

We may think that Augustine goes too far at this point. One reason for thinking this is that we know that the cells of our bodies are continually being lost and (except in the case of the brain) being replaced in such a way that a person living in 1980 has no single physical cell in common with any he will have in 1990 if he lives till then. Another reason for thinking that Augustine may be mistaken is that he does not appear to have taken into account the physical transformations that will have to take place in the bodies of those who are weakened or disabled as death approaches. And Paul's words about a 'spiritual body' together with his stress on the incorruptibility of such bodies shows that the resurrection body will be more than a re-constituted physical body. Paul says that our 'vile bodies' will be changed into bodies like Christ's glorified body. Our bodies will

continue, and yet be changed in ways that at present we cannot envisage.

The analogy of faith suggests this as well. For as regeneration is not the modifying of the old sinful nature but the granting of a new set of principles, a new nature, so we might think that the bodies of the redeemed 'at the regeneration' *(Matt. 19:28*) will not be merely new phases of the present body, but changed bodies, just as Christ's body is now glorified. It is impossible for us now to explain how God will effect such stupendous changes, and yet for our bodies to remain the same bodies.

Whatever difficulties may be associated with the idea of the resurrection of this very body, the body with which I write and you read, it is fundamental to the biblical idea of life beyond the grave that it is *embodied* life, because being embodied is essential to being a human being, and the full restoration of men and women redeemed by Christ requires that; as Paul puts it, they are 'clothed upon' with their house which is from heaven, that mortality might be swallowed up of life *(2 Cor.* 5:4). The idea that the 'resurrection' is some kind of ethereal, spiritual existence after death, or that all that is meant by 'resurrection' is some heightened feature of this present life, are views which are at odds with the plain biblical teaching. Although believers will, at their death 'being then made perfect in holiness' be 'received into the highest heavens' (as the Westminster Confession of Faith has it), nevertheless such a state is only an interim arrangement, a rather anomalous state which will not be made complete until the manifestation of the sons of God *(Rom. 8:19).*

SHOULD A BELIEVER WANT TO DIE?

Death and dying raise many acute problems: the strain of knowingly facing death, the effect of pain and medication on the personality, the relationship between the one who is dying, and his family and friends, what to disclose about the medical condition of the dying and, not least, problems of faith and assurance. In addition, there are the difficulties presented by the need to give the Christian message to the unconverted dying, of knowing when to speak and when to keep silent, and of what to say. A consideration of all these problems falls outside our present scope.

There is, however, one general question that ought to be considered about the believer's *overall* attitude to the approach of death. Should a believer want to die? This question raises in an acute form the tension that the Christian can come to feel between this world and the next.

On the one hand there is the well-known situation in the life of the apostle Paul when he was faced with the dilemma between wanting to depart to be with Christ and wanting to remain *(Phil. 1:23).* We are not told how Paul resolved the dilemma. It may seem to be a mark of Christian spirituality to want to die and to be with Christ. For this is the ultimate Christian desire. It is present to some degree in every Christian at every stage of life. But should it be encouraged, or indulged in such a way as to become the dominant thought in a person's experience?

There is reason to think that it ought not to be. For even the ageing believer has a calling to fulfil. It is dreadful for a person to be brainwashed into thinking that because he or she is retired, or unwell, that they are therefore fit for nothing. Christ's strength can be made evident in bodily weakness. Paid employment may have stopped, but a Christian's gifts have not been withdrawn, and opportunities will be given to exercise these gifts. A Christian must therefore be careful that his desire to die and to be with Christ, however pious-sounding, and however expressive of his deepest longing, is not an attempt to avoid plain Christian duty or opportunity. For an ageing and physically-weakened Christian may too easily be persuaded to 'give up', suffering a loss of morale and a deadening of effort to such an extent that they place an additional, unnecessary burden on those who are caring for them. It is difficult to write in such a way without being unnecessarily dogmatic and prescriptive, for often individual situations are unique. Yet the Christian who is growing old, and in pain, should be encouraged to take up those attitudes which do not place unnecessary additional burdens on others.

Despite these qualifications there is nothing finer in Christian experience than to be privileged to hear the words of a dying Christian who knows that he is dying and who expresses the conviction that he is 'ready to go' and to be with Christ. These are not words of suicidal despair, nor of one whose morale has sunk to the bottom, but of quiet confidence and of inner Christian conviction. This must

have been part of what Paul meant when he said that he had finished his course and kept the faith (2 *Tim.* 4:7).

SUMMING UP

Our aim in this chapter has been simple and yet difficult; to face up to the fact of death in a Christian manner. Death is the first of the ‘last things’. It is difficult to write about, as are all the ‘last things’, though for different reasons. But facing death is central both to the character of Christian experience and to Christian witness. What gives death its poignancy and its seriousness is not only that it is the parting of friends but that it heralds the judgment. It brings to a close that one life on earth the character of which will irrevocably fix the life beyond the grave. It is to a consideration of the sure judgment that follows that we must now turn.

3: *Judgment*

None of us welcomes the prospect of being judged, and it is not hard to discover why this is. To be judged is to be put on the defensive, to be called to account. Instead of having things one's own way, of going about one's affairs at one's own initiative, one is placed 'in the box'. Actions are subject to examination and to assessment. And under these circumstances there is the all-too-likely chance that one's weaknesses and inadequacies will be revealed. As a result one will be shown up to be less creditable than had previously been thought, or than one would like to be thought. And even if such an unfavourable assessment does not lead to punishment it may result in a lowering of regard, the growth of distrust, or an outright ostracism that will be painful and hurtful and will make life more difficult.

There are exceptions to this attitude, but they are rather special. A person may be so sure of the quality of his work that he may invite examination in the way that an engineer may be willing to have his invention tested to destruction. A student may be so confident that he has thoroughly revised for an examination that he might welcome the sight of his examination-paper. An innocent person may invite the police to conduct a thorough investigation and be willing to answer any question because he has nothing to hide and wants his reputation to be vindicated. But such cases are rare.

There is another reason that may make a person reluctant to be judged; the danger of being misjudged, of being subjected to a judgment that is warped or ignorant. Each of us has met cases of hasty and unfair judgment. The prospect of such treatment understandably makes a person hesitant and defensive.

Behind each of these attitudes lies the deeper wish to avoid blame, and, where possible, to fasten responsibility for failure upon others. There is a craving to see oneself in the best light and, if necessary, to destroy others' reputations in order to save one's own skin.

But the deepest reason of all for not welcoming the criticism and judgment of

others, from whatever sources, is the desire not to be found out, but to keep private what one has done or what one has desired because virtually any person would regard these as wicked. Hence the need for secretiveness, and for each of us to mount a personal propaganda exercise, to do our own public relations, in an effort to whitewash those matters of which we are ashamed and which we do not want to be made known in their stark reality. And so mean-ness becomes prudence, lust is ‘having a good time’ and feeble excuses are offered for evading plain moral duties.

All these attitudes are intensified in the case of divine judgment. For before God it is clear that no secrets can be hidden, and the convenient, and socially necessary, distinction between what is private and what is public, collapses.

The reasons why the idea of judgment is unwelcome provide motives for men and women to avoid thinking about it, or to ridicule and belittle it. As there seems to be nothing to gain from facing judgment so there is no reason to take it seriously. Such an attitude may remain even in those who, as Christians, are convinced that there is a divine judgment to come. This aversion to the thought of judgment often prevents us thinking clearly about it, and allows caricatures of it to occupy centre-stage.

THE FACT OF JUDGMENT

And so the first matter which has to be emphasised, in the face of the common aversion to the thought of judgment, is that according to Christ and the apostles the judgment to come is a plain matter of fact. To any candid reader of the New Testament this is unmistakeable. Judgment is inevitable. It is not a ‘nasty’ that is tagged on, but it arises from the very idea of the just creatorhood of God, and of our responsibility as creatures who have been made in God’s image. Judgment is so woven into the ministry of Christ that his teaching would be severely distorted if all references to it were eliminated. The teaching of Christ on judgment is thus not an appendix to the good news of the gospel, an afterthought, but (strangely perhaps) it is part of the very texture of the good news.

For the idea of divine judgment is essential to a proper understanding of what

took place when Christ died on the cross. His suffering was an inspirational example *(Phil. 2:5-8).* But it was more than that, fundamentally so. On the cross Christ bore divine judgment *(Matt. 27:46).* According to Paul, Christ was made a curse *(Gal. 3:13),* he was made sin *(2 Cor. 5:21).* Christ's cry of dereliction 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' is evidence that the chastisement of our sins was upon him and that with his stripes we are healed *(Isa. 53:5).* So the idea of divine judgment is integral to the gospel. Take it away and what Christ did is essentially changed; in fact, what he did no longer makes sense. We shall return to consider the fuller significance of the central place of judgment later.

Christ's death is also, in some sense, the anticipation to another judgment. Referring to his own impending death, Christ said that it was 'the judgment of this world' *(John 12:31).* So not only is divine judgment central to the teaching of Jesus and the apostles as regards the meaning of the cross, but they are equally emphatic that there is a judgment to come, a judgment which, as you read these words, lies in the future. Christ repeatedly taught this (*Matt. 7:2*), and it is part of the promised ministry of the Holy Spirit to convince the world of such a judgment *(John 16:8).* This is borne out in the words of the early Christian preachers *(Acts 17:31)* and writers *(Heb. 9:27).*

It is certainly possible to construct a theory of the four Gospels and of the New Testament as a whole that would remove all references to judgment. There are dozens of such theories, each of which would permit one to discount all such references as being marginal or inauthentic, or as evidence that Christ was conditioned by the outlook of his own time. But such theories raise two important questions. Can any of them be held in such a way as to do justice to the integrity of the text of the New Testament? Any handling of the text that allows us to remove all references to divine judgment looks as if it will also permit us to remove all references to divine love as well. The second question is: what motive do people have for adopting such arbitrary ways of treating the New Testament? As we saw earlier, one question that anyone who reads the New Testament ought to ask of himself is: why is the idea of divine judgment so unwelcome to me?

Christ and the apostles present the idea of judgment to come as a sober and

sobering truth. While details about judgment sufficient to satisfy everyone's curiosity are not provided, it is repeatedly affirmed. And if there is to be a judgment then this ought to be reckoned with. For if it is to take place then there is nothing that any of us can do to avoid it. There are no plans that we can make or schemes that we can adopt that will alter that fact. Though we may close our minds, and try to forget it, we will not be able to hide. Such deliberate evasion or forgetfulness does not alter anything.

When the idea of judgment to come occupies its rightful place at the centre of Christian understanding it imparts a seriousness and a watchfulness to life that nothing else can. For it is then recognised that life, however else it is viewed and valued, does not end with the death of the body, but that the whole of a life is lived with the final, divine assessment in mind. However the attitude of 'worldliness' ought to be defined, its dominant characteristic is that it seeks human satisfaction and fulfilment in this life to the exclusion of any thought of a judgment and of a life to come. Christ's verdict upon the worldly-minded religious leaders of his day is devastating; they have their reward *(Matt. 6:2*), one not to be found in the favour and blessing of God but in the applause and approval of those who think like them and in the satisfaction of their own lusts. Such a perspective is bounded by 'this life', life before the grave. They had put from their minds the thought of living on beyond death to receive God's verdict.

The question of whether or not there is an after life is often popularly debated as if such a life, should there be one, will be a ghostly continuation of the present life. But the Christian has no interest in such questions, which have more to do with spiritualism than with the Christian faith. For the 'life after death' which is the Christian's concern has a definite shape and character. It is a personal entrance into the presence of God to receive the reward of the deeds done in the body, the final verdict.

THE JUST GOD

These ideas face enormous barriers to becoming fully accepted at present, even by Christians and those under Christian influence. To adhere to them knowingly and thoughtfully requires a revolution just as surely as it will bring with it a revolution. Why is there this difficulty? The chief reason is that very many

people find the idea of judgment not only difficult to accept because of the personal awkwardness and embarrassment that it brings with it, but also because the basic idea behind divine judgment is one that is at odds with much modern thinking.

For what the Christian doctrine of judgment presupposes is that a person's eternal relation to God will be determined wholly by his past at the time of the judgment. God will reach back into a person's life, to retrieve buried memories and half-forgotten desires, and he will bring these to an accurate and utterly faithful assessment at the bar of divine justice. Every secret thing will be taken into account and a verdict passed accordingly. Such justice, *retrospective* in its scope, assesses all human action and the springs of such action, in accordance with the divine law, whether that law is revealed in Scripture or known through the conscience *(Rom. 2:15).*

Divine justice is thus dispensed in accordance with what a person was and is, and not with what he may become or will become. Such justice is therefore to be distinguished from pains and penalties inflicted in order to produce better behaviour. The Bible has a place for such pains and penalties in what it teaches about divine chastisement *(Heb. 12:5-11),* the aim of which is to improve and to renew. But judgment has no such aim. When judgment is pronounced there is no opportunity for improvement. Those who are filthy must be filthy still *(Rev. 22:11).* Such judgment is in accordance with justice.

This view of justice is called by many names at the present time. It is 'vindictive', 'punitive', 'useless', 'blood-thirsty'. I shall shortly consider the view that such judgment is based upon revenge and blood lust. But let us first briefly examine the claim that such justice is useless. Many will ask what possible point there is in holding people to account for what is past. Surely the only possible reason might be to improve them, or to lead to some other beneficial consequences. But if such justifications for judgment are ruled out, as they undoubtedly are in the biblical idea of a *final* judgment, then such a judgment, it is said, must be barbaric and repugnant. How could the idea of a final judgment be Christian? Where is love in such judgment?

What is the Christian response to such objections to be? We have already noted

that divine judgment is at the heart of the gospel, for the Saviour bore the divine wrath for sin, wrath that would otherwise have been visited upon the sinner in judgment. But more now needs to be said. God's wrath is exercised against sin not merely because certain actions have unfortunate social consequences, but because of the intrinsic moral character of sin, because it is the violation of the law of God and so is defiance of the God of righteousness. So that even if it were possible to imagine a person whose sinful motives and desires were so much in his control that he never deviated from religious and social duty, as this is commonly understood, nevertheless such a person would still have offended against God.

God's concern for the bad social effects of sinful actions, and the added wickedness of leading others astray, and of sinning against the light, are vividly portrayed in Scripture. Nevertheless the essence of immorality, on the Scriptural view, is its offensiveness to God.

The first chapter of this book emphasised the central importance of personal responsibility for sin. Now we begin to see some of the consequences of this. For sin is, in its essence, rebellion against God. However it might be covered up, or re-described, it is the deliberate, intentional attempt to subvert or to overthrow the rule of God. By disobeying God the sinner attempts to rob God of his glory, to de-throne him. Happily, it is a rebellion that never succeeds. God is still supreme. But rebellious men and women live without him, and in opposition to him. This is the essence of sin.

When judged by human standards these expressions of the sinfulness of sin seem extravagant. For, until a person is under conviction of sin, his sinfulness does not like any of these things. For when we think about sin we invariably attempt to measure in terms of general human reactions and opinions, or in terms of social consequences. We do not focus upon God, and so we lose sight of the enormity of sin as an act against him. We turn our backs upon the true standard of measurement.

So often we find it hard to accept the terribleness of hell, and the absolute righteousness of God in punishing anyone in hell. The language of Scripture - including the language of the Saviour - seems exaggerated. We think like this

because we fail to appreciate the sinfulness of sin, how it is a hatred of God and his ways, and has within it the desire to remodel God, or to banish him from his universe. There is a failure to analyse the real character of the thoughts and intents of the sinner's heart.

