

LIFE AND DEATH –
FACE THE FACTS

by Peter Watkins



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LIFE AND DEATH - FACE THE FACTS!

1. CHALLENGE!

This challenge is for *you*. It is probably the most important challenge you have ever had, or ever will have. Please take it very seriously. Quite literally, it is a matter of life and death—of eternal life and eternal death. Are you willing to face the facts?

Most people are not willing. They do not know what the facts concerning life and death are, and they do not want to know. Their minds are full of other more exciting things, like making money, scrambling up the status ladder, and having a good time.

The day may soon come when the glamour connected with these other interests will disappear, and the issues of life and death will assume a new urgency. Probably it will be too late then.

For those who are willing to face the facts, and act on them *now*, the benefits are beyond reckoning.

The great barrier

Before we come to grips with our subject, we must come to terms with ourselves.

We shall make no progress at all with the great issues of life and death unless we recognise that, in common with all other human beings, we have a weakness that stands like a great barrier in the way of truth. When we recognise the weakness, we will have gone more than halfway towards conquering it.

The weakness is this: we have far more respect for our feelings than for facts. If it comes to a competition between feelings and facts, feelings win every time. Or, to express it in another way, we are only interested in the facts that we like.

A simple illustration may help here. Two cars are in collision. Both vehicles are damaged, but the drivers are not hurt. Inevitably, feelings are roused.

Although it is not glaringly obvious. Brown is at fault and Smith knows it.

Brown himself has a lurking suspicion that he is to blame, but he does not admit it, even to himself. The machinery of self-justification takes over, and he finds himself conveniently forgetting some facts, and giving a gentle twist to others. In theory, Brown would regard truth as a sacred thing, but when self-interest is involved, truth is automatically relegated to a lower place.

The fact that Smith, on the other hand, readily accepts all the facts, is no proof of his honesty. In this situation, the facts give him an advantage. If the situation had been reversed. Brown would have been willing to face the facts, and Smith would have done the dodging.

This is normal human behaviour. You and I could easily play the parts of Brown and Smith, or Smith and Brown, respectively, in the car drama. We all tend to dodge the facts we do not like. When the issues are unimportant, we can sometimes get away with it, but when big issues are involved, the consequences can be catastrophic. Invariably, the fact-dodger is the loser.

The issues with which we are concerned are the greatest of all. They are the issues of life and death. The ultimate facts—if we can get as far—are wonderfully attractive, but we shall not be able to receive, and act on, these facts until we have accepted certain other truths that are far from pleasant. Yet to neglect these unpleasant truths is worse than foolish, it is disastrous.

As you read this booklet, you will, almost certainly, be on your guard in one way. You will treat everything I say with a healthy suspicion. Fine! That's as it should be. But, in your own interests, you should be on your guard in another way too. You will, shortly, be confronted by certain distasteful facts, and you may feel an overwhelming urge to shy away from them. Please treat your own reactions with suspicion too. Suppress your prejudices, and dare to face the facts!

Authority

We want the facts about life and death. Guesswork is not fact, and theory is not fact. By observing ourselves and our fellow men, we can learn some things about human life, though we are too deeply involved to be reliable witnesses. By our observation we can also learn something about the appearance of death, though we cannot be certain that appearance and reality are necessarily the same. If however we are to be sure of our facts, we shall have to call in a higher authority. There is only one absolutely reliable authority—the Creator Himself. It goes without saying that the One who has made man knows everything about him.

Our main purpose must therefore be to examine the revelation that God has given us concerning life and death. In other words, we must consult the Bible, the Word of God.

If you think you know a higher authority, I am sorry, but this is where we must part company.

2. HARD FACTS

Human behaviour

Before turning to the Scriptures, let us, as people conscious of the dangers of nearsightedness, survey the human scene. We shall not concern ourselves with the behaviour of vile criminals of the worst kind. That would give an unbalanced picture. Instead, we shall look at the behaviour of ordinary people; people—if I may say so—like you and me.

Let us return to the motor car story. You will remember that our purpose, in discussing this, was to illustrate that the average, respectable person has little respect for truth when self-interest is involved. But this sort of everyday occurrence tells us other things about human nature too—none of them flattering.

Driver Brown (there are lots of Browns about, don't forge!) was too selfish to admit that he was in the wrong. And so skilful was he in the art of deception, that he actually succeeded in persuading himself that he was still an honest man. So much so, that if a discussion had taken place and Smith had been bold enough to call him a liar, he would have been seething with indignation. Normally a peace loving man, he would have felt an irresistible urge to act violently—provided of course that Smith was smaller than he.

Please don't miss the point! The point is that this is the way that selfishness, deceit and cowardice normally work in ordinary people like ourselves.

Think of another unflattering aspect of normal, human behaviour. Consider again— we have mentioned it before—how childish and superficial most grown people are. What are their interests? Money, houses, cars, social standing, fun and games... Why don't people grow up and act responsibly? Why don't they get to grips with the important matters of life?

The astonishing thing is that very few people are able to give a straight answer to the question, "What is the great purpose of life?" Just try asking a few people yourself what they think they are here for. You will be appalled at their ignorance. By the way, can *you* answer the question?

An outstanding indication of human perversity—dare we say, human madness?—is that men cannot refrain from fighting each other. Wars are expensive and unpleasant in a thousand ways, and naturally people don't like them. All the same, they just cannot control their vicious impulses and live at peace.

Authoritative verdict

We have tried to look at human nature objectively, and we have been depressed by what we have seen. Now let us have an authoritative verdict from the Word of God.

We shall see that the Bible states, clearly and repeatedly, that human nature is vile. Here are three quotations—from Jeremiah, the Lord Jesus and the Apostle Paul, respectively:

"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (Jer. 17: 9).

*"From within, out of the heart of **men**, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness" (Mark 7: 21, 22).*

"There is none righteous, no, not one: there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: their feet are swift to shed blood: destruction and misery are in their ways: and the way of peace have they not known: there is no fear of God before their eyes" (Rom. 3: 10-18).

This last quotation is interesting. Paul brings together a number of quotations from various parts of the Old Testament, all of which emphasise the depravity of human behaviour. Read out of context, it sounds like a description of certain exceptionally wicked men. One could be excused for asking who these loathsome people are that Paul is describing, and what is really wrong with them. If we had begun the quotation just one verse earlier, we should have had the answers:

"... we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin" (Rom. 3: 9).

The people are Jews and Gentiles. In other words, everybody.

And the trouble? "They are all under sin."

So the first, hard fact that we have to face is that we are all creatures of sin. It is sin that explains all the ugliness of human thoughts and deeds.

How it all began

In the same epistle, Paul explains how it all began:

"By one man sin entered into the world ..." (Rom. 5: 12).

Paul is not telling us anything new here. He is reminding us of something we can read for ourselves in Genesis 2 and 3 — the history of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Old and New Testaments consistently point back to Eden as the beginning of the human tragedy.

The fact that many people nowadays reject the Genesis account need not concern us. The Lord Jesus believed the Genesis story¹, and by such statements as the one from Romans 5: 12 (above), Paul made it clear that he accepted this record too. If we accept the authority of Jesus and Paul, we shall also believe the authentic Bible record of the fall of man.

The wages of sin

To say that human beings are sinners is one thing. To know that we ourselves are stricken by the dread disease of sin is another. To God, sin is like leprosy. Only when we feel within ourselves the repulsiveness of our defiled nature, have we really grasped the fact of sin.

We do well to reflect upon the grim truth that the great Creator, who knows all about us, and who can assess our true worth, has said that we are not fit to live. We are all under sentence of death.

Let us return to Romans 5: 12, the first part of which we looked at before, and see how it links sin and death together:

"By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned."

Again, this connection between sin and death is not a new thought. At least, it is not new to those familiar with the Eden story of Genesis.

¹ See Matt. 19: 4, 5.

In Genesis 2 we read that God put man on probation:

"Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die" (verses 16, 17).

The chapter that follows tells of the disobedience of Adam and his wife, and of the fatal consequences of this disobedience. In accordance with God's warning, Adam was sentenced to death.

The rest of the story we know. All the children of Adam inherit from him a sin-tending nature, and all are subject to death. Paul has told us this, and there are many other scriptures that carry the same sad message. But let us again express it in terms that bring the message nearer home: we all inherit a sin-tending nature, and *we are* all subject to death.

Under sentence of death

Although we are like prisoners in the condemned cell, we do not feel cramped and confined. God is not cruel, like man; and, in any case, physical imprisonment is not necessary, for we cannot escape. For a little while we can enjoy the illusion of unfettered freedom. But the end is inevitable.

For all our feelings of freedom, we cannot live without knowing that something called *death* ultimately happens to every human being. And men rarely welcome the sudden arrival (it's always sudden!) of this strange visitant.

But the deceitful human mind is never at a loss to take the sting out of unpleasant facts. Though we cannot deny the fact of death, we can put it out of our minds, and miss the vital lesson to which it points.

One writer (now deceased) once remarked that we think everybody is mortal except ourselves. Although the years pass by at an incredible speed, and although so many of our relations and acquaintances have been taken from us, we are still here. The strange thing about death is that it's always somebody else — have you noticed? So far, at least...