So it is necessary for us to take our standard of sin from God, and from divine judgment, and not the other way round. Instead of thinking 'Sin is not so bad; how extreme of God to punish it in hell', we should think 'What must sin be like, if it results in sinners justly going to hell?'

So the offensiveness of sin, rebellion against God, is such that it deserves, in strict justice, the punishment of God, not with a view to producing some beneficial effect, as when a person is reformed, but because of the moral offensiveness of sin as such.

But there is another layer to the objection to the idea of the judgment of God. For even supposing that judgment as an act of strict justice is acceptable, many people object strongly to the idea of *God* being the judge. For the dogma - unsupported by Scripture - that God is a God of love, essentially and completely love, has become so deeply ingrained and so widely accepted that the thought that God is capable of acting in strict justice is repugnant to many. For surely, they say, if God is a God of love, he will accept us all. If he is a forgiving Father can he not be expected to overlook sin, to forgive it, as we are called upon to forgive the sin of others? Cannot human sin be swallowed up in divine love? Is not that what the gospel is, an expression of such love?

The gospel *is* an expression of the love of God, the supreme example of it *(John 4:10).* But the love of God is never expressed *at the expense of* any other of God's characteristics. It is not as if the love of God tugs in one direction, and the justice of God pulls in the opposite direction, and because the love is stronger it wins the tug-of-war, overwhelms justice, and so allows God's love for all mankind to be proclaimed. For what the Scriptures repeatedly teach us is that the exercise of God's love to sinners is possible *because of* his righteousness. Grace reigns *through* righteousness, according to Paul *(Rom. 5:21).* And what Paul means is that it is only because Christ has kept the righteous demands of the law for those who are 'in' him that they receive the grace of God; forgiveness of

sin, perfect righteousness, adoption and sanctification. So while it may appear that the love and grace of God which are so prominent in the preaching of the good news of the gospel exclude the justice and righteousness of God, this is an illusion. Where the love of God is pre-eminently shown is in the Father's gift of the Son to be the sin-bearer *(John 3:16).* More will be said later on about the connection between the work of Christ and the final judgment.

So divine justice requires the punishment of sin because it is sin, and the same divine justice is central to the gospel of the love of God because it is through divine justice being satisfied that the love and grace of God come undeservedly to the ungodly.

But there is a final layer to the misunderstanding and opposition that surrounds the idea of divine justice. One prominent understanding of justice at the present time is that the outcome of any just policy or procedure must be the same for everyone. Justice is only justice if it is *fair* and if Jones is treated differently from Smith and Robinson then the treatment cannot be just. When such a view of what justice is is applied to the character of God, to *his* justice, then it is easy to conclude that God cannot be acting justly if he treats one person differently from another. And since we are all different, and the courses of our lives are different, then God, who is supposed to be in providential control of all events, cannot be just. So a divine judgment with sheep and goats *(Matt. 25:32,* 33), the saved and the lost, those on the Saviour's right hand and those on his left *(Matt. 25:41)* must be morally repugnant, primitive and uncivilised. Why does not God deal the same with all, since all are sinners? According to Scripture, God deals with people differently, endowing them differently and destining them to different ends, and yet he deals justly.

To understand this, it is necessary to remember in the first place that God is the Creator and Lord of all. He is the giver of life to all in the fullest and most basic sense, for we all owe our existence to him. God has absolute rights over his creation by virtue of his creatorship. Scripture teaches this. The Lord asks, rhetorically, Ts it not lawful for me to do what I will with my own?' *(Matt. 20:15).* 'Shall the thing formed say of him who formed it, why hast thou made me thus?' *(Rom. 9:20).* And provided that what the Lord proposes to do with his own does not involve him in imperfect conduct of any kind, then it is clear that

God *can* do, and *does* do, what he likes with his own, and that no one can legitimately call him to account. For this reason it would be unwise to model our ideas of what God may and may not do on what an earthly father or brother may or may not do. For the rights of a father or brother are structured by the fact that each person is a fellow-creature of each other person. The rights of God over his creation are not qualified in the same way unless he chooses to qualify them by a covenant promise.

So the judgment of God is a judgment according to strict justice, about which more will be said in a moment. It is fitting that God should be judge because he alone is essentially just. And it is not necessary for the exercise of such justice that the outcome should be the same for all God's creatures.

JUDGMENT ACCORDING TO TRUTH

At the beginning of the chapter we saw that the idea of judgment is unwelcome partly because we seldom regard others as fitted to pass judgment. As if to support this, Scripture warns against too readily adopting the role of being the judge of other men *(1 Cor. 4:5).*

But we are now in a better position to see that the idea of *final* judgment is not open to such an objection. For in the final judgment God is the judge, and the judgment of God is *according to truth (Rom. 2:2*). It is just judgment, based upon the true state of things, and unerringly executed.

This is extremely difficult to grasp and to appreciate fully. For we are all attracted by the view that morality, issues of rightness and wrongness, goodness and badness, are merely matters of opinion or culture. Controversies in morality, we are encouraged to think, cannot be settled. There is no final answer to the question of what is right and what is wrong in any particular set of circumstances. Such matters are to be settled by group reaction or decision, or by cultural consensus. It is not objectively wrong to steal; it is simply that our society has decided to treat stealing as wrong.

If we are thinking about how moral issues are settled politically and socially at present in the West there is no doubt that this is fairly accurate. Differences are

settled by compromise, by negotiation and by political settlement through legislation. It is very rarely that one person or group is able to persuade someone else that his views are immoral in an objective sense, and to provide reasons that persuade him to abandon his belief. Yet we must not confuse the rough and ready ways in which human affairs are managed with what is, in strict truth, objectively right or objectively wrong.

For Scripture teaches that there are matters which are, in an objective and final sense, *right*, and other matters which are *wrong*, and that God announces what is right and wrong not by his own whim but in accordance with his supremely good nature. It is because of who God is, and who we are, creatures made in the image of God, that the moral law is objectively good; that it is objectively good to be honest, objectively bad to steal, and so on. For this reason the judgment to come, the final judgment according to truth, ought never to be downgraded to a judgment based on divine whim. It is because of wrong-doing, in this objective sense, and because of God's strict justice, that the final judgment is inevitable. The difficulty of settling practical day-to-day moral issues between people holding different views, and the need for compromise, are not good reasons for thinking that neither view is the correct one.

So when Scripture teaches that the judgment of God is according to truth, it means precisely that. At the last judgment the lives and characters of all will be held up to the light of God's gaze. Nothing that is in the least relevant to each case will be forgotten or mislaid, and nothing irrelevant will intrude.

So another reason why the idea of a final judgment is hard to accept is that human systems of justice are, at best, systems of rough justice. No human judge has all the facts. No jury is completely unbiassed, even though every effort may be made to reduce bias. Show trials, re-trials, appeals against sentence, perversions of justice, mistaken identity - these features of human judicial systems testify to the fact that humans and human arrangements are fallible.

This is one of the reasons that Scripture gives for warning against taking private revenge. It is because God is the judge *(Rom. 14:4).* And because God is the judge vengeance is his *(Rom. 12:19).* While Scripture teaches us that the 'powers that be' are ordained by God, and that the magistrate wields the sword of God's

justice *(Rom. 13:1-4),* Scripture nowhere teaches that such processes are infallible. Human kings and judges have the same weaknesses as the ruled and the judged, and yet civil order requires that there are such systems of justice in order that societies may continue to exist in a decent and orderly way.

God's judgment is not impersonal, the vindictiveness of blind fate, for God is supremely personal. But his person is not afflicted with bias or emotional disturbances in the way that we are. He is never passive, never acted upon, never the butt of human pressure or fancy. And the principle that he judges men by might be expressed as follows: every desire or intention that least offends the law of God is God-defying and God-dethroning in intent, and therefore deserves the judgment of God.

There is something both terrible and exhilarating about a judgment to come, a final judgment according to truth. It is terrible because none of us can escape it, every minute brings it nearer, and it reaches to the thoughts and intents of the heart. That is a terrible, a terrifying thought. And yet it is exhilarating to think that those who have mercilessly lied, cheated and lusted, and by whose actions men, women and children have been horribly oppressed, and who have as a result become stunted and enfeebled human beings, will finally be revealed for what they are. Their rottenness will be headlined throughout the universe. No image-building, no public-relations gloss, will hide it. None will escape through privilege or rank or mock humility. The final verdict will be passed upon them. And the justice of the final judgment will itself have a cleansing effect. The moral ambiguities, the secrecy, the duplicity, will finally be unmasked. Not that even at present such immorality is unknown to God, but rather he lets it run on to fulfil his own purposes for the race *(Rom. 1:24,* 26), until the final tribunal.

The Christian doctrine of the last judgment reminds us that the universe we live in is not a physical accident, the result of mere random collisions of atoms, but that behind the apparently random is the hand of God, and more than this, that the order of divine providence is a *moral* order, that all our thoughts and actions count morally, and that we shall all give an account of them in a final way.

So the last judgment is 'last' in two senses. It is the *final* judgment. Just as a final court of appeal in a legal system is a court whose verdict cannot be overturned,

so the last judgment is final in this sense. There is no court of appeal in this case. But it is ‘last’ in another sense; its judgments are *decisive*. It is not merely the last in a line of judgments, it is the decisive, the determinative judgment.

Although Scripture portrays that final judgment as a time of great upset, when the earth will shake *(Heb. 12:26),* when many that are first shall be last, and the last first *(Matt. 19:30),* a time of wailing and of self-despair *(Matt. 13:42),* no-one ought to comfort himself with the thought that such reactions are those of the unjustly-treated, or the falsely accused. Often in human courts there are surprising verdicts. The obviously guilty may be released on a technicality, those who are wrongfully imprisoned may languish in jail without redress. Such people have reason to exult in private, or to complain publicly at the rough justice they have received. But no-one who is involved in the final judgment will have cause to exult or complain at a miscarriage of justice. No-one will be able to say that his case was not thoroughly looked into, or that the judge had an imperfect grasp of the law, or that the jury was corrupt. For the judgment of God is according to truth, exhaustive and unerring. God the judge is just in all his ways *(Psa. 143:17).*

THE STANDARD OF JUDGMENT

But what, more precisely, is the standard of that final, divine judgment to be? At this point many make a serious mistake, for they suppose that the purpose of the final judgment is to put right present wrongs. Suppose that someone has stolen £500 from me. Then, they say, I can expect, at the final judgment to regain the £500 and the one who has stolen it will have to suffer accordingly. And -to anticipate the course of the discussion a little - many have supposed that heaven is a place where their present wrongs and grievances will be settled and put right. If they are poor, then the divine judge will compensate them for their poverty. And there is no doubt that to anyone who is presently suffering at the hands of someone else the thought that matters will be put right in an after- life is a powerful and attractive one.

But it is nevertheless completely without foundation in Scripture, and so it is false as a representation of Christian teaching. Not only is it without foundation, it rests upon a serious error. Scripture nowhere portrays the final judgment as a claims-court at which redress can be gained for losses that have been suffered in

the present life.

The error on which such a view rests is in fact doubleheaded. It seriously misunderstands the *direction* of the divine judgment. God is not an arbitrator between his creatures, someone who adjusts losses. The last judgment is not an arena in which one person is arraigned against another. In the last judgment men and women are arraigned against God. The matter at issue is one between God and men, not between men and men. And in that judgment God is both the party offended against and, by virtue of his Lordship over the whole of the creation, he is also the one who makes judgment, who brings in a verdict in accordance with strict justice.

But it might be retorted to this that while God does not act as an adjudicator between one person and another, to extract compensation from one for the other, nevertheless the judgment is a place of compensation. For, it might be said, what happens at the final judgment is that God himself, in accordance with his justice, compensates for the ills that a person may have endured at the hands of his fellow-men. So that if I have had £500 stolen from me then God himself will right this wrong by returning the £500 to me. My wrong will be righted by God himself.

But this is the other head of the error, and equally as serious as the first. For what it supposes is that there are two classes of people at the final judgment, the sinning and the sinned against, and that the purpose of the judgment is to vindicate the sinned against. But the Scriptures are emphatic that there is only one class of person at the final judgment, the sinners. There are saved sinners and condemned sinners. This is the true significance of what Paul wrote about all having sinned and come short of the glory of God *(Rom. 3:23).* It is a serious mis-reading of Scripture to suppose that anyone will face the final judgment of God in a state of innocence, and that the purpose of the judgment is to uphold his innocence by compensating him for wrongs innocently suffered. Insofar as a person has suffered by being a victim of evil then no doubt this is one factor that the unerring judge weighs. But those who suffer such evil are not themselves innocent; for they too have fallen short of the glory of God.

So God is the judge of those who have, in the first instance, sinned against him,

whatever other effects their deed may have had. And those who have offended him are all men and women without exception.

If there is to be a judgment, and all must face God, what is the standard of judgment? This is another way of asking, what is sin? And the answer of Scripture is clear; sin is lawlessness *(i John 3:4).* It is the knowing transgression of the law of God, that law which is God's revealed will for mankind, those standards which set forth the pattern of true humanity. Scripture teaches this explicitly in many places, and implies it in many others.

Yet as with all biblical doctrines the standard of divine judgment must be set out with great fulness and care if the many-sidedness of the biblical teaching is to be appreciated. What more needs to be said?

An important place to begin to answer this question is Romans 2. There Paul is concluding his proof that the Gentiles are under the judgment of God on account of their sin, and that they need the grace of God, and (later on) that the grace of God is intended for both Jew and Gentile. Paul argues that the Gentiles despise the idea of divine judgment *(Rom. 1:32*) while still being willing to judge their fellowmen, though in so doing they condemn themselves *(2:1).* Such men mistake the delay of judgment for a total absence of judgment, not appreciating that the delay is intended to lead men to repentance *(v.4).* Nevertheless, Paul says, 'the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God' is coming *(v.5).*

What will that day be like? Paul says that at that time God will render to every man according to his deeds (*v.6*).The judgment will be according to works in their full moral sense. According to Paul this judgment will divide men into two classes: first

to them who by patient continuance in welldoing seek for glory and honour and immortality	eternal life *(v.7)*
to every man that worketh good	glory, honour and peace (*v.10*)

and then

unto them that are contentious and do not obey the truth but obey unrighteousness upon every soul that doeth evil *(v.9)*	indignation and wrath tribulation and anguish *(v.9)*

And, Paul adds, in carrying out such judgment, God will be no respecter of persons *(v.11).* He will not treat one group or class of people differently from another; more specifically, he will not treat the Jews any differently from the Gentiles (*v.10*).

Thus the judgment will be according to works and actions, and those who have performed good actions, who have been well-doers, will receive glory and eternal life, while those who have lived unrighteously will suffer the wrath and tribulation of God.

But Paul now meets and considers an objection: if the standard of divine judgment is the law of God, what about those who have not had the benefit of the law, the Gentiles, the heathen? How can they justly be judged on the basis of the law if they have never known it? Will they escape the judgment of God? No, Paul says, they will not. And the reason that they will not escape is because although they do not possess the law in the form in which it was given to Moses, for example, nevertheless they set lawful standards for themselves when they do ‘by nature’ the things contained in the law (*2:14*). For example, if a person is ‘by nature’ honest in his dealings with others, if he approves of honesty in himself and others, and disapproves of dishonesty, he is thereby endorsing a divine standard even though he may never have come across the command ‘Thou shalt not steal’ in so many words. And when he is dishonest he breaks the law which he has personally endorsed and which, unbeknown to him, is part of the divine law.