If we really faced the fact of *our own* mortality, we should act like people who are desperately short of time. Instead, we yawn our way through life, as if eternity stretches before us. We do not use time: we waste it and kill it.

Only those who regard time as their most precious trust have really grasped the fact that they are dying creatures.

David knew how hard this lesson was to learn. He prayed:

"Lord, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail I am" (Psa. 39: 4).

Moses speaks in similar vein, when he says:

"The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off and we fly away... So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom" (Psa. 90: 10-12).

The hardest fact of all

The question of how we can most profitably use our precious time is an urgent one, but we are not ready for it yet.

In the meantime, I must ask you to prepare for the shock of what may be the hardest fact of all.

We keep coming back to the thought that men are not willing to face facts. With regard to death, I stated, "Though we cannot deny the fact of death, we can put it out of our minds, and miss the lesson to which it points".

The first part of this sentence is not strictly correct. Perhaps you noticed it? Many people *do* deny the fact of death. They think that death is an appearance and not a fact. They say that when a person dies, he is not really dead, because the essential part of him continues to live.

Let it be stated categorically here that nothing could be further from the truth. There is a mass of evidence that death is real: we shall look at some of this evidence shortly. I have said a lot about the deceitfulness of the human mind and its remarkable facility for dodging facts. But the denial of the fact of death caps the lot.

Onus of proof

Why do people imagine that dead people are not really dead? Everything about them suggests that they *are* dead. They cannot see, or hear, or speak. Or at least, they seem unable to do these things. All communication seems to be cut off. We see not the slightest flicker of response.

Of course it has to be admitted — indeed, it has already been admitted — that appearance is not necessarily the same as reality. Even so, if someone asserts that reality is utterly different from appearance, *he* has to do the proving. Many people say that, although death looks like the cessation of life, it is not really so. Very good, the onus of proof rests squarely on their shoulders.

How do they try to prove their point? Here we meet one of the biggest conspiracies of ignorance and deceit imaginable. Despite the fact that the Bible teaches plainly and repeatedly, explicitly and implicitly, that death is real, it is claimed that the evidence for the doctrine that man is essentially immortal is contained in the Bible.

Isn't it amazing? And yet, when one considers how ignorant the average professing Christian is of the Bible, perhaps it isn't so surprising after all.

3. BIBLE TEACHING CONCERNING DEATH

A heap of dust

First, let us look at the brief account of the creation of man:

"And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Gen. 2: 7).

We hardly need reminding that this is a summary. We can fill in the details ourselves. When it says that the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, we are not to think only of the external form, but of every cell of every tissue of every system of the human body. When man was thus formed, God "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life", and the inanimate man came to life.

Now let us turn to the sentence that God pronounced on the man when he sinned. The concluding words of the curse upon Adam are:

"In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Gen. 3: 19).

Mark the very pointed use of the word *dust* in the sentence. Man, who was formed of the dust, was being sent back to the dust. He began as dust; he would end as dust. Adam was therefore returned to the condition that obtained before his creation. Did he have an existence before he was created? Obviously not! Nor would he have an existence when he went back to his native dust.

Altogether, the Genesis narrative provides three reasons why we should believe that death is real:

1. Death was introduced as a punishment for disobedience.
2. The death sentence was couched in terms that indicated that Adam was being sent back to the dust from which he was created. He had no life before the breath of life was breathed into him; and he had no life when he was sent back to the dust.
3. (An additional point). After the transgression, Adam was prevented from having access to that which could have given him life. Clearly then, it was God's intention that he should be deprived of life. The relevant words are:

"... lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden... and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life" (Gen. 3: 22-24).

Echoes of Eden

There is a mass of supporting evidence in the Old Testament. Two passages from the Psalms are particularly impressive:

"Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God. Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest, Return, ye children of men" (Psa. 90: 1-3).

"Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help. His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish" (Psa. 146: 3, 4).

Psalm 90 presents us with a contrast. The endlessness of God's existence is contrasted with the extreme brevity of the human span. The validity of the contrast depends upon the reality of death. If death is not real, there is no contrast. Indeed, the whole Psalm — it is the one that speaks of "threescore years and ten", and asks God to help us to number our days — loses its point and purpose if dead people are not really dead.

But look particularly at verse 3: "Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest. Return ye children of men." When did God turn man to destruction, and when did he say, "Return"? Yes, the link with Eden is unmistakable. Remember the fateful words to Adam, "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." Psalm 90 shows clearly that the Edenic sentence applied not only to Adam, but to all in Adam. All obey the inexorable sentence and return to the dust.