So there is in Paul’s overall argument both a qualification and an amplification. The qualification is that, while the standard of divine judgment is the law, one

does not escape the judgment through ignorance of the law, since any person's conscience in fact approves of portions of the law and so endorses at least part of the divine standard. This portion will, in that person's case, become the standard of judgment. The amplification is that Paul makes it clear beyond any doubt that the standard of righteousness that is required in order to escape the judgment of God is the righteousness of the divine law, since he stresses, in answer to the objection about the Gentiles, that what matters is a person's relationship to the law.

Does Paul make it seem that there are some people who will be saved by their own deeds, some Jews and some Gentiles? Does he not teach that those will gain eternal life who 'by patient continuance in well-doing seek for glory'? (*v.7*). If so, then Paul is teaching a form of salvation by works, something which he vehemently rejects elsewhere *(Gal. 2:16).* But there is strong reason to think that Paul is not and cannot be teaching such a thing. In these verses he is setting forth the *standard* of divine judgment, as part of his argument about the universality of judgment. He is not dealing with the *outcome* of that judgment. Those who by patient continuance in well-doing seek for glory will receive eternal life. But are there any such? Do any continue patiently in well-doing in their own strength? There is a crucial distinction, then, between *judgment* according to works, and *salvation* according to works. Later on we will return to this distinction and show its importance.

Another reason for thinking that Paul is not teaching or implying salvation by works in this passage is that he nowhere teaches that those who are without the law do in fact keep it. The doctrine of the m. rural innocency of mankind was taught by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (*1712-1778*) and by many others, but it is not the teaching of Paul. Rather his entire argument is expressed not in terms of keeping the law, whether naturally known or specially revealed, but in terms of breaking it, of sinning. So in verse 12 he writes of those who sin without law and of those who sin in the law. While Paul nowhere teaches that every action that any person performs is sinful (see *v. 14)*

he emphatically teaches that any breaking of the law, whether that law is written or unwritten, brings down the wrath and the righteous judgment of God.

There are two further qualifications to be made to the bald statement that the standard of judgment is the law of God. To say that there is one standard of judgment, the divine law, is not to say that that law will be applied in judgment with uniform rigour to all. It is the teaching of Scripture in many places that a person's knowledge of the revelation of God in Scripture amounts to an increase in that person's 'light'. Such an increase in knowledge brings with it, other things remaining equal, an increase in responsibility. For the coming of Christ, and his ministry upon earth, increased the light of those who met and heard him, and increased the culpability of those who loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil (*John3:19).* In the course of his ministry Jesus compared the responses of the cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida on the one hand, and Tyre and Sidon on the other, and indicated that the light shining into the first two places was greater than that which shone in Tyre and Sidon and that therefore their responsibility was greater *(Matt. 11:21).* And Christ says that there are those who will be beaten with many stripes, but also those who will be beaten with few. The servant who knew his Lord's will and did not prepare himself nor live according to it shall, Christ says, be beaten with many stripes; but he that knew not, but did things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. 'For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more' *(Luke 12:48).* Responsibility is related to knowledge and to opportunity.

This fact, that God will judge with full knowledge, is one reason, Paul elsewhere teaches, why it is foolish for any of us to anticipate the judgment of God by taking judgment into our own hands. Writing to the Corinthians Paul warns against judging 'before the time', the time when the Lord is to come in judgment. At that time the Lord 'will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness (evil deeds done in secret) and will make manifest the counsels of the heart (intentions and desires that have never been put into action)' (*1 Cor. 4:5).* Paul is writing here about the danger of praising ministers for their 'success', and of writing off others as failures. But only when the judgment time comes will all the relevant data be in, and only then will it be appropriate to exercise judgment. But although Paul is writing about ministers, the principle that he is laying down is clearly one to be applied to every Christian.

This is one reason why Christ says that at the last judgment 'many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first' (*Mk. 10:31).* This overturning of

expectations is not due to divine whimsy or irrationality, but to the fact that the judge of all the hearts of men will judge according to truth. Because of this, many confident expectations will be overturned. Many seemingly pious people will be rejected while many that are seemingly impious will be received.

SALVATION BY WORKS?

We have seen that the standard of the judgment to come is based upon the law of God, and that it covers the secrets of the hearts of men. In Romans 2 Paul implies that while it may in theory be possible to keep the law of God no one does in fact keep it. Indeed that is why, according to Paul, there is a gospel of grace at all. It is because the wages of sin is death, because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, that the gift of God's grace is necessary, and why the granting of this gift to any is so astonishing.

Yet there are other passages of Scripture which seem, on the face of things, to teach that some people at least are saved by their own actions. It is important to think about these passages both in order to clear up possible confusions and also to lay out the biblical teaching in greater detail.

Perhaps the most prominent passages which seem to lend themselves to this view are the following: 'For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works' *(Matt. 16:27);* 'Who will render to every man according to his deeds' *(Rom. 2:6);* 'And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give to every one of you according to your works' *(Rev. 2:23).*

To suppose that such texts teach salvation by works would, given the teaching of other places of Scripture, be a message of utter hopelessness. For elsewhere Scripture teaches, as we have already seen, that no person can hope to be justified by the deeds of the law. If justification before God must be sought by the works that we do then we are all condemned *(Gal. 3*:).

Does this mean, then, that Scripture contradicts itself, teaching on some occasions that salvation is by works and on others that it is by grace? Not at all.

There is a vital distinction to be drawn between a judgment that is *according to works* and a judgment that is *for works.* Scripture nowhere teaches that a person actually secures justification by his deeds; the very opposite, in fact. Justification is by or on account of divine grace and is appropriated by faith *(Rom. 4*:16). And such faith is not to be regarded as a meritorious work but a means by which the divine, all-sufficient Saviour is relied upon. No one is justified *for* works, nor justified *for* faith. We are justified by faith and according to works.

There are different phases of justification. When a person, convinced of sin and penitent, casts himself helplessly upon Christ, he is justified. Such a person will enjoy public, final justification when the reality of his justification is publicly vindicated by the 'fruits' of grace - obedience to God. And in *this* sense he is justified by works; his deeds of obedience *prove* his justification, but they do not themselves justify.

In the last judgment two classes of people are to be involved. There are those who do not truly or sincerely rely upon Christ but on something else in order to gain acceptance with God and justification before him. Such people will be judged according to their works and, since they have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and have failed to benefit from the remedy which God has in his grace provided, they are condemned in his sight. This is not a case of salvation by works, but it is certainly judgment by works.

The other class is composed of those who rely upon the mercy of God and who, at least in the New Testament era, rely explicitly on the blood and righteousness of Christ. These are members of the universal church of Christ. For them the final judgment will be a test, a sifting, a time when the reality of their faith in Christ will be publicly put on trial. And how will this be done? How is a person's faith to be declared publicly? Clearly, by judging that person according to his works, according to those actions which go with saving faith, without which faith is dead, being alone *(Jas. 2:17).* In a parallel way those whose profession of faith in Christ is a sham will be shown up as insincere and hypocritical by a public testing of the reality of their faith by their works. So when the biblical writers deal with the public judgment of professing Christians it is not surprising that the judgment of such is according to their works, for what is at issue is the reality of their faith, and the reality of faith is

shown by works.

This is particularly striking in such a passage as Matthew 7:21, ‘Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven’. Here it seems that salvation is due to doing the will of the Father. But in fact Christ is here describing the judgment of the professing church, the final testing of the reality of their profession.

So, either way, whether we are concerned with the last judgment of those who make no profession of faith in Christ, or with those who do, the judgment is according to works, not because salvation is by works but because the last judgment is either a judgment of those who, tragically, hope to be saved by works, or a judgment of those who profess faith in Christ and whose profession is brought to the test.

This book does not aim to go into detailed theories of the second coming of Christ or of the judgment. Nothing will be said about the millennium, nor about the saints judging the world (1 *Cor. 6:2).* But it is important to emphasise that the biblical teaching is that the last judgment is a public judgment at the hands of Jesus, now ascended and glorified *(John 5:22).* Before Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that he is Lord *(Phil. 2:10).* All things are now put under the feet of Jesus *(Eph. i:22)*$_y$ who occupies the place of supreme authority at the Father’s right hand. It is Jesus who will pronounce the sentence, either blessing or cursing *(Matt. 25:34).*

It is eminently fitting that this should be so. For the Lord Jesus is in resurrection-triumph because he has undergone the wrath of divine judgment on the behalf of sinners. He has endured, as their substitute, what they ought to have endured. And so all who are in him, who by faith are united to him in his death and in his resurrection *(Rom. 6:4),* will be glorified together with him, while those who are ‘outside Christ’ will endure divine judgment as his enemies.

4: *Heaven*

People who believe in heaven do so for a variety of reasons, and from different motives. Some regard heaven as their just reward, the culmination of their pleasure-loving, their Nirvana. For others it is rest from weariness, or a place where all pent-up frustrations and limitations can finally be laid to rest. Others think of heaven as a state of mind.

Such views may appear to be extreme distortions of the biblical teaching, but like all distortions they each contain elements of truth. For all these views, heaven is regarded as the end-state, the climax of human hopes and endeavours. This in turn implies that all human history, which heaven marks the end of, is *purposive*. The events of human life do not form a mere random sequence, nor is history cyclical, every event being merely the return of some earlier event. Rather history is progressive, not in the sense that through history human culture gets morally better, but rather that through history certain purposes are achieved. And yet the biblical view is not simply that human actions are purposive, but that the whole of history is divinely-purposive. God's eternal purpose undergirds and makes possible and also gives abiding significance to merely human purposes which fade and pass away. Nonetheless, even in popular, distorted views of heaven the idea of purposiveness remains.

Not only does heaven follow the life on earth of each of us, but also the enjoyment of heaven is directly related to what takes place on earth. Heaven does not merely occur *after* earthly life ends, it comes *on account of* the earthly life. 'What a man sows, that shall he also reap' is an important biblical truth. But there is much more to the biblical view of heaven than this, as we shall now see.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

There is a clear sense in which, according to the New Testament, heaven begins on earth for all believers, but also another sense in which heaven begins only at death. According to Paul the Christian church to which he was writing was already, at the time of his writing, seated in the heavenly places in Christ *(Eph.*

2:6). Their heavenly destiny was already secure. It was as if they were already in heaven with Christ, sharing in the fruits of his glorious triumph over sin. Paul does not mean that the believers were actually in heaven, for if they were in heaven he could hardly have been writing to them at Ephesus. Rather, since Christ has obtained eternal redemption for them, they are as good as in heaven. Reference to the 'heavenlies' is Paul's vivid way of expressing the believers' safety in Christ. In the same way Christ himself spoke of the believer already having eternal life while here on earth *(John 6:54).*

Paul also writes of the believers, when they die, being absent from the body and present with the Lord (2 *Cor.* 5;8), in the way that Christ himself assured the dying thief that he would be with him in paradise 'today' *(Luke 23:43).* On one occasion Paul was in something of a dilemma between continuing his work on earth and being with Christ 'which is far better' *(Phil. 1:23).* Whatever the precise condition of those believers who have died and who are immediately ushered into the presence of Christ is - and here, as in many other places, we begin to hit our heads against the limits of what it is at present possible for us to understand - it is clear that such people are blissfully united with Christ; they are in his immediate presence. So that even as I write these words, and as you read them, there are multitudes who are now with Christ. For them heaven is - in some sense - a present reality.

But there is a further sense in which heaven has begun on earth for the believer. In his present union with Christ, despite the fact that it is accompanied by sin and faithlessness, the believer experiences a foretaste of heaven. He not only already has eternal life in the abstract sense of being guaranteed it by faith, and is joyfully assured of it as he relies upon the promises. He already possesses heaven in the sense that he now experiences something of the quality of the life to come.

He has a foretaste of it. Although no eye has seen, nor any ear heard, nor any mind conceived the things that God has in store for his church, he reveals them to his children. This revelation is not in the form of a secret code. Paul says that the revelation is 'by the Spirit', and this indicates that what he has in mind are spiritual realities. The Christian experiences the privileges and pleasures of being a child of God; sonship, reconciliation, new life in Christ. And this is a

foretaste of heaven.

While the physical reality of our bodies ought not to be placed in opposition to the spirit, there is nevertheless a sense in which, in the economy of God's grace, the spiritual runs ahead of the physical. The body remains liable to corruption while the spirit rejoices in hope of the glory of God. And at the resurrection of the body that imbalance will be redressed. Then this mortal must put on immortality, and this corruptible must put on incorruption (i *Cor*. 15:53).

So while heaven has already begun for the believer there is an equally clear sense in which heaven is yet to be. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews urged his readers to look for that city which has foundations, whose maker and builder is God *(Heb. 11:10*). Christ himself assured the disciples that he was going to prepare a place for them, and that he would come again and receive them unto himself *(John 14:3).* And Peter writes of the inheritance, incorruptible and undefiled and unfading, which is reserved in heaven for the Christian *(1 Pet. 1:4).*

This is the familiar biblical tension, which we have previously noted, between the 'already' and the 'not yet'. Already (in one sense) the believer is seated in the heavenlies in Christ, while in another sense heaven is 'not yet'. For in order to enter heaven in this fuller sense the believer waits, along with all other members of the church of Christ, and with the whole creation, for the judgment of God and the consummation of all things.

Keeping in mind this contrast between the 'already' and the 'not yet' aspects of heaven enables us to bring to mind and to keep in focus two more important features of the biblical account of heaven.

One vivid way of highlighting the fact that heaven is in an important sense continuous with life on earth is by stressing, as the New Testament stresses, that Christ was raised and has ascended to the right hand of his Father *embodied.* The resurrection of Christ, however extraordinary, and whatever strange and unexpected properties his raised body may have *(Luke 24:36*), nevertheless involved a physical body, not a ghost or a spectre. Christ said 'A spirit has not flesh and bones as ye see me have' *(Luke 24:39).*

And even if we suppose that a further transformation of Christ's body took place at the time of his ascension to the Father's right hand in glory, yet it is an undeniable fact that Christ ascended in bodily form, that his human nature entered glory and remains there. The centrepiece of heaven is the risen Christ, the slain Lamb *(Rev.* 5:6), the second person of the Trinity with a human nature. Heaven contains, and forever will contain, the body that was wounded for our sins and bruised for our iniquities.

It is similar with the resurrection of the bodies of believers; Christ will change our vile bodies *(Phil. 3:21).* At the resurrection we shall have spiritual bodies (*1 Cor. 15:44).* Such teaching should warn us against thinking of the resurrection in simple physical terms, as if it were a resuscitation. The resurrection to come is not merely a matter of the reconstitution of the present physical cells of the body, but of the granting of a spiritual body, in which the believers will be raised incorruptible (i *Cor. 15:52).* They will be endowed with a body that not only will not be corrupted in heaven, but which cannot be corrupted. So the direct continuity between the pre-mortem and the post-mortem body is not the same in the case of the believer as it was in the case of the uncorrupted and incorruptible body of Christ. Christ's body was not dissolved in the grave as the bodies of the dead in Christ are.

The Bible does not set out to answer all our questions -the purpose of such teaching as Scripture gives is not to satisfy our curiosity, but to support our faith. The biblical writers do not try to fill in the gaps of our knowledge only to succeed in making a bad job of it. Rather the intention of the writers is to assure believers, not to inform them with encyclopaedic detail, that the life to come is certain and that it will be the climax of their deepest Christian hopes and longings. 'It does not yet appear what we shall be', John says, 'but we know that when he shall appear we shall be like him' (*ijohn 3:2*), and Paul adds 'Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face' (1 *Cor. 13:12).*

So the difficulties which the Christian may feel about understanding the nature of the resurrection body, and about the character of the life to come, while they must be acknowledged, must nevertheless be kept in proportion, and not be allowed to dominate or preoccupy Christian life and experience. The difficulties and gaps in our knowledge should not, in an age which has seen

hitherto unimagined processes and powers developed, the age of the microchip and the laser beam, feed any scepticism about the ultimate reality of heaven. For, as Isaac Watts put it many years ago

The men of grace have found Glory begun below.