Now to Psalm 146. Suppose we ask the question, "What happens at death?" This Psalm gives us a concise answer: "His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish". Pay particular attention to the words, "... his thoughts perish". It would be difficult, if not impossible, to give more effective expression to the doctrine that the dead are really dead. They cannot even think.

Again there is a link with Genesis. We cannot miss the connection between "he returneth to his earth" and the words of the sentence upon Adam, "Dust

thou art, and unto dust thou return” (Gen. 3: 19). Also the double statement, “His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth”, is a direct reversal of the words, “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life...” (Gen. 2:7). Already we have taken note of the fact that the death sentence that god pronounced upon Adam was a reversal of the creative process, Now we see that the same thing is true of Adam’s sons.

The immortal soul myth

The question that many will be wanting to ask is: “But what about the soul?”

Well, *what* about the soul? We all know that it is often regarded as the essential part of man, that continues to live when the body dies, but does this view make sense? And – more important – is it in accordance with the Scriptures?

Think once again of the words of Psalm 146 concerning death: “...in that very day his thoughts perish”. The *thoughts* perish! Is there anything more essential to man that his ability to think? So if there *is* an immortal soul, it stops thinking when the body returns to the dust!

And what about these words from Psalm 6 (verses 4 and 5):

“Return, O Lord, deliver my soul: of save me for they mercies’ sake. For in death there is no remembrance of thee: in the grave who shall give thee thanks?”

David thought that death was near, and he was appalled by the fact that when he died, the highest and noblest of all activities, that of praising God, would cease. So if there is an immortal soul, it cannot praise God either.

Observe too that David's entreaty, "Deliver my soul", seems to mean, simply, "Deliver me from death". This suggests that lots of people have got the wrong idea about the use of the word *soul* in Scripture.

You will recall that the word *soul* occurs in Genesis 2: 7, the passage that speaks of the creation of man. Here it is again:

“And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”

When the breath of life was breathed into the nostrils of the lifeless human

form, it became a living soul. The use of the word *became* is significant: man *became* a living soul. The living soul was the complete, animated creature.

Let us set it out as a sum:

Bodily form + breath of life = living soul.

Remove the breath of life, and the soul is destroyed.

Although the Bible does not contain a single reference to an immortal soul, there are a number of passages that speak of souls dying. Here is an example:

"Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die" (Ezek. 18: 4).

Joshua 10 contains seven references to souls. They are "utterly destroyed", and "smitten with the edge of the sword", so that none is "left remaining". Look the chapter up and see for yourself.

At this stage, some would want to complain that all our references concerning the subject of death have been from the Old Testament. If this is simply a reminder that the New Testament teaching must be taken into account, the point is granted. If, however, it contains a suggestion that the New Testament will contradict the doctrine of death presented in the Old Testament, the suggestion must be repudiated.

Is it seriously supposed that one part of God's message can contradict another part? In any case, how do those who take refuge in the New Testament because they find Old Testament teaching offensive, explain those New Testament passages that recommend the Old Testament?²

However, we are now in a position to turn to the New Testament. Having faced the hard facts concerning humanity's plight, we can now open our ears and our hearts to the good news of a way of escape.

It will be seen that, so far from contradicting Old Testament teaching concerning death, the New Testament provides ample confirmation. Our main purpose now, however, is to acquaint ourselves with the good news.

² John 10: 35; 2 Tim. 3: 16; 2 Peter 1: 21, etc.

4. A MESSAGE OF LIFE

Breakthrough!

Is Jesus Christ alive today?

You believe that he is? Then you are a believer in miracles, because this Jesus lived nearly two thousand years ago, and he was put to death by crucifixion. If Jesus Christ is alive today, then two mighty miracles must have taken place. A dead man has been restored to life; and he has also been made immortal. In the words of the Lord Jesus himself: "I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore" (Rev. 1: 18).

It's amazing how people refuse to be impressed by this colossal double miracle. By their attitude they say that, as far as they are concerned, God need not have taken the trouble to call the Lord Jesus Christ back from the dead. Nothing could demonstrate more strikingly that men's priorities are all wrong. So full are their lives of other important matters that the resurrection of Christ is treated like an irrelevancy. Yet words are not big enough to express the magnitude of this event. It is not an exaggeration to say that it represents the biggest breakthrough in all history.

Right from the days of Adam, men had been following each other in an endless funeral procession to the grave. Then a new thing happened. There was a great earthquake. A grave was thrown open, and a man who had been tortured to death three days earlier came out alive! He is, in fact, alive to this very day, although it happened nearly two thousand years ago. Can you not see the exciting possibilities?

A sure foundation

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a foundation fact of Christianity. Other important truths are built upon this foundation. Let us turn to 1 Corinthians 15, and see how the Apostle Paul builds upon this foundation fact.