We shall try to explore a little more of the richness and the glory of this foretaste of heaven in the final chapter.

HEAVEN AS REDEMPTIVE, FIXED AND FINAL

It is no good speculating about heaven. For any information about it we must rely completely upon divine revelation. When scientists have systematically studied the physical properties of the universe their theories have sometimes conflicted with interpretations of divine revelation, and *vice versa.* But there is no prospect of such a conflict in the case of heaven. For there is no-one who has the natural ability to be a student of heaven as men study the earth. This fact serves to underline the further fact that the only source of truth for the Christian is the special revelation of Scripture.

The biblical teaching about heaven emphasises that it has a fundamentally *redemptive* character. It is the natural expectation of all of us that we shall become weaker, and eventually sickly, and die. But there is no natural expectation of a similar kind about heaven. Heaven is not like the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly, a natural change which it is possible to explain by chemical changes. To give people the impression that it is, and to offer comfort and strength at a time of loss in this way, is to give way to a profound and dangerous error, for it is to lull those who believe it into a false sense of security.

Heaven is not a stage in a natural process. Heaven is redemptive. There are two lines of biblical evidence which bear this out. The first is the contrast between human sin on earth and the purity and spotlessness of heaven. To enter heaven as we are, and for heaven to remain heaven in the process, is a moral impossibility. Nothing that defiles can enter heaven *(Rev. 21:27)* and so the idea that death marks a natural and inevitable transition to the bliss of heaven, a bliss

which awaits us all, is a deep and deadly mistake. Heaven is made possible only by the work of Christ and by personal union with him through faith. It is because he has conquered sin, and purchased heaven, that his resurrection and glorification are the first-fruits of all those who have died 'in' him.

Christ humbled himself, and as a result God the Father highly exalted him, and has given him a name at which every knee shall bow *(Phil. 2:10).* It is Christ who has obtained eternal redemption for us, and because of this, has entered into the heavens *(Heb. 9:12).* It is Christ, and only Christ, who has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel *(2 Tim.* 1:10). It is

Christ who has gone to prepare a place for his people *(John 14:2),* that those whom the Father has given him may be with him where he is, that they might behold his glory, the glory which he had with the Father before the world was *(John 17:5,24).*

There is no prospect of heaven without Christ. For heaven is the fruit, the end point of his redemptive work; it is that state when sin and all its consequences shall be finally defeated and eradicated, when this mortal *must* put on immortality and this corruptible *must* put on incorruption *(1 Cor. 15:53).* For only then will be brought to pass the saying that is written; death is swallowed up in victory (*I Cor 15:54).*

So heaven is made possible - and made actual for believers - by the work of Christ, and by his work alone. Heaven is the crown of salvation, the ultimate blessing.

Because heaven is redemptive it is Christ-centred. Scripture emphasises that not only is the believer's hope and ambition to be with Christ, but also that Christ is the heart of heaven, both its focal point and its axis, the one who gives heaven its glory and holiness and bliss. The Lamb is the centre *(Rev. 21:23).* And the believer's hope, while here on earth, is to be with Christ, to see him as he is, and to be like him; to engage in the adoration and service of the one who by his love and blood has redeemed him, and to cry 'Worthy is the lamb that was slain . . .' *(Rev. 5:12).*

But in the second place heaven is *fixed*. Life on earth is transitory, and also a transition to another state, life after death, heaven or hell. But heaven or hell are not themselves states of transition to still further states. That is the significance of the judgment, as we saw in chapter three, for the judgment is the *last* judgment, and human destinies fall out in accordance with the just determination of the judge.

Saying that heaven is fixed highlights the fact that it is in heaven that the final security of believers in Christ is openly and publicly declared. The security of the church has its origins in eternity, for it is in accordance with God's eternal purpose that men and women come to faith in Christ *(Eph. 1:4*).But during the believer's life on earth, this security, though as real as it ever was and ever will be, is not made manifest. It is real enough because God's purpose of election never wavers nor varies. But it is not publicly evident, often it is not evident to the believer himself, even though he is sustained by divine grace and by the divine promise of final perseverance and glory. But in heaven this fixedness will be obvious, not least because of the fact that the 'spiritual body' that the believer is to put on is part of the incorruptibility that he will then possess. In the resurrection state it will not be possible for a believer to lapse into sin, to succumb to temptation and weakness. He will be incorruptible. There is no prospect of a second Fall.

The final security of the believer is brought about, by God's grace, through the gift of a new nature, and the realisation to the full of what it means to be 'in Christ'. Perseverance and final security are made evident by the imparting of a full new nature; the image of Christ is imparted to all those who are in Christ, who have been incorporated by God into Christ's death and resurrection, who have been predestined to be conformed to the image of God's dear Son *(Rom. 8:29).* As it is impossible for Christ to sin or to have sinned, so it will be impossible, at the last, for all those who are in Christ to sin.

Some Christian theologians, particularly under the influence of Greek forms of thought, have sometimes thought of heaven in static terms, as the place where all change ceases. They regarded heaven in these terms because for them change was synonymous with decay and they recognised that there could be no decay in heaven. They concluded that there could be no change in heaven either. While

such a conception of heaven is wide of the mark, it does contain one germ of truth, that heaven is static to the extent that the moral character of believers in heaven can never decay. There will be growth and movement in heaven, no doubt, because there cannot be bodies without change, but there will be no decay.

The fixedness of heaven, the inability of those who are in heaven to sin, is not an inability that is maintained mechanically by some external force or power, as one's inability to get out of a room may be due to a strong lock, but it is one that is brought about by a change in personal nature. It is not merely that the person does not want to sin, but that he *cannot* want to sin; and he cannot want to sin because he has a sinless, holy nature. Such an idea is anathema to many modern minds for whom the ability to choose between different courses of action, between good and evil (supposing such a choice to be possible) is a supreme good, and the idea that a person might be so changed that it is no longer possible for him to choose what is evil is regarded as an infringement of his liberty.

But this is not the biblical view. While Scripture places a value upon the ability of a person to act in an unconstrained or uncoerced way, it places a greater value upon the individual acting in accordance with the truth, in accordance with what is right. 'Freedom' in Scripture is not the freedom that an amoral individual has to do what he wants to do; it is the service of God. It is this freedom, in contrast to the bondage to sin, that Christ promised to his followers *(John 8:32-6).* So however 'free' - politically, financially or in other ways - a person may be, if his uncoerced choices are sinful then that person is not free but is in bondage.

The freedom of heaven, then, is the freedom from sin; not that the believer just happens to be free from sin, but that he is so constituted or reconstituted that he *cannot* sin. He does not want to sin, and he does not want to want to sin. And in this respect he is like Christ, who, though tempted, yet could not sin. If to have such a moral character is to be less than free, as many hold, then of course Christ is not free, nor is God the Father. But it is a miserable delusion to suppose that only if God could sin, only if he could succumb to temptation, would he then be free. The supreme glory of God, and that which makes him supremely worshipful, the object of utter trust, is that he is incapable of change, of departing from the immaculate standard of his own majestic holiness *(Jas. 1:17).*

If God could do evil, how does anyone know that he has not done evil, and that he will not?

HEAVEN AS REST, BUT ALSO AS ACTIVITY

We noted earlier that there is a sense in which in heaven the destiny of the church is manifestly secure; it was always secure in the eternal purpose of God but now, in heaven, it is openly so. But heaven, though static in this sense, can nevertheless be a state of intense activity. As Jonathan Edwards beautifully expresses it

In heaven ’tis the directly reverse of what ’tis on earth; for there, by length of time things become more and more youthful, that is, more vigorous, active, tender, and beautiful.

But there is another sense in which heaven is static. It is a state of rest. Scripture emphasises this. Our Lord promised his disciples many mansions, or resting-places *(John 14:2).* Those who die in the Lord are said to be blessed, for they rest from their labours *(Rev. 14:13).* They sleep (i *Cor. 13:18).* And the letter to the Hebrews uses the idea of the sabbath-rest as a model in terms of which to portray heaven. There remains a rest to the people of God *(Heb. 4:9).*

Such rest is not the total cessation of all activity, complete motionlessness. It is to be understood in relative terms, by contrast with the sort of activity which has preceded it. The activity in question is the spiritual warfare that the believer is engaged in so long as he lives on the earth; his battle against the world, the flesh and the devil. Sanctification is not a passive resignation of the will to God, but it requires intense activity, a concentration of the believer’s powers on the frustration of the enemy, on the mortification of the deeds of the flesh. Such activity is compared to a fight (i *Tim. 6:12*), to a race (1 *Cor. 9:24*), to running *(Heb. 12:1*), and to wrestling *(Eph. 6:12).*

So heaven is rest not from work but from opposition, from the exhausting effort that comes from fighting against those powers and forces which would, if they could, stifle the life of God in the soul. The rest of heaven is not the rest of something that has wound itself down to stillness; it is rest from endurance

against evil. Such a stand is no longer necessary in heaven, because in heaven there is no evil against which to endure, no remaining sinful nature in the believer, no world organised in opposition to God, no devil.

But if there is rest in heaven, there is also activity. As man was made for the knowledge and service of God so it is unthinkable that in heaven which is the culmination of God's saving purposes for his church, the new creation (2 *Cor.* 5:17)3 the new heaven and earth *(Rev. 21:1*), man will be released from that which is the most basic aspect of his calling. For his calling, when renewed in heaven, is to know and to serve God. It is mistaken therefore to think of heaven as sheer self-indulgence and self-gratification, just as it is mistaken to think of it as motionless rest. Rather it is that sphere in which mankind will serve God, and will know him in a fuller and more elevated way than was possible at the first. As Isaac Watts expressed it, 'every power' will 'find sweet employ, in that eternal world of joy'.

In heaven human powers will be at full stretch as, renewed by grace, and made perfect in love, they strive to serve God in Christ. Indeed Scripture goes further than this in hinting that in heaven there will be added responsibilities for the redeemed, for there they will be given the responsibility of using talents taken from those who on earth abused them *(Matt. 13:12).* The Christian will take on additional spheres of service.

It is sometimes said, rather jokingly, but with a serious intent, that heaven will be boring. How tedious, it is said, to live for ever. Life on earth has its point because we know death will come. But how could a deathless life have any point? Such a question is based upon a misunderstanding. There will be no prospect of boredom in heaven because of the ever-new powers of creativity that men and women will be able to exercise there. As Edwards suggests, there will be growth and increase in heaven. This is another reminder that heaven is not the habitation of spirits, but a city of people, people made in the image of God and for his service.

CRITIQUES OF HEAVEN

The prospect of heaven is so crucial to the thinking of the Christian, and is such

an attractive prospect, that it is hard for him to imagine that anyone should take the trouble to criticise and dismiss the idea of heaven. Yet paradoxically it is the very attractiveness of heaven to the Christian that spurs on the critic. So central is such criticism to the modern mind that it is hard to appreciate many modern attitudes to the Christian gospel without addressing it. We shall look at the two fundamental critiques of heaven, around which many other criticisms gather.

The first of these is not so much a critique of the idea of heaven in itself, but a criticism of using the idea of heaven, and especially the idea of heavenly reward, as a spur or motive to moral effort. It is said that the prospect of heavenly bliss or, by contrast, of hellish misery, are morally unworthy or improper motives to offer someone in order to change their present conduct. To alter one's behaviour because one will be rewarded for doing so is regarded as a sub-moral attitude. It is to act selfishly, and without a true regard for the intrinsic goodness or badness of the action in question. Virtue, on this view, is to be its own reward. The only acceptable motive for acting morally is simply that it is right to do so. So the morally upright man ought to want or to need no other motive for living as he does other than the fact that it is the right thing to do. To require, in addition, the idea of personal gain, even the sublime gain of the eternal reward of heaven, is to debase human conduct. And so we find Immanuel Kant, the great eighteenth-century philosopher, writing

Man may hope for reward from the Supreme Being, he may expect that God will see to it that he does not suffer for his good deeds, but reward must not be the impulsive ground of his action. Man may hope for happiness, but this hope ought not to be his incentive, merely his consolation.

And Kant has been followed by numerous imitators.

It is important to understand that Kant did not completely repudiate the idea of heaven. For although he believed that very little could be understood of heaven, or of the idea of immortality, or indeed of God himself, he nonetheless believed that it was necessary to hold to the idea of heaven. Yet his attitude to heaven is subtly and yet vitally different from the one that he criticises so vehemently. For while Kant dismisses the prospect of heaven as a motive for moral behaviour,

because such morality is based upon self-interest, he nevertheless argues that true morality requires the idea of heaven. In a nutshell, according to Kant, the prospect of heaven is not a reason for being moral, but being moral is a reason for requiring heaven. Only if it is supposed that heaven is to follow, with a life of endless moral growth, does living morally while on earth make sense.

What should the Christian say to the idea that heaven ought not to be a motive for living morally? Is it pure selfishness and nothing more?

The New Testament does not forbid acting out of self-regard. According to God's law a person ought to love his neighbour *as he loves himself.* And Jesus specifically warns his disciples to fear him who has the power to destroy both soul and body in hell *(Matt. 10:28).* In this warning Christ clearly appeals to a person's self-regard. So Scripture does not condemn self-regard as such, but it does forbid that kind of self-regard which expresses itself in disregard for, or at the expense of, the real interests of one's neighbour and especially of God himself. But there is an attitude of super-selflessness, a self-abnegation, which finds popular expression, for example, in some hymns, which is contrary to the New Testament. As, for example, in the lines

My God I love Thee, not because I hope for heaven thereby

Then why, O blessed Jesus Christ,

Should I not love Thee well?

Not for the sake of winning heaven Or of escaping hell?

Such an attitude, while it may seem to be very spiritual, does not carry the endorsement of the New Testament. This is because according to Scripture the law of God has to do with the true interests of men and women, with their needs and the proper fulfilment of those needs. Morality is not a set of principles quite unrelated to human nature; the law of God concerns such mundane matters as life and death, sex, and property. The law demands a re-orienta-tion of sinful human attitudes to these matters, it condemns lust and covetousness, but this does not require an attitude of total self-denial. While the believer is

crucified with Christ, nevertheless *he* lives *(Gal. 2:20).*

Furthermore Scripture gives central place, in morality, to the command of God. Biblical morality is not, however, obedience to the whim of an arbitrary tyrant, who requires people to fulfil his merest wish, or who delights to needle and to upset people and to torment them fiendishly. Morality is grounded in the will of the Creator who commands men and women to do what is in their own best interests to do, as creatures who are made in the image of God. Often, of course, these commands cut clean across the beliefs that people have as to what they ought to do, or would like to do, and such commands are unwelcome. In this sense Kant is correct. True morality often does cut across human pleasure. But this is far from saying that morality has nothing whatever to do with human pleasure, or from saying that the prospect of reward ought never to be a motive.