First, he demonstrates how well founded the fact is. He presents a formidable array of witnesses to the resurrection of Christ. Hundreds of people have seen him alive, so there can be no argument on this score: He himself is one of the witnesses. So convincing is the evidence that it has completely changed Paul's life. No wonder the resurrection of Christ has been described as the best attested fact in history.

Then Paul starts building on the foundation:

"Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept" (1 Cor. 15: 20).

Firstfruits is a harvesting expression. If there are firstfruits, there is a harvest to follow. By his resurrection, Christ became the firstfruits of them that slept. Obviously therefore there must be a harvest of resurrected ones to follow. Paul says this in verse 23:

"But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming."

So others will come forth from their graves, as Jesus did. This is a prominent New Testament teaching. Here are two other passages where resurrection is taught. They are the words of the Lord Jesus and Paul, respectively.

"The hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation" (John 5: 28, 29).

"The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first..." (1 Thess. 4: 16).

Did you notice that resurrection is linked with the second coming of Christ in two of the three passages quoted?

Satisfying logic

Thoughtful people are impressed by the logic of Bible teaching. See how it all fits together:

1. Human beings are sinners.
2. Because of sin, they are subject to death.
3. Death is real. It is the opposite of life.
4. Jesus Christ came forth from the grave.
5. He was made immortal.
6. Those who belong to Christ will, likewise, come forth from their graves; and they will live for ever.
7. This resurrection will take place when Jesus Christ comes back to the earth.

It will be appreciated now that this positive gospel message of resurrection

and life can only be understood against the background facts of sin and death. There is therefore no conflict between Old and New Testament teaching. They complement each other. *Because* men are dying creatures, and *because* death is a reality, God has provided humanity with a way of escape through Jesus Christ. This surely is the meaning of that well-known verse:

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3: 16).

If words carry meanings at all, these words tell us that men are, naturally, perishing creatures, and that they can only be saved from death, and have everlasting life, if they believe in the Son of God, whom God, in His love, has provided. John 3: 16 tells us then that men are perishing creatures — a fact that we have already learned from the Old Testament.

There is — let it be repeated — no conflict between Old and New Testaments on this subject. Look at it in another way. The doctrine of resurrection, as taught in the New Testament, does not make sense unless, as the Old Testament teaches, death is a reality. If escape from death is by resurrection when the Lord Jesus returns, the dead must be really dead until that resurrection, if the dead are not dead, then resurrection has no purpose. This point is so obvious that there is no need to labour it.

Since Old and New Testaments integrate so well in their teaching concerning death and resurrection, it should not surprise us to discover that resurrection is actually taught in the Old Testament. Daniel 12: 2 is one of several scriptures that could be quoted:

"And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."

Crown of rejoicing

A diligent person once did a spot of counting, and discovered that there were no fewer than three hundred references to the second coming of Christ in the New Testament. This is the measure of the importance of this event.

Two great purposes will be fulfilled when Christ comes again:

1. He will establish the kingdom of God on the earth.
2. He will raise the dead and reward the righteous.

It is impossible for students of the Bible not to be keenly interested in the coming kingdom of God. Our immediate interest, however, is in the connection between the second coming and the resurrection.

Paul looked forward with eager anticipation to that great day, because then he and those to whom he had preached the gospel would be united in the presence of Christ. What a grand reunion it would be ! We can sense the excitement in his words:

"For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming?" (1 Thess. 2: 19).

John too, the aged disciple who had been banished to the island of Patmos because of his beliefs, showed the same intense desire for this great event. The next to the last verse of the Revelation — the next to the last verse of the Bible — reads thus:

"He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22: 20).

5. GOD COMMANDS

The Unknown God

Ancient Athens was a city steeped in idolatry. The Athenians worshipped many gods, and for each of these gods there was an altar.

To play safe, the Athenians had built one extra altar. This they had dedicated to the Unknown God.

To the Unknown God: as Paul, the Apostle, gazed at this inscription, a thought came to him...

Inevitably, Paul found himself involved in discussion, first, in the market place — the Hyde Park of Athens — and later, at Mars Hill, the meeting place of the philosophers. He told the people about this Unknown God, whom they worshipped in ignorance. Although unknown to them. He was the only true God, the Creator of heaven and earth. Gone were the days, said Paul, when this God left people to their foolish, idolatrous practices. God would be an unknown God no longer. But hear the Apostle himself:

"Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17: 29-31. R. S. V.).

Now God *commands* all men everywhere to repent. The word "commands" is powerful. Those who do not repent are disobedient to God's command. They are rebels.