So we ought to dismiss from our minds the idea that the thought of heaven should never figure in morality. The New Testament does not, of course, teach that heaven is the reward for doing good - that would be a blatant form of the doctrine of salvation by works - but it does teach that heaven is a reward, and that there are rewards in heaven, as we shall see later. Nor does the New Testament teach that heaven bears a merely external and accidental relationship to the obedience of the faithful Christian. Heaven is the crown of the Christian's life of faithful obedience on earth. Nevertheless, with all these necessary qualifications, the thought of heaven should motivate holiness. The Christian reckons, with Paul, that the sufferings of the present world are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed *(Rom. 8:18).*

Another objection to heaven from the critics of Christianity is more radical. It is that heaven is the creation of the human mind, a figment of the diseased religious imagination, created in order to compensate for present wrongs, the outrages of human life. Many of such ills and evils are unavoidable. And so, it is surmised, in order to make life, which is beset by such ill, tolerable, men imaginatively project the idea of heaven as a place where they will be compensated for present pains and troubles. So in heaven the present injustices of human life will be overturned, and all human wrongs will be righted. But this idea of heaven is an escape-mechanism, say the critics, and nothing more. It ought to be rejected.

Such a critique of heaven is a fundamental feature of Karl Marx's attitude to religion. Marx wrote

Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people.

Marx inherited this attitude to religion from other German thinkers such as Feuerbach *(1804-72).* They had in common the idea that men and women, because of their present distressed condition, have a need to hope for something beyond this wretched world, and therefore create, in their imaginations, a heaven which is a Utopia, in which all their unsatisfied desires are satiated. Men create heaven because things have gone wrong on earth. If and when such matters are put right on the earth, as Marx thought that they could and would be through a communist revolution and the classless society that would follow, then the need to create heaven would vanish. There would be no point to fantasising about heaven and the life to come, for the life here would provide the perfect fulfilment of all human aspirations. But in the sad world in which we live we create heaven to take our minds off earth.

This critique of the idea of heaven has percolated down into popular attitudes to heaven among many who are certainly not Marxists. So what is to be said in response to the view that heaven is pie in the sky when you die, something to take a person's mind off the real issues?

There is much that could be said, but there are two matters which are of central importance, one about human needs and the other about heaven itself. The fact that a person needs something very badly does nothing to show, one way or the other, that what he needs is fantastic and out of reach. A person may need food, and there be no food. He may want a new car, and obtain one. The question of whether there is food, or a new car, is not answered by a person's needs, however vital or worthy those needs may be, but by whether there *is* food, or a car. And it is precisely the same with heaven. Some people may look forward longingly to heaven as their hope and reward, while others may scorn the very idea of heaven as being something that is not worthy of the human spirit. But the

central question is whether there *is* a heaven to come, and whether it is possible to discover that there is. If there is a heaven then the appropriate response is for a person to adjust his hopes and fears to the reality. Hopes and fears do not create reality, except the reality of dreams, but they ought to reflect it. Those who, throughout the centuries of the Christian gospel, have longed for heaven have done so because they believed that there is a heaven to come. If they are mistaken in this hope, as Marx believed that they were, the way to demonstrate the mistake is not to point to the desires but to show, if possible, that there is no such place or state as heaven.

In the eyes of Marx, and of countless other critics of the Christian religion, heaven is thought of as an *automatic* recompense for the ills of the present. Whatever is lacking here is provided for there. Many people have such a romantic or sentimentalised view of heaven, and Marx certainly calls into question this popular attitude. But it is important, once more, to stress that the correct way of counteracting misconceptions about heaven is not by abolishing the idea of heaven altogether, as Marx proposes, but by understanding and accepting the biblical view. The question of truth always comes before questions about human attitudes or needs.

What Scripture teaches about heaven is drastically different from the sentimentalised view against which Marx protested. According to Scripture, heaven is what it is because the glorified Christ is there. Heaven is *evangelical* in character. It is the home of the saved, the climax and culmination of God's saving purposes for his people, the summit and crown of their redemption. It is not a way of making up to men and women what they have lacked, or thought that they have lacked, while on earth.

According to Scripture, heaven is a holy place, where only whose who are undefiled, who have been finally delivered from sin, can enter. In heaven the believer enjoys to the fullest degree the privileges that the righteousness of Christ brings. There will be unalloyed, unimaginable joy and peace, for the church will be with her Saviour. She will see him as he is, and be like him, and will serve him in ways that we cannot at present begin to grasp. So heaven is not like winning the pools or the Grand Lottery, a way of satisfying one's wildest dreams, it is the privilege of beholding the glory of Christ. And only those who

are related to Christ here, united to him by faith, will find heaven a pleasant or a congenial place to be. For if a person despises Christ and his teaching here, what reason is there to think that he will enjoy and be captivated by the presence of the glorified Christ?

Yet in spite of the weakness of what Marx and others say about heaven there *is* a compensatory aspect to the biblical view. But it is not the compensation for earthly loss by gains of a similar kind, the sort of compensation that a court or an insurance policy may provide. It is the compensation of justice. In heaven the wrongs that Christ's people have endured will be righted. So heaven is necessary, and the fact that the righteous may suffer in this life while the wicked prosper is an argument in favour of there being a heaven to come. As Jonathan Edwards put it in one of his Miscellanies

The only natural argument of any weight, for the immortality of the soul, takes its rise from this observation, that justice is not extended to the good, nor executed upon the bad, man in this life; and that, as the Governor of the world is just, man must live hereafter to be judged.

Or again

Unless there be such a state (of rewards and punishments), it will certainly follow, that God, in fact, maintains no moral government over the world of mankind. For, otherwise, it is apparent, that there is no such thing as rewarding or punishing mankind, according to any visible rule, or indeed, according to any order or method whatsoever ... if God maintains a moral government over mankind, then there must be rewards and punishments.

But there is a vast difference between saying: 'We live in a world that is fundamentally just, a world in which everyone will receive the just deserts of what they have done, either themselves or through Christ as sponsor and mediator' and saying 'We live in a world in which anything that a person ever desired, and which has for one reason or another been denied to him, will be granted to him in the world to come'. Whatever the difficulties of understanding all the details, it is fundamental to Scripture and to the Christian message that men and women live in a set of arrangements that are just,

because they live in God's world, and that at the last there will be no legitimate ground of complaint that he or she has been unjustly treated.

HEAVEN AS VISION AND REWARD

We have already touched briefly upon the question of rewards in heaven, a question that has frequently been discussed among Christians. Some dislike the very idea of reward in this connection, believing it to be fundamentally at odds with divine grace, and with the redemptive character of heaven. If a person comes to heaven solely through divine grace, how can there be rewards there? Other Christians believe that Scripture teaches that there are to be rewards in heaven.

So let us be clear what the issue is. There is no doubt that heaven is the last stage, the crown of Christ's work. That anyone is in heaven is the result of God's free and unmerited mercy and grace. If this thought is developed a little, the question of whether or not there are rewards in heaven will come into proper perspective.

All who are in heaven and who are bound for heaven are in this position because Christ has redeemed them by his grace, and none whom he has redeemed will miss heaven. All the redeemed are equally redeemed. No-one will be able to say, nor will he have the least desire to say, that he is more, or less, dependent on divine grace for his final redemption than is someone else. For each member of the church, death is swallowed up in victory (i *Cor. 15:54)·* All the redeemed have the prospect of being like Christ because they will see him as he is (1 *John 3:2).* There is, therefore, about heaven a fundamental and essential equality in the status of those who are there because the standing of each of them is due completely to divine grace, God's free and unmerited favour to them as sinners.

Heaven is, nevertheless, a reward. As God himself was Abraham's 'exceeding great' reward *(Gen, 15:1)* so heaven, both for Christ himself and for his people, is the Father's reward to the Son and to all who are 'in' him. Heaven is Christ's by right. It is not a gift. He *must* reign *(1 Cor. 15:25).* The church may therefore consider heaven as her reward. But it is not her personal reward, as heaven is Christ's personal reward, for believers have not personally earned or merited

heaven. They do not deserve it. Rather heaven is an indirect reward; the church enjoys heaven because Christ has been rewarded for the triumph of his redemption. God the Father has 'highly exalted' him, and each believer shares this triumph, because each is united to Christ not only in his death and resurrection *(Rom. 6:4)* but also in his ascension and glorification (1 *Pet. 5:10).*

If the mediated or indirect character of the reward is kept in mind it will place the question of whether there are rewards in heaven in perspective. For whatever the position turns out to be about rewards in heaven the dominant fact is the fact of salvation through divine grace, of mercy enjoyed on account of what another has suffered and done.

Yet it is clear from Scripture that, despite the basic equality just alluded to, there will be differences in heaven. The heavenly citizens are not clones, nor the product of a celestial assembly-line. They are individuals who retain their individuality. And some will enjoy a different status in heaven from others. This certainly appears to be a warrantable inference from what Christ said on one occasion in answer to a mother's question *(Matt. 20:23),* as it is the plain teaching in a number of the parables *(Matt. 13:8).* Paul teaches the same when, for example, he deals with the question of ministerial faithfulness and success *(1 Cor. 3:12-15).*

What are we to make of this? On the one hand the whole basis of heaven is free, unmerited grace. On the other hand there are differences, and these differences are described as rewards *(Lk. 6:35).* Can this be consistent? Some have been so impressed by the testimony of the Protestant Reformation to salvation by divine grace through faith alone that they have difficulty in making room for any idea of reward. To their way of thinking 'reward' suggests 'merit' and, as they quite correctly insist, the very idea of personal merit is excluded from heaven. How then can heaven, where personal merit never enters, be a place where there are differences among the redeemed because they are rewarded differently?

It may be helpful here to consider the position of the church on earth. The church is the redeemed, the body of Christ. And yet there are differences between individual members of the church, God-ordained differences. We may even say

that such differences are *essential* to the church in that the church could not function as the church without them. Yet these differences do not undermine the basis of the church's existence, the free, unmerited favour of God.

So how are these differences to be accounted for? Is it that there is a foundation layer of divine grace, and then on top of this another layer of personal goodness, good works and personal merit? Is there a difference between 'salvation', which is free, and 'service', which is earned? It would be a serious mistake to think so. For if it were so then it would be possible for there to be boasting in heaven, personal pride, and the envy and jealousy that can result. This would be unthinkable.

No, there are not two layers, but only one. For as in the church on earth the differences in gift and aptitude among individual believers are the gifts of God who divides to each 'severally as he will' (i *Cor.* 12: xi), so in heaven the 'rewards' are not the rewards of personal merit but the rewards given to the grace of Christ as this is seen in the life of the believer. As the church is founded on the eternal, electing grace of Christ, and as redemption is the 'reward of grace' *(Rom. 4:4*), so differences in heaven are also the reward of grace. They are *rewards* because they are given in strict justice in accordance with inner motives and outward actions of the believer, and on no other basis, even though each such action is imperfect and does not directly, of itself, merit reward *(Luke 17:10).* But they are rewards of *grace* because they are based upon the unmerited goodness of God and not upon the personally-gained merit of the believer.

And so the rewards of heaven are in accordance with those degrees of obedient, loving faithfulness in the saints while upon the earth, which in turn are the effect of divine grace. But the works of the saints do not merit the reward. For the holiness of the saints is itself the product of the work of Christ and of the sanctifying grace of the Spirit. So the believer cannot boast of himself *(Rom. 3:27)* only of Christ *(Gal. 6:14).* For he does not have anything that he has not received *(1 Cor. 4:7).*

The thought of rewards and of differences in heaven might conjure up the idea that in heaven there could be envy of those who are better placed. But a moment's thought will show the absurdity of this. Heaven will be a place of

supreme joy and fulfilment for all who are there, based upon the sufficiency and fulness of the work of Christ, and of the vision of Christ which is to be the centre-piece of heaven. And part of that joy will be a willingness to rest in the sovereign appointments of God, a willingness which is itself the product of divine grace.

But if heaven is a reward, even a reward that is carefully qualified in the way in which we have sought to qualify it, will this not spoil and corrupt the desire for heaven? For is not the desire for reward unholy? Here we touch once again on a matter already dealt with. The essential point is not that self-regard is wrong; what is wrong is a perverted view of the self. It is impossible to escape from oneself. But what matters is not whether a person's actions are self-regarding or not - they are inevitably so - but what sort of a 'self a person wishes to foster? Is it the sinful self or a heavenly, gracious, renewed self, the image of Christ? What *ought* to motivate the believer is the 'reward' of being completely renovated in Christ and of fulfilling the divinely-assigned role in heaven. Who could say that such a desire is sinful or immoral?

5: *Hell*

Hell is a dreadful topic, which anyone with any sensitivity naturally shrinks from thinking about, let alone going into print about. This is because of the abyss that hell is, a place of final, conscious banishment from the loving presence of the eternal God, the Lord, Creator and Redeemer of sinners. Who would wish to dwell on this theme, on the fact of hell, the details, the prospect? And yet a certain type of religious personality has loved to dwell on the subject, to embellish it in lurid detail, to linger on the pains, and the hopelessness, in a way that tells us more about such a person's own psychological and spiritual state than about the sober and restrained witness of Scripture.

This chapter will not be like that. It will strive to maintain Scripture's measure and care, and not to indulge in unwarranted fantasy or speculation, nor skew the biblical teaching by a wrong emphasis. It is important to begin where Scripture begins, and also to end where Scripture ends.

This needs to be stressed, that hell is taught in Scripture. Not only on the fringes of Scripture, where it could lightly be dismissed as 'apocalyptic imagery' but at its very centre, as part, even a central part, of the ministry of Christ himself, and of the apostles. Consider, for example, the following passages But the children of the kingdom shall be cast into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 8:12)

Fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell *(Matt, 10:28)*

And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal (Matt. 25:46)

But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation *(Mk. 3:29)*

It is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched *(Mk. 9:43-4).*

All these are words recorded as having been spoken by Christ. They form as much a part of his authoritative teaching as does ‘Suffer little children to come unto me[5]. It is possible to try to diminish the force and strength of what Christ said by supposing, by one theory or another, that he did not say it. But the unsatisfactoriness of such an approach stands out starkly. For why should these texts, of all texts, not be genuine? Presumably because of what they teach. But then the force of this argument depends entirely upon assuming that what they teach about divine punishment, and about hell, is false. And likewise with the view that Christ is a child of his time, for if he is a child of his time in his views of hell then presumably he is in his views of heaven, and of everything else. His ministry dissolves into the sea of relativity beneath which there is no bedrock of objective truth.

So, like it or not, the doctrine of hell is a part of the warp and woof of the Christian message, part of its very fabric. It cannot be cut out without causing all the remainder to unravel. But if the doctrine of hell is part of Christ’s entire message, and if that message is revealed truth from God, then hell, with its stark finality, has to be faced up to.

The plain fact, then, according to the Christian gospel, is that men and women are not automatically destined for heaven but that there is for some a place of punishment without relief. It is those who are without Christ who are without hope *(Eph, 2:12).* They are bound for that place where all hope must be abandoned. And such a fact is as much a part of the overall Christian message as is the biblical teaching about assurance, joy and the love of God.

As we noted, some warped individuals gloat over the fact of hell, savour it, embroider it and so corrupt both the Christian testimony and themselves. Thankfully, most people are not like this, but rather find extreme difficulty in accepting the fact that there is a hell and the prospect of personally facing it. It is worth trying to explore why this is.

OPPOSING HELL

One reason is the general weakening of belief in the Christian gospel. I have stressed that the doctrine of hell is an integral part of the Christian faith, and

where the general acceptance by a community of the system of Christian belief fades then so will belief in hell.

There is a further reason. Hell is a place of punishment, where people continue to be held accountable for their sins. It is not a torture chamber, nor an Inquisition, but a place of justice. This fundamental feature of hell, to which we shall return, is hard to accept, because modern ideas of personal accountability and of punishment are out of accord with it. In modern culture punishment is very largely a tool of social engineering, though perhaps not a very efficient tool, a device for making people behave less badly. Punishment is assessed, and justified - or not justified - almost solely in terms of its social effectiveness. People who are accustomed to think of the future consequences of a policy of punishment as the only possible justification for it cannot readily find a place in their thinking, or in their system of morality, for the idea of punishment that is based upon desert, upon justice. For the idea that a person is to be held accountable for their doings and desires, as we have already seen when discussing the idea of personal responsibility, is an alien one to the modern mind.

Yet even a hardened opponent of punishment based upon desert sees the importance of establishing guilt before punishment is meted out - otherwise it would be right to punish the innocent - and guilt is inseparable from personal accountability. But it is the idea of *personal* accountability that provides the other main stumbling block to the acceptance of hell. For we have become accustomed to weakening the sense of personal responsibility, and to accepting low views of sin, by an appeal to heredity, environment, upbringing and the like. Yet hell presupposes definite personal responsibility: ‘everyone shall give an account of *himself* to God’ *(Rom. 14:12).*

But there is a still deeper reason why people reject the idea of hell. This has to do with the justice of God. They ask, how can a just and loving God send anyone to hell? But here a number of separate questions tend to become tangled together. One assumption at work is that love is the dominant characteristic or attribute of God, and that it is so dominant that every other attribute may safely be ignored. And if love - pure benevolence - is what God *is*, how can there be anyone in hell? And this appears to be a correct response, if God *is* pure

benevolence.

But God is not only benevolence, not if the Christian gospel is true. We may *wish* that he were only benevolence, wish that God were another sort of God than according to Scripture he is. Such wishing is wrong, and irresponsible, because it does not change God in the least. As we have noted before, the rational approach is to adjust one's thinking to the facts, however unpalatable and unpleasant they may be, rather than to go in the reverse direction, and indulge in theological make-believe.

This is not a mere debating-point. It is central to an understanding and an acceptance of what the Bible and the Christian church teach about hell. If God is supremely just, and just in a sense which is recognisable as just by his human creatures, and if hell exists, exists because it is ordained by God, then hell must be just. If hell is where some men and women gain their deserts at the hand of God, then those deserts will likewise be just. For hell is not a place of corruption, a diabolical society, a community out of God's reach. It is where corruption is impeccably punished, punished according to strict justice. In this sense God reigns in hell as he reigns in heaven. Nothing which is not in accordance with strict justice will be permitted to enter there. So that we can be satisfied, at the outset, that whatever happens in hell is just; no-one can or will justifiably complain about hell or the fate of its inhabitants.

And yet it is extremely difficult to settle in one's mind that hell *can* be just. This is because we have preconceptions, anticipations of what hell must be like, drawn from fiction or from our own imagination. But the Bible -Christ himself - offers a particular warning about entertaining such preconceptions, as if it were obvious now who will be in hell and who not! (*Mark 10:31).* Here it is necessary to refer back to what was discussed in chapter three. Nothing ought to be judged before the time (*Cor. 4:5)* and in any event it is not we who are the judges, but God (*1 Cor. 4:4).* But Scripture goes as far as to say that the day of judgment will bring surprises. Many that are first will be last, and the last first. Many will be shocked by the divine verdict; the self-confident will be overturned, those with confidence only in Christ will be delivered (*Lk. 13:23-30).*

So hell is a place of justice, where punishment is dispensed not in accordance with the warped and partial and ignorant procedures of human society, but immaculately, in accordance with the standards of him who is supremely just. There will be no cause for complaint. Every mouth will be stopped, not forcibly but by the recognition of the justice of the proceedings. And every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord *(Phil. 2:11),* even the tongues of those who are justly condemned in hell.

But still dissatisfaction with the prospect of hell may rankle. It may take this form: if salvation is by divine grace, not merely in the sense that God in some way offers deliverance from sin, or makes such deliverance possible, but actually secures salvation for sinners through the work of the Son and the Spirit, why does he not so arrange things that none are lost? Why should any be lost, if God could save all?

There is no answer to this, or at least no *explanation.* Scripture refers this matter, and all such ultimate matters, to the divine sovereignty (*Lk. 10:21).* All such questions, if pressed long and far enough, come down to the matter of the ultimate will and purpose of God. Why is there a universe at all? Why is there a universe like this? Why are there precisely the numbers of people that there are? Why is sin allowed? Why is salvation provided for sinners? Why is the Christian message made known widely in some places and eras and not in others? To all such questions the only possible answer, and the only satisfactory answer, is; this is God's universe, and he has willed it thus. Here we come face to face with the divine sovereignty, and there is no avoiding it. Nor are those who stress divine sovereignty in the correct biblical proportion in greater perplexity at this point than those who soft-pedal it. All who allow the creatorhood and Lordship of God are faced with such intractable questions, questions which are without an answer other than 'Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight'.

Yet this sovereign Lordship is not whimsical or capricious, but carried out for good reason, and in accordance with the holiness and goodness of the divine character, even though we may not know what that reason is, for the simple reason that it has not been disclosed to us.

But is hell, the endurance of everlasting punishment for sin, in some sense the

triumph of evil? Some are ready to assert this, and to argue that since it is inconceivable that evil could triumph in God's universe there cannot be a hell. On such a view hell is the triumph of evil, because evil natures, that is, unregenerated, untransformed human natures, will remain for all time. And so a universe which was, at the beginning, created all-good, will remain for ever less than all good, since it will contain evil people.

Is such a state of affairs the triumph of evil? There are at least two reasons for thinking that it is not. One is that while there is pain in hell, and pain is in some sense an evil, the pain of hell is *deserved* pain. It is penal pain. If pain *per se* is an evil, then hell is the triumph of evil. But if, on the other hand, hell is a just place, because none suffer there except those who deserve to suffer, and none suffer more, nor less, than they deserve, then hell is not evil. Furthermore, from the point of view of the original creation, and looked at in isolation, hell may be an anomaly. For the Creator intended to create an all-good universe, and did so, and hell is the final culmination of the sinful departure of creatures from the original order of things.

But hell is not an anomaly from the point of view of God's purpose or decree. For it was God's nature to punish sin in hell. It is *required* by God's holiness, and by the enormity of sin as rebellion against God. So that although according to Scripture hell is a place of indescribable woe, nevertheless in hell, no less than in heaven, the justice of God reigns. Heaven is founded upon the justice of God in accepting Christ's righteousness on behalf of sinners; hell is founded on the justice of God in punishing sinners. But it is impossible to probe the matter further, and to ask why certain individuals are in heaven, and certain in hell. The answer to all such questions is, in the final sense, where it properly belongs, in the hands of God.

Older Christian writers developed this thought in a way which is unfamiliar to most Christians today, but in a way which is nonetheless scriptural. They claimed that, far from being an anomaly, or the triumph of evil, hell demonstrates the justice of God in a public, unmistakable way. His justice against sin is manifest in the punishing of the sinner, just as his grace is demonstrated in providing his Son as a substitute for those who are as undeserving of the saving goodness of God as are any of those who are in hell.

Such an argument will appeal to those who recognise, with Paul, that ‘of God and through God and to God are all things’ *(Rom. 11:36).* The trouble is that Christians tend to measure a doctrine not by its scripturalness, nor from a perspective which naturally and habitually places God at the centre of his creation, but from a perspective which places mankind there. And then it is hardly surprising that the problems begin to pile up.

Exactly the same consideration applies to the everlastingness of hell. Many people may be quite willing to accept that for those who are impenitent a period of purgatorial punishment after death is appropriate. But how could *everlasting* punishment ever be justified? Is it not monstrous that an action which has had only limited evil consequences, or a desire which has had no public evil consequences at all, should be punished without limit? Is not this a monstrous disproportion? How can there be justice in that? But this is to forget what is basic to the biblical account of human responsibility and accountability, namely that such accountability is fundamentally directed *towards God.* Each of us lives primarily in his sight, and only derivatively in the sight of others. All other responsibilities, to individuals and to communities, derive from this basic responsibility, which cannot be ducked or shed.

Hell is without limit because the offence justly punished is committed against one of infinite, immeasurable holiness and goodness. (And heaven is without limit because the atonement of the Saviour is of immeasurable value). Hell’s purpose is not to amend the life of anyone; the time for such a change has passed. Rather its purpose is to mete out with exact and final justice what every unrepented-of sin deserves. Hell is not the result of the petulant temper of a capricious and unstable God, but of his strict and exact justice.

It seems that Scripture teaches that those in hell recognise hell for what it is and the justice of their being there. Otherwise hell would be a breeding ground for further injustice and resentment, for further sin. For although hell is a place of sinners, there is no reason to think that it is a heaven for sinners, a fool’s paradise. It is under the direct control of God.

Where does Scripture teach this? We are informed that before Christ the Judge every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the

glory of God the Father *(Phil. 2:11).* And this language implies that the impenitent will recognise the essential justice of their plight. For they too recognise Christ's Lordship, and confess him, not with love and adoration as a Saviour, but as their Lord. So hell is a place of pain, but not of defiance or resistance. It is not a demonic colony which has gained unilateral independence from God. Because there is full recognition of God's justice, God's character is vindicated, and hence glorified, even by those who in this life have defied him and who suffer for it.

HELL AND ANNIHILATION

The idea of hell as a place of eternal justice is so awesome that there is a double need to establish it from Scripture. We have already glanced at some attempts to rule out hell by arguing, for example, that Jesus did not quite mean what he said. But among those who accept scriptural authority without demur are some who have argued that Scripture does not teach everlasting punishment, but rather that it teaches the annihilation of the wicked. When the impenitent die they do not go on to await the judgment, but they literally go out of existence. They perish. They are no more. On this view death is itself the final punishment. There is, beyond death, no life for the impenitent, no Day of Judgment, no banishment out of the sight of God.

What, more precisely, is this view, and what can be said in its favour? It is the view that life after death does not occur in virtue of some original power or endowment of the soul, but that the 'natural' thing is for men and women to be annihilated at death. Eternal life, then, follows only as a result of the grace of God in Christ; it is part of, and in a way the most fundamental and striking part of, the work of Christ for sinners. So that annihilation is the 'natural' fate of all except for those for whom the grace of God intervenes to grant eternal life. There is no counterpart to heaven. 'Hell' is simply another name for 'non-existence'.

There are two main arguments for this view. One is that Scripture does not teach the immortality of the soul as such, but that such an idea owes more to Greek than to Christian thought. Indeed according to Scripture, it is said, only God has immortality (*1 Tim. 6:16).* And if only God has it, how can mankind have it as well? Furthermore, where Scripture does refer to eternal life, it always does so as

a gift of God to the Christian. For instance, it says that the wages of sin is death, but that the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord *(Rom. 6:23).* And Christ gives eternal life to his sheep, and they shall never perish *(John 10:28).*

The second main argument has to do with references in Scripture to those who are outside Christ 'perishing' or 'being destroyed', (for example *John 3:16).* If something perishes it ceases to exist, and if something is destroyed it ceases to exist; so those who perish through unbelief cease to exist. Ceasing to exist, they become incapable of either pain or pleasure. And so hell, considered as a place of punishment, cannot exist.

Some of these reasons may seem to have a plausibility at first sight, but a more thorough examination reveals serious weaknesses. It is true that Scripture does not teach the immortality of the soul in so many words. The teaching of Scripture is not focussed on 'the soul' but on the human being as embodied, and as we have already seen, it does not teach that at death a person permanently loses his body as a butterfly permanently loses its chrysalis, but that the redeemed will receive a 'spiritual body'. Nor does Scripture teach that the soul is inherendy immortal in the sense that it possesses some power to endure for ever apart from God's sustaining power. It is because all such power comes from God that he alone is immortal, in the sense that he is eternally and underivedly so.

When Scripture refers to immortality as the gift of God it is referring to the eternal life which Christ has procured for his people. This is indeed the gift of God's special grace. But it does not follow from the fact that some receive eternal life in this rich sense that all who fail to receive it are annihilated. As we shall shortly see, this is far from being the teaching of Scripture. 'Eternal life' as it is used, for example, in John's gospel, has qualitative overtones beyond the bare idea of unending existence. Eternal life is life lived in the presence of God; the redeemed have in this present earthly life an inkling of such an eternal life, and for this reason they are said in Scripture to possess it already.

The arguments for annihilation are weak, even interpreted charitably. But they appear immeasurably weaker when the positive teaching of Scripture about life

after death is added. We have already referred to this teaching, and so it is necessary only briefly to mention it again.

As we have seen, Scripture teaches that the impenitent wicked will suffer (*Lk. 16:23).* But it is impossible to suffer if one does not exist. And the suffering indicated is everlasting, corresponding to the everlasting life enjoyed by the redeemed, as Scripture explicitly teaches *(Matt. 23:46).* In the face of both the weakness of the arguments for annihilationism, and the strength of the arguments against, one is forced to reject it.

DIFFERENCES IN HELL?

In the previous chapter we discussed the question of whether or not in heaven there are rewards, and came to the conclusion that there are differences in heaven, and that these differences are the reward of grace. While all in heaven are there because of Christ, nevertheless there are differences due to differing degrees of grace and of the faithfulness that divine grace calls forth. It seems from Scripture that a similar principle operates in respect of hell, though with one important difference.

The difference is due to the inescapable difference between the reason why some people are found in heaven, and why others are in hell. No one deserves to be in heaven. Those who enter do so out of pure grace and mercy. As we have seen, heaven is the climax of God's redemptive work for the people of God, a place of glory and of sinlessly perfect service in his presence. By contrast, everyone in hell deserves to be there, and those who are in heaven deserve to be in hell equally as much as those who are in hell. Heaven epitomises salvation by grace. It is the crown of grace. Hell is the fate of those who, in divine sovereignty, have been passed by and who have been left vainly to attempt to gain salvation by works. So hell is merited, while heaven is unmerited. No one can boast in heaven, while in hell everyone is driven by the facts to condemn themselves because the reason why they are there, the ground of their condemnation, is their own sin and folly.

This fact, that heaven is unmerited while hell is merited, has consequences for the differences that there are in hell. Differences in heaven are all undeserved,

but in hell the differences are deserved on account of the differing degrees of guilt or blameworthiness that men and women engender. Scripture says that such degrees of guilt and of blameworthiness are due principally to ignorance. Those who knew not the Lord's will are beaten with few stripes (*.Lk. 12:48),* their condemnation is less. Into this category come, perhaps, those who are unsaved and have never had the benefit of the divine revelation in Scripture. This is what Paul appears to teach in Romans 2. All those who have sinned outside the law - in ignorance of what was revealed through Moses in the Old Testament -shall be judged outside the law. So the measure of judgment in such cases cannot be the law, because the people in question are ignorant of the law. What is the test, then? It appears that such people are tested by whatever standard they have had the benefit of - the standards that prevail in their own society or culture. But this does not mean that such people will escape the judgment. Paul clearly teaches that the heathen who have sinned apart from the law shall perish apart from it *(Rom. 2:12*), and that they, together with all others, will be judged by Jesus Christ, such judgment extending even to the secrets of the hearts *(Rom. 2:16).*

A similar principle is at work in the case of those who have sinned high-handedly, deliberately, who have had the benefit of the divine revelation in Scripture, or of part of it, and who have even benefitted personally from it to some degree, without being converted *(Heb. 6:4-6).* Their degree of responsibility is correspondingly greater. They crucify the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame *(Heb. 6:6).* Clearly in such cases there is a heightened degree of guilt corresponding to a heightened degree of responsibility.