See how Paul follows this up quickly with the warning that a day of judgment is coming. Man is commanded to repent *because* there is to be a judgment. The judge is the man of God's appointment — the man whom God has raised from the dead.

By this act of resurrection, God "gave assurance to all men". It was the Unknown God's way of making Himself known. It was His way of getting men to take notice, and to obey — or be punished.

God commands all men everywhere to repent. Let us come back to this thought. The obvious point has been made that those who do not repent are disobedient to God's command. They are rebels.

All this fits into a bigger Bible context. We have seen that, as children of Adam, all men inherit a sin-tending nature, and are subject to death.

Men have an exaggerated estimate of their own importance. They think, act, and speak as if they have a right to live for ever, and they resent the fact that they are subject to death. Yet it is obvious to those who know what sin-stricken human nature is worth, that God would not want rebellious little dustlings to disgrace the earth for ever. The fact that the members of this rebel race have a chance to live at all is evidence of God's mercy. The fact that this opportunity to live carries with it another wonderful possibility — that of living for ever — is evidence of a mercy that should fill us with astonishment and gratitude.

"This is the condemnation..."

God does not blame men for inheriting a rebellious nature. He knows that it is their misfortune, and not their fault. What God *does* blame men for is their refusal to repent when all the facts are presented to them.

We, who are by nature rebels, become *wilful* rebels when we refuse to hear God's Word, and repent. This explains Paul's stern warning that God will no longer tolerate the idolatrous practices of the nations. By raising Jesus from the dead. He has given adequate proof of His power and His interest in human affairs. Men must repent — or change their lives — because the resurrected One will also be the judge.

This explains too the words of the Judge:

"This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (John 3: 19).

The people of ancient Athens were not really so different from the people of our day. See how the Athenians reacted to Paul's message:

"Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked; but others said, "We will hear you again about this" ... But some men joined him and believed..." (Acts 17: 32-34—R. S. V.).

There were then three types of people: those who mocked; those who seemed impressed for the moment, but did nothing about it; and those who

obeyed the gospel.

Two classes

It would be more correct to say that there were two main classes:

1. Those who did not obey God's command to repent.
2. Those who obeyed.

Then we can subdivide the disobedient people into:

- (a) Those who were positively hostile.
- (b) Those who showed their low estimate of God's message by doing nothing, although they knew that they were in the rebel camp.

Judgment

Paul's warning concerning judgments to come connects up with the words from Daniel (12: 2), already quoted:

"And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."

When Christ returns to the earth, he will raise the dead, and judge them. Those who, by God's grace, are accounted worthy will receive everlasting life; and shame and destruction will be the portion of the unworthy.

The words of Paul to the Thessalonians are appropriate here:

"The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord... when he shall come to be glorified in his saints..." (2 Thess. 1: 7-10).

"Like the beasts... "

Reverting to our classification of men, based on Acts 17: if we want a more complete analysis, we have to add one extra subdivision to the *disobedient* class — namely, those who have lived and died without having heard the gospel message. Although, as children of Adam, these men are sinners, there is no special guilt attaching to their sin, because of their ignorance. From God's point of view, these people are like the beasts of the field.

The Scriptures leave us in no doubt concerning the fate of those who have spent their lives in spiritual darkness. They have lived like the animals, and they die like the animals. They die, and remain dead for ever. In other words, they perish. Here are two passages, the first from the Old Testament, and the second from the New Testament, that make this clear:

"Man that is in honour, and understandeth not, is like the beasts that perish" (Psa. 49: 20).

"As many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law" (Rom. 2: 12).

To round off this section of our study, the reading of two portions of Scripture is recommended: the whole of Psalm 49, a verse of which is quoted above, and Isaiah 26: 13 and 14.

6. LOOSE ENDS

Our purpose now is to deal, very briefly, with the following outstanding questions:

1. Where will the righteous live after the resurrection?
2. What will they do?
3. What will happen to those who are alive when Christ returns?
4. What about hell?

Where will the righteous live?

If I quote the first part of the verse, you will probably be able to finish it:

"Blessed are the meek.

Yes, the second half of Matthew 5: 5 is:

"... for they shall inherit the earth."

The abode of the righteous will be the earth. This is the consistent teaching of Scripture. There are about half a dozen statements to this effect in Psalm 37 alone.

The idea that people go to heaven when they die is linked up with the unscriptural notion that the soul is immortal. In John 3 we read that "no man hath ascended up to heaven" (verse 13).

Christ is coming back to the earth to be united to his people. The exultant words of Paul come to mind again:

"For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming?" (1 Thess. 2: 19).

What will the righteous do?