This is one vital difference between life here on earth now, and the judgment to come and what will follow it. Here God, according to his sovereign good pleasure, allows injustice. The wicked flourish like the green bay tree *(Psa. 37:35).* Sometimes the godly suffer *(Job 1).* There is extortion and oppression *(Psa. 119:134).* But in hell, as in heaven, this will not be so. The arrangements there are to be exactly just, perfectly fair. None will have the least cause to complain. For any suffering endured is deserved suffering, and its desert will be recognised by those who suffer it. And so those who suffer the tragedy of the death of an infant, or who have a severely handicapped loved one, have two reasons for hope and encouragement. They may hope for them in the mercy

of God in Christ, who is able to do exceeding abundantly above what we ask or think *(Eph. 3:20*), and beyond this they may rest assured that into whatever final circumstances such people come nothing about those circumstances will be unfair. This may be hard for us to imagine, but it is what we are fully entitled to believe.

Should such questions be discussed in this plain and matter-of-fact way? Would it not be more prudent to draw a veil across the whole business of the fate of such people, and not to venture to say anything? The trouble with such an approach - which clearly has its attractions - is that if Christians do not think about such questions, and come to reasonable answers to them in line with the guidance that Scripture gives, opponents of the Christian faith most certainly will.

Yet no amount of reasoning and explaining, important as this is, will eradicate a fundamental difference in attitude between those whose outlook is principally God-centred, and those whose outlook is man-centred. This basic and deep-seated difference may reveal itself in different ways. For example, people may differ over how they react to personal setbacks. Faced with personal tragedy, some will be content to submit to the will of God; to be content, not knowing all the circumstances of the case, and to commit all who are involved in the tragedy to the mercy of God. Like Job *(Job 2:10)* and Habakkuk (*Hab*. 3:17-19) and Eli (1 *Sam. 3:18*) they find strength to bless God's name whatever befalls them, not by a Pavlovian reflex but out of a deep conviction and awareness that they are in the hands of a just God. Others will not accept that the goodness of God is not yet fully clear. They will bridle and rebel, as John Stuart Mill was inclined to bridle when he said

I will call no being good, who is not what I mean when I apply that epithet to my fellow-creatures; and if such a being can sentence me to hell for not so calling him, to hell I will go.

Mill may have forgotten that whether or not we are justified in calling someone good may depend upon facts that are not available to us; that our ideas of goodness, even human goodness, may themselves undergo revision; and that there is a basic difference - in roles and in responsibilities - between God and

ourselves. A good king may behave differently from a good subject.

According to Scripture there is no nobler or more appropriate reaction to personal grief and loss than submission to the will of God. This attitude is often confused with fatalistic resignation, but it is very different. The fatalist believes that he can do nothing whatsoever as regards some particular outcome, and so he folds his arms. The person who submits to God recognises explicitly that he is in the hands of another, seeing to it that his own responsibilities are discharged. God, in a sense, thereafter takes it over. He assumes responsibility for it, for God *is* responsible for it. Not only was such an attitude characteristic of Job or Eli, it was uniquely exemplified in Christ himself, who at all times submitted himself to the will of his Heavenly Father *(John 4:34*), but did so supremely on the cross. The cry 'Nevertheless, thy will not mine be done' *(Matt. 26:39)* is [not] that of someone who has been overpowered, from whom control has been wrested. Nor is it the cry of a fatalist. These are the words of someone who willingly submits himself to the will of the eternal God.

This leads to a general issue of some importance. As we have stressed throughout this study, Scripture teaches a high view of personal responsibility in all the various areas of life, in the family, at work, in the life of the church, and finally before God himself. To carry such responsibility for oneself, and to be given other areas of responsibility, is part of what it means to be made in the image of God. A person is a 'centre of responsibility[5] and not a mere piece of flotsam or jetsam borne along by a relentless tide of events.

Yet although a person is personally responsible, he is not all-responsible. He does not shoulder complete responsibility for the universe. For while we may be responsible to a degree, such that we never fully or properly or ever discharge that responsibility, nevertheless we are not responsible for everything. I may have a responsibility to help you when you are in need, or in various other circumstances; nevertheless I am not *wholly* responsible for you. I cannot take over responsibility for you, and any attempt by me to do so would be both pathetic and tragic. It would be a sign of megalomania on my part, and a recipe for your stunted or retarded growth.

So it is in the case of God. Scripture will not allow us to forget the fact, such is

its view of the sovereignty of God, that this is God's world. It is the universe which he, and not we, have created, and for which he is ultimately responsible. It is perfectly true that, unlike you and me, God is not responsible *to* anyone. With him the pyramid of responsibility reaches its apex. He does not have to give account of any of his ways *(Job 33:13*). Nevertheless this fact does not make him irresponsible, capricious; he works all things after the *counsel* of his own will *(Eph. 1:11*), consistently with those purposes and plans which are in accordance with supreme wisdom, justice, goodness and truth.

It is wrong therefore to shoulder responsibility, or to attempt to do so, for those matters which are God's. We may feel deeply aggrieved that Scripture teaches the doctrine of hell, and doubly aggrieved at the thought that any whom we know and love are bound for hell and not for heaven. In such circumstances it is all too easy to become frantic, attempting to press them into the kingdom. And it is equally easy to become embittered, in such circumstances, against Almighty God.

But, hard as it may be to see this, these are not appropriate attitudes, and they ought to be resisted. While never using the sovereignty of God as an excuse for ducking our own responsibilities, the appropriate attitude is to recognise that the people concerned in the tragedy are not creatures of ours, but of God's. We do not have final responsibility for them. Their destiny is not in our hands but in the hands of One who, though his ways are past finding out *(Rom. 11:33),* nevertheless does all things well *(Mk. 7:37).*

THE PREACHING OF HELL

The hell-fire preacher is a figure of fun and ridicule. He is both amusing and sad, because he has only one theme, and he attempts to frighten men and women into heaven by endlessly warning them of the terrors of hell in loud and lurid detail. But if such a figure is unacceptable, both to the general sensibility but also (more importantly) to the Christian who strives for a fully biblical emphasis, then how is hell to be preached? What exactly is wrong with the picture of the hell-fire preacher? If preachers who believe in hell are not to be hell-fire preachers, then what kind of preachers are they to be?

If the existence of hell is a part of the divine revelation then the preacher cannot avoid making reference to it. His people are to be informed, and the preacher's responsibility in that regard must be discharged. But hell is only a *part* of the divine revelation and therefore it is not to be preached as if it were the *whole.* The trouble with the hell-fire preacher is that he preaches nothing else, he is a religious monomaniac, and this is as inherently unacceptable as the preacher whose sermons are all about the Second Coming, or the doctrine of election, or the furnishings of the Temple. The preaching of hell must be balanced and explained by the other elements of the divine revelation.

But what does 'balance' mean in this connection? Often the appeal and attraction of'balance' is that the 'balanced' preacher is as soft as putty. He has no cutting edge. He says nothing that is definite. He prophesies smooth things *(Isa. 30:10).* What he does say is so qualified and hedged about that nothing is clear. But to be balanced in the sense being advocated is not to be indefinite, vague, or imprecise. Rather it is to be as rounded as Scripture itself is. How can the preacher of hell, or of any other topic, preserve the biblical balance?

He must remember, firstly, that hell can only be properly understood, both by the preacher and by his hearers, in terms of the central message of the gospel. When we looked, in the previous chapter, at heaven, it was stressed that heaven has an *evangelical* character. For it is in the heavenly state that the gospel reaches its climax and fulfilment for the believer. The pleasures and delights of heaven are gospel-centred, Christ-centred, pleasures and delights. Similarly with hell. Hell is not simply pain without end, much less is it pain deliberately inflicted by a cruel and sadistic God. Rather, it is separation from the grace and forbearance and the love of God. The inhabitant of hell is forever cut off from the grace of God, and bears the just consequences of his own sin and folly. It is in hell that the judgment of God upon sin, which often, according to Scripture, begins in this life *(Rom. 1:24,* 26), but is equally often withheld and postponed *(Rom. 9:22*), reaches its end-point. So that as heaven is the final deliverance from sin for the believer so hell is the final condemnation of sin for the unbeliever. It is the place which is unrelieved by penitence and the hope of mercy. At that stage the final separation of mankind is made plain.

To many the idea of hell is monstrous for precisely this reason. Such great

emphasis is laid, in modern culture, and in modern versions of Christianity, on the identity and unity of the human race, that anything that cuts across this unity, and points to a final division between the sheep and the goats, is quite unacceptable. It is important for the Christian to stress the unity of the human race when dealing with the evil of apartheid and with social prejudice of any kind, but the unity of the human race is not, for the Christian, the supreme value, any more than his nation, or his political party, is the supreme value. For Christianity has a God-centred view of things, and the Christian strives to place the value on humanity that God himself does. It is clear from Scripture, and from all that we have been considering about heaven and hell, that the unity of the human race is not something that is to be maintained by God at all costs.

It also needs to be remembered by the preacher that hell is connected to the 'preaching of the law'. As there are many ways of preaching the gospel, and many ways of thinking about the gospel, so there are many ways of preaching the law in preparation to the gospel. It can be proclaimed in a straightforward way; or by means of a study of the life of Christ who, being holy, harmless and undefiled, perfectly exemplified the law, and who at the last, bore its curse *(Gal. 3:13).* But the law can also be considered by a study of hell, the final condemnation due to lawlessness.

The purpose of the New Testament in emphasising, as it does, the fact of hell, is not sadistic. Hell is not revealed so that perverted people can gloat over the thought of suffering. Hell is revealed in order to warn men and women. We are told about the wrath to come and urged to flee from it *(Matt. 3:7).* We are told that there will be no escape if we neglect so great salvation *(Heb. 2:3).* Such passages as these show that hell is not a fiction invented by priests to keep the people quiet, but that it is plain fact. There *is* wrath to come. But the point of highlighting this fact, whether it is Christ who highlights it, or his faithful ministers two thousand years later, is to warn men and women of an impending fate so that, being warned, they will flee from it to Christ who is the only and all-sufficient conqueror of sin and death and hell.

6: Glory Begun Below

In the previous chapters I have tried to set out the main elements of what the Scriptures teach, and what the church has always believed, about the ‘last things’. The treatment has been very much a ‘nuts and bolts’ affair. For it has been necessary to set out the position as clearly and plainly as possible both in order to avoid misunderstanding, and to contrast the Christian view of the future, and the attitudes which underlie it, from other views and attitudes which prevail at present. Sadly, many of these views are represented as being ‘Christian’.

But it would be a mistake to end on this note, as if there is nothing more to the Christian view than the nuts and bolts. To change the figure of speech, the Christian gospel is a feast. It would be a shame to analyse some of the constituents of the feast and then to fail to enjoy it. While fibre, calories and vitamins are important, a person who thinks of food in these terms, and who fails to enjoy what he is eating, is missing something vital.

The matters with which we have been dealing - death, judgment, heaven and hell - are still in the future for the writer, and for everyone who reads these lines. We have seen that the prospect of the last things ought to act as a motive and a control for our actions at present. For if there is to be a judgment, then it is rational to prepare ourselves for it. In this way what is still in the future can affect us all in the present.

But there is a deeper, richer, and more mysterious sense in which what is future affects the present. The New Testament teaches that, for the believer, heaven has already begun. Not merely in the sense that he is assured of heaven, but rather that he has a foretaste of it in his life now, an anticipation of it in experience. It is as if the *hors d’oeuvre* is already being served, both as a pledge and as a sample of the feast to come. (There is also the darker side to the New Testament teaching, on which I shall not dwell here; that there are those who experience a foretaste of hell).

And so it is that, in this final chapter, I shall endeavour to stand back from the

various elements that we have been considering separately (the nuts and bolts) and to view the whole in such a way as to take in this deeper and more mysterious dimension. The aim in doing so is not to forget what we have been learning, but to use it as it ought to be used, to feed and to fuel Christian faith and hope and assurance.

In order to do this, I shall focus upon three passages of the New Testament where Paul links together the future hope of the Christian with his present experience and conduct. For Paul the prospect of heaven was not something to be banked away and forgotten about while the Christian busies himself with other things. Rather the thought of heaven, the certainty, glory and purity of heaven, are to act as spurs to action and to personal devotion in this life.

I CORINTHIANS 15

This passage is possibly the most sustained treatment of the Christian hope in the New Testament. Certainly it is one of the most closely argued passages in the whole of Scripture. In it Paul deals with two main issues, the fact of the coming resurrection of all believers in Christ (‘How say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?’); and the nature of the resurrection body (‘How are the dead raised up, and with what body do they come?’).

The course of the argument leads Paul to praise God and to offer thanksgiving to him. For what he shows is that the triumph of Christ is such that not only will there be a resurrection of the dead, and the inheritance of new incorruptible bodies, but that these things *must* take place. It is because Christ has triumphed over death, because he has satisfied divine justice by his death, that the curse of death, brought on the race by sin, is removed. It is removed, and *must be* removed. If it were not to be removed then Christ’s death would have been ineffectual, and this is unthinkable. It is unthinkable because he is already in the glory, having triumphed over sin and death, and having been exalted there by his Father.

It is at the point when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortality shall have put on immortality, that death will be swallowed up in victory. The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But Christ has

satisfied the demands of the law, and thus has deprived sin of its strength, and death of its sting.

And so Paul, in the name of all Christians, taunts and challenges death and the grave. He mocks them, indicating that through Christ their force has been spent. The remarkable thing about Paul here is that, through faith in what Christ has done, he adopts an attitude which outflanks death. He is not saying that Christians will not die, nor that death is not a reality from which we all shrink. What he is saying is that though, in death, men and women seem to be dealt a final, dreadful blow, this is not so. For the man or woman in Christ there is the prospect of glorious, incorruptible life beyond the grave. And this fact, because it is certain, is the ground of a present triumph and a sense of exultation in what God is going to do. So heaven is not a remote and detached thing, a matter of theory, a never-never land. Though the life of heaven is for us future, its certain occurrence imparts a confidence and joy during the present.

To this exultation Paul links thanksgiving. The victory to which he refers, that future, certain victory, is not the result of human strength or cleverness. Rather, God the church her victory through Christ. And what more natural than that such a gift should call forth thanksgiving, a present thanksgiving which, through faith, anticipates the receiving of the full gift. There is no hint of doubt nor is there a qualification of any kind in the tone of Paul's writing. God gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Here, as at every point in his exposition of the Christian gospel, Paul stresses that heaven, that 'incorruptible inheritance' (*1 Pet. 1:4*)is the gift of God. It is the direct fruit of God's grace. It is not a reward for faithful service which in any way detracts from the grace of God to which all our salvation is due. And so Paul *presently* thanks God for that assured victory which is, as yet, future, but about which he does not entertain the slightest doubt.

There is one further, important consequence that Paul draws from the assured victory that Christians possess in Christ. This is that Christians should, here and now, give themselves unstintingly to the service of God. Paul stresses two things, and gives one reason. He stresses the need for the Christian to be steadfast in the work of the Lord. Not to waver, nor to grow weary, but to

be constant. This naturally follows from what he has been teaching. There is no doubt about the victory that is to come. So Christians should echo that certainty with their own constancy. If there were the least doubt that the victory would be achieved then a person could be excused for being less than fully committed. But as Paul has established the certainty of the victory, so he calls for an unwavering adherence to the path of Christian service and duty.

That is the first thing stressed by Paul. But he links constancy to generosity of spirit. The constancy for which he calls is not to be a thin, stoical, tight-lipped affair. The Christian is not called to hang on grimly, clinging by his fingernails to the bare rock. He is called to abound in the work of the Lord, and to abound at all times. He is to be inventive, creative, resourceful, and generous as his life wends its way, with complete certainty, to his heavenly transformation and reward.