Here again, I must refer back to an earlier statement:

"Two great purposes will be fulfilled when Christ comes again:

1. *"He will establish the kingdom of God on earth."*³
2. *"He will raise the dead, and reward the righteous."*

The work of those who have been raised from the dead and made immortal will be to assist Christ in the government of the world, when the Kingdom of God is established:

"Thou... hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth" (Rev. 5: 9, 10).

What will happen to those who are alive when Christ returns?

Some of those who are alive when Christ returns will be considered responsible. For them, there will be a judgment, as there will be for those who are raised from the dead. Thus Paul speaks of Christ Jesus, "who is to judge the living and the dead" (2 Tim. 4: 1. R. S. V.).

Those who are found faithful will share in the great work of ruling the world. If there are rulers, there must be people to be ruled over. The nations of the world who survive the destruction associated with the return of Christ, will be the subject nations of the kingdom.

"The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever" (Rev. 11: 15).

Hell

Generally speaking, when we meet the word, *hell*, in the Bible, it means simply, *the grave*.

The original language of the Old Testament is Hebrew; and the original Hebrew word for *hell* is *sheol*. In about half the places where the word *sheol* occurs the translators of the "King James" Bible have actually rendered it *grave*; and they could have done so in the other half too.

The original language of the New Testament was Greek; and the Greek word, *hades*, means the same as the Hebrew word, *sheol* — the grave.

³ See Luke 1: 32, 33. Rev. 11: 15. 46

There is, however, another Greek word that has been translated *hell*. It is *Gehenna*. This is really the name of a place — a valley outside Jerusalem. For centuries this valley had been used as a huge rubbish dump, where fire and worms consumed the refuse.

The bodies of executed criminals were often thrown into Gehenna and, in times of siege, carcasses were flung there indiscriminately. Accordingly, *Gehenna* became a symbol of utter destruction.

The Lord Jesus was using the word in this figurative sense when he spoke of impenitent people being cast into Gehenna, "where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched". They would be utterly destroyed.

7. THE CROSS—THE PLACE OF DECISION

The crucifiers

We have seen that there are two classes of people in the world: the majority, who do not obey God's call to repentance; and the minority, who do. Another way of saying this is: there are those who are on the broad way, that leads to destruction; and those on the narrow way that leads to life.⁴

There is another way again — a startling way — of distinguishing between men and men. There are those who crucify Christ; and those who are crucified with Christ.

Those who crucify Christ! But surely they were a little band of desperately wicked people who lived in Palestine nearly two thousand years ago?

Not such a little band ! And many would doubtless have said, not so wicked either. There were many people involved, and — more significant — many types of people.

Some of them were very respectable people too.

Although the Jews and Romans hated each other, the crucifixion was a combined operation, in which both played vital roles.

Pharisees and Sadducees are often confused. They were, in fact, very different types. They represented the narrow-minded scribe class, and the broad-minded priest class, respectively. They regarded each other with suspicion and contempt. Yet they were united in common purpose on this occasion.

That mixed multitude also included a seditious murderer named Barabbas, and a false apostle named Judas. Strangely enough, the quarrel between King Herod and Governor Pilate was patched up on this occasion too. And even the common people were persuaded to join in the clamour and cry, "Crucify him, crucify him!"

All these different types of people sank their differences and united against a common enemy. Although the differences had hitherto seemed important, the impact of Christ's presence proved that they were trivial. All these people represented the world — and the world crucified Christ. The forces of evil

⁴ Matt. 7: 13, 14

were united against the only righteous man.

All who belong to the world are on the side of those who crucified Christ. Men may hold up their hands with horror at the enormity of the crime; yet if they have not renounced the world, they are themselves numbered amongst the crucifiers.

The force of this is quickly demonstrated. The Lord Jesus is called, the *Word of God*. He was rejected and despised. Today the Word of God comes to us as a book. This unique book is likewise rejected and despised. Those who, by active hostility or sheer neglect, reject the written Word today, would have rejected the *Word made flesh*, if they had been there.

The crucified ones

Long before his martyrdom, the Apostle Paul made an extraordinary statement. He said, "I am crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2: 20).

Paul had belonged to the other camp. When he persecuted the Christians, their Lord took it personally and said, "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest". Now he had changed sides, and shared the sufferings of the crucified Nazarene.

When Paul was converted, he responded to the invitation of the Lord Jesus to take up his cross and follow him.

As a rule, people who carried crosses in those days were going to be crucified. Each condemned man was compelled by the Romans to carry his cross to the place of crucifixion. When therefore Jesus invited men to take up their crosses and follow him, he was asking them to go to the place of crucifixion and die with him there.