Paradoxically, what Paul is teaching is that it is because of the life to come, in heaven, that our life now on earth matters. For the Christian's calling is a heavenly calling. It comes from heaven, from the grace of God, as we have been seeing, and it reaches out towards heaven for its fulfilment. So that all aspects of the Christian's life, not only those aspects which are customarily called 'spiritual', but all aspects, have significance because they are woven in as part of the divine calling.

Referring back to what he had earlier said Paul insists that the Christian's life is not lived 'in vain'. He is to be assured that all that he does has a point and a purpose to it. Earlier Paul had stated that if Christ was not raised from the dead then Christian faith and Christian preaching are both vain; pointless, ineffectual, a waste of time. But Christ *has* been raised from the dead, and so Christian faith and all that flows from it is fruitful and purposeful.

As if to underline this fact Paul proceeds to give explicit and detailed instructions about charitable giving for needy Christians. It is not that, having climbed further and further up the mountain in i Corinthians chapter fifteen, Paul is suddenly brought crashing to the ground at the beginning of chapter sixteen. To think this is to misunderstand completely the way in which Paul's mind was working. There is not a *contrast* between the heady doctrinal teaching of I

Corinthians 15 and the practical details of the next chapter. Rather, we should recognise the artificiality of the chapter division and see that the practical details to which Paul now gives attention are part of the outworking of that attitude for which he had just been calling.

So these two chapters do not present a contrast between heady, useless doctrine and practical church business, but the fulfilment of the one in the other. One way in which the Christian is to be abounding in the work of the Lord is to attend to particular duties here and now. Paul's words about abounding are thus not rhetoric, words designed to make an effect by their prettiness. Paul had not been carried away with his own flights of fancy. He is sober and deadly serious.

It is possible to look at this another way. Much of our life seems to consist of distinct activities. Think of the varied things that we do in the course of the day. What unites them, for they do not seem to be connected in any way? What has making the lunch to do with tidying the garden, or with going for a walk, or with talking to a neighbour? It is very easy to become preoccupied with one or other of these aspects, and to allow one or other of them to dominate one's attitude to life as a whole. For many people life can seem a drudge of routine; for others, life is random and chaotic. The Christian is perhaps tempted to opt out of the present evil world by pinning his hopes on heaven as a place of unending calm and peace, a refuge of freedom from worry and responsibility.

From Paul's standpoint both of these attitudes are misguided. For what he is teaching here is that life is not lived in vain, for the Christian, but that even the most trivial actions in the line of service have importance in that such labour is not in vain 'in the Lord'.

ROMANS 8

Here Paul writes of the privileges of the person who is 'in Christ Jesus'. There is 'now no condemnation'. In Paul's thinking, as we have been noting, being free from condemnation does not refer to what is merely past or present, but to what is future as well. And at this point the analogy of a human law court may not be helpful. When a judge declares that the prisoner is free, not condemned by the law, that verdict refers to the specific charge concerning something in the past

for which the person had been brought to the court. The judge is not saying anything about what may or may not happen in the future. He is dealing with a single, isolated event.

But the ‘not condemned’ of the Christian, as far as Paul is concerned, is the same as ‘can never now be condemned’; it reaches into the future. And this is why Paul’s treatment of what might baldly be called ‘sanctification’ is shot through with references to the future. Perhaps the key to Paul’s treatment in Romans 8 is his teaching that the Holy Spirit who dwells in the believer is ‘the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead’ (*v*. 8). This fact carries a pledge with it; if the believer is ‘in Christ’, and has the Spirit of the ‘raised Jesus’ in him, then undoubtedly the believer will himself be raised. And so ‘He that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you’ *(v*.11).

So for Paul the Christian life is a fundamentally forward-looking affair. The Christian looks for the fulfilment of the work of redemption, for the inheritance of which, with Christ and the whole church, he is the joint heir *(v. 1*7). And just as heaven is a spur to present activity, so its certainty is, for the believer, a way of keeping everything else in proper perspective.

Paul had come to this conclusion after deliberate and careful thought. He does not minimise or belittle the present difficulties and sufferings of the church. He does not say that suffering does not exist, that it is all ‘in the mind’, nor does he say that it ought not to exist. But the prospect of glory should overwhelm the suffering. Almost like an accountant, Paul has considered the debits and the credits and, in conclusion, he ‘reckons’ that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us (v. 18).

Yet, while he adopts the careful, deliberate style of the accountant, the conclusion which he comes to is not that the prospect of glory outweighs the present suffering, it is rather that there is no comparison between the two. The prospect of heaven is such that it would be insane seriously to suppose that present difficulties detract from it, and that given the choice the believer should seek a lessening of his difficulties at the price of heaven. Paul compares the two

only to show that, in fact, they are incommensurable; there is such a qualitative difference between this fife and the fife to come that any attempt to compare the two in quantitative terms is misconceived.

Paul develops these ideas further in the never-to-be-forgotten climax of the chapter, verse 28 onwards. He says that it is the eternal purpose of God to conform the church to the image of Christ (*v.29*). We are now in a position to see how all-embracing this conformity is. It would be wrong to think that Paul is referring only to the moral character of Christ, central and important as that is. The scope of this conformity is clear from the verses before and after. For if the agency of such conformity is the Spirit, then that conformity must include the glorious hope of resurrection, because Christ is raised.

And verse 30, in amplification of verse 29, makes this clear. Those whom God predestinates to be conformed to the image of his Son he calls, justifies and glorifies. And what is glorification? It is sharing the glory that the Son had with the Father, and which he now has as the triumphant God-man.

So when Paul writes of conformity to the image of Christ he is not thinking of that image as something abstract, like the abstract idea of holiness, or beauty. Rather he has in mind the concrete reality of Christ, the Son embodied as Jesus of Nazareth, who has been loosed from death and raised to glory. It is the prospect of being raised to glory with Jesus, and like Jesus, that leads Paul to say that the sufferings of this present life cannot be compared with the glory that shall be revealed.

The climax of Paul's treatment of this theme in Romans 8 is achieved through the answers that he gives to two questions. One question concerns the law. Can the law now be used to charge a Christian, a person who is in Christ? Certainly not. No one can condemn such a person. Why? Not simply because Christ has died and has risen again; but because Christ is 'at the right hand of God' (*v.34*). So that even when Paul is dealing with the believer's justification before God, this is linked, in his mind, with the resurrection and glorification of Christ, and therefore with the believer's hope.

The second question concerns union with Christ (v. 35).

Just as no one can condemn the Christian, so no one can keep apart the believer and Christ. The two are inseparable. As far as the present life is concerned the union between Christ and the believer is spiritual, as Paul has been emphasising. They are united by together possessing the Holy Spirit. Neither tribulation, nor distress, nor persecution, nor famine, nor nakedness, nor peril, nor sword, can affect this union. But what about the future?

No, Paul says, there is nothing in the future that can separate the believer from the love of Christ. He is secure because Christ has gone before. And the security is the prospect of resurrection.

The hope which these teachings of Paul conjures up is thus not an uncertain hope. The believer does not hope against hope. He does not hope against all the odds, or against all the evidence. Such a hope would be hopeless. Rather, what is hoped for, union with Christ in glory, is certain. It is guaranteed by the eternal purpose of God, and by the resurrection and glorification of Christ in time. Why then is it *hope?* Simply because what is hopedforis future. It is the confident looking forward to the coming to pass of what is hoped for. It is a hope that has the present experience of God's grace in Christ as a foretaste. The believer rejoices in hope of the glory of God *(Rom.* 5:2).

The Christian life is coloured at every stage by this prospect of life to come. It gives the life of the Christian its distinctive character. The Christian life is not merely a matter of moral renovation; the moral change is effected and sustained through the power of the risen and glorified Christ, and it is a change which earnestly looks forward for its consummation to union with Christ in the glory.

2 CORINTHIANS 4 AND 5

The final passage from Paul to which we shall refer is probably the most personal of the three. Paul is considering his own ministry, and particularly his own mistreatment by various hands. He writes of the perplexities and persecutions of his own career *(4:8-9),* and of the way in which he had not been spared in his efforts to bring Christ to the Corinthians, so much so that he can write of a process of death at work in himself at the very time that life is being brought to them *(v. 12).*

Nevertheless, what sustains him in these trials is his faith in the resurrection to come. Paul says that he knows that he who raised up the Lord Jesus shall raise up us (that is, both himself and the Corinthians) by Jesus, and that Paul and the Corinthian church will be presented together; presented, that is, triumphantly before God at the last.

Paul then amplifies the substance of this claim in the verses that follow. While what he goes on to teach has the resurrection of Christ as its general background and context (5:14), nevertheless Paul does not deal explicitly with that aspect here, but rather with the general contrast between present afflictions and future glory.

So there is a two-fold process at work; the outward man is perishing, while the inward man is being renewed daily. The evidence for the first was all around Paul, in the persecutions that he was enduring, his bodily weakness, the times when he was cast down. But where is the evidence for the second process, the renewal of the inward man? If we confine our attention to the immediate context, and do not trace the argument back to what Paul says earlier about his own conversion (*4:6*) then two things stand out. One has already been mentioned, Paul's faith in the fact of the resurrection to come.

It is the faith that enables Paul to affirm, in words of quiet triumph, that his repeated persecutions for the sake of the gospel are only 'light'. They are only 'for a moment'. And they 'work' an exceeding and eternal weight of glory (5:17). The afflictions work this glory in the sense that they encourage faith in it, and so bring it nearer. And also in the sense that they refine and renew Paul's character, and so fit him for glory. And, Paul concludes, so long as the eye of faith is directed to the eternal reward, then things are kept in proportion. If the believer concentrates his attention upon the things that are seen, then faith grows dim, and he is in danger of being overwhelmed by the present. But if he is able to look at what is unseen (paradoxical though this may seem) then the sense of proportion between present weakness and future glory is maintained.

So the first piece of evidence for the second process, the process of renewal, is Paul's faith in God's power to give him glory. But, as we saw in our consideration of the earlier passages, there is more to it than this. Paul

also writes of ‘groaning’ *(5:2).* Just as, in Romans 8, he writes of the whole creation groaning, waiting for the final glorifying of the church of Christ, so now he writes of himself as one groaning. He does not have faith in the promises of God in a cold and unfeeling way. He longs for heaven. By his grace God has set going in Paul a longing for his final home, for the house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. There is, as it were, a matching of character between Paul and the heaven for which he is bound. And until heaven is achieved there is a repeated longing for it, a deep desire which sets up in Paul a groaning. God has ‘wrought’ this for Paul (v. 5) or rather, he has wrought in Paul a state of anticipation and preparedness for heaven.

It is these two lines of evidence, Paul’s faith in the promise of God that there is reward and glory to come, and his inward earnest of heaven shown in the longing for it that God has wrought in him, that enables Paul to say, with supreme confidence, that he *knows* that if his present ramshackle existence is destroyed, he has a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

I began the chapter by drawing attention to the fact that the prospect of heaven is to be in the forefront of a believer’s mind; and to the fact that, according to the New Testament, heaven is not wholly future. The Christian’s experience has as one of its present ingredients a foretaste of heaven. In trying to gain an estimate from the New Testament of the place that heaven should play in the believer’s experience here and now we have examined what Paul wrote. This is not because Paul has exclusive rights on this teaching - Christ himself taught that believers in him are already in possession of eternal life, Peter writes of the incorruptible inheritance of believers -but because it was given to Paul to develop the teaching more fully. In the examination of Paul, what have we found?

The most basic thing that we have discovered is that there is a strong *connection* between the future and the present. The prospect of future rest should lead to present activity. According to Paul, it is because of heaven that our life on earth matters. For the Christian’s calling is a heavenly calling; it comes from heaven, and it reaches out towards heaven. So that all aspects of our lives, not only those

that are customarily referred to as being ‘spiritual’, but the social and cultural as well, have significance because they are woven in as part of the divine calling which will end for the believer in heaven. So heaven is not an excuse for taking it easy, it is a reason for renewed effort. It is evident that Paul feels no opposition between the present life and the life to come.

The most basic reason that Paul gives for holding to this strong connection between the future and the present is that because of the certainty of Christ’s public, final vanquishing of sin the labour of a Christian is not ‘in vain’. Our lives on earth, despite the seeming randomness of what befalls us, the nasty surprises, the setbacks and tragedies, is purposive. It is not necessary to forsake the earth to find purpose. The work of the Christian, whether it is thought of in terms of the building of his own character, or as the work of the church in the world, or the wider cultural and social responsibilities of the Christian, is not futile. The fruit of such living does not die and rot at death. If in this life only we have hope in Christ we are of all men most miserable, Paul says (i *Cor. 15:19);* what folly it would be to live as if there is heaven to come when there is not! But the fact of the matter is that Christ *has* risen from the dead, he will vanquish death, and hence the activity of the Christian is not ‘in vain’, it will not be frustrated.

This is the reason why the Christian’s hope is not a speculative thing; it is not a leap of faith, a battle against the odds. It is the quiet, God-given confidence that the promises of God, of which Christ’s resurrection is the pledge, will come to pass; a hope which itself ought to have a purifying effect upon the believer. For everyone who has the hope of seeing Christ and being like him sets about purifying himself here and now, even as Christ is pure (*1 John 3:3).*

But if that is the most basic tie, there is a richer and more intimate connection, formed by the fact that the indwelling Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of him who raised Christ from the dead, is the present pledge to the believer of his final arrival in heaven. But it is a pledge of a rich kind. It might be said that a valid ticket to York is the pledge of my arrival in York. Yet possession of the ticket gives me no idea at all what York will be like; its history, its atmosphere, the architectural wonder of the Minster, and so on. The pledge that the Spirit gives, and is, is not like a ticket. It does not simply guarantee arrival into heaven;

it provides the believer with a foretaste of heaven. It is as if a person could experience a little of the atmosphere of York before arriving there.

How does the Spirit do this? In brief, by imparting to the believer those qualities and powers which he will enjoy without measure in the world to come. For instance, the believer has certain *desires* now - a hunger and thirst for righteousness, the desire to serve God with all his powers - which are anticipations of that final state when all will be righteousness, and when Christ will be served without reserve or restraint. Now the believer experiences a measure of victory over sin, but then his victory will be complete. Now the believer loves Christ, even though he has never seen him; and though he does not see Christ, nevertheless he rejoices in him. But then he will see Christ and his joy will be full. Now the believer has a partial knowledge of God's grace and love; then he shall know even as he is known. Such qualities and powers, when taken together, constitute the foretaste of the unspoilt powers and qualities of heaven. It is the reality of these experiences, and their sweetness, that enables the believer to look forward to heaven with confidence, and to overcome the distorting and enfeebling effects of his own continuing sin and failure.

Finally, we have seen, in our brief survey of Paul, that the prospect of heaven lends a sense of perspective to the present life. Paul was able to endure hardship, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ, to continue as a Christian with such tenacity and determination, because of his abiding conviction that the sufferings of this present life, however trying they might be, are not worthy to be compared with the glory to be revealed. The trials and difficulties of life, which tend to loom so large when they occur, and to overwhelm everything else, are kept firmly in their place.

The worst of such difficulties is no more, for Paul, than a 'light affliction' which lasts for a moment; it is not to be compared to the 'eternal weight' of glory that is to come. As, daily, his inner man was being renewed, so that new man longs for the home of heaven with the firm conviction that he will arrive there.

Now, as a believer, I am inhibited, dragged down, kept back, by sin and bodily weakness and the pressure of circumstances. But, as Isaac Watts put it many years later than Paul, when heaven is gained

Then shall I see, and hear, and know

All I desired or wished below;

And every power find sweet employ

In that eternal world of joy.