Can you picture the scene? A solemn, single file procession, with Jesus in the lead. Each has a cross upon his shoulder. They are following Jesus to the place of crucifixion.

Crucified with Christ: what does it really mean? First let us witness the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and then we can discuss its meaning.

The cross of Christ

Scourging came first. The body was whipped with leathern thongs to which small pieces of bone or metal were attached. The flesh was ripped open.

Some people died as a result of scourging.

Then big nails were driven through hands and feet, and the body was pinned to a wooden cross. This cross, with its burden of quivering human flesh was lifted to an upright position. Its foot was dropped into a hole in the ground, prepared for the purpose, and there the victim was left to die a lingering death.

Compared with others, the Lord Jesus died quickly. Yet he hung for hours upon the cross.

It is written that Jesus "endured the cross, *despising the shame*".⁵ From this distance, we tend to regard the cross as something beautiful. Let there be no mistake about it: when our Lord was crucified, crucifixion was considered to be a shameful, ugly death. It was the death of cursed and hated criminals. People stared, shuddered and took warning. Indeed, people argued that Jesus could not have been the son of God, because (they said) God would never have allowed His son to die such a death.

Why the cross?

Jesus Christ is the only man who has ever lived a perfect life. Why had he to die? And why such a painful and shameful death?

One answer is: because the men who put him to death were so cruel and wicked.

This sounds obvious, but it is worth pondering. We have seen that the crucifixion of Christ was the decision of "the world". What this really means is that human beings cannot tolerate a person whose great ambition in life is to obey the laws of God. Or, to put it in another way: human beings hate God's laws.

We have already faced the hard facts about the vileness of human nature. The fact that the world crucified Christ is a convincing demonstration of the fact that the case against human nature has not been overstated.

The will of God

Obviously God could have intervened and prevented this dreadful crime. Why did He stay His hand?

⁵ Heb. 12: 2.

The astonishing truth is that it was all part of God's plan. God used wicked men to fulfil His purpose. Don't misunderstand me here. God did not make these men wicked. He *used* their wickedness to fulfil His purpose. The fact that the crucifixion of Christ was a part of God's plan is exceedingly important. Here is a passage that states this categorically:

"This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men" (Acts 2: 23—R. S. V.).

So God planned it all. Indeed He commanded His son to submit to crucifixion. Jesus could have evaded it. The temptation must have been great, but he "became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross".⁶

Still we must ask, Why? Why did God command His son to die?

Let the Scriptures answer this question for us:

"Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures" (1 Cor. 15: 3).

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3: 16).

So Christ died to save men from sin and death.

The only way

But was there no other way? Why had Jesus to *die* to save men from sin and death? And why such a death?

There was no other way. Although Jesus thrice besought his Father that, if it were possible, this cup should pass from him, it was not possible.

This brings us to an inescapable conclusion — a conclusion to which we have already been brought by several lines of evidence. Yet again we have a pointer to man's wretched condition. Man's condition must have been pitiable indeed, if nothing less drastic than crucifixion of the Son of God could save him.

⁶Phil. 2: 8.

Righteousness and life

Let us retrace our steps. By his death Christ provides us with a way of escape from sin and death.

We have already discussed the relationship between sin and death. Man is subject to death because he is a sinner. In the words of Paul, "The wages of sin is death".⁷

Since death is the consequence of sin, we should expect life to be dependent upon righteousness. It is, in fact, a basic principle that only righteous people receive eternal life from God.

The quest for righteousness is one of the great themes of Paul's letter to the Romans. Man cannot attain righteousness by his own efforts; nor can he attain it through the Law of Moses. Jews and Gentiles are all "under sin". Against this unhappy background, Paul declares triumphantly:

"All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified (or made righteous) freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness... that he might be just, and the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus" (Rom. 3: 23-26)

Frankly, the detail of this passage is difficult to understand. But some truths come shining through. Already we have seen that man must become righteous before he can receive eternal life. This scripture tells us that this righteousness is given him by God. God accounts men righteous, and he does it, somehow, through the death of Christ.

Justice and mercy

Still we have not plumbed the depths of this profound subject. Nor indeed shall we do so here; but we can, at least, go a little deeper.

Think, for a moment of Adam. Because he sinned, God condemned him to death. Adam set the pattern for the whole human race. All human beings are "in Adam".⁸ From him they inherit a sin-biased nature, and like him they return to the dust.

⁷ Rom. 6: 23.

⁸ 1 Cor. 15:22

By pronouncing the death sentence upon mankind, God is upholding His own righteous law. Because God is righteous, and because God always will be righteous. He can never waive this death sentence upon the children of Adam. To do so would be to say that sin does not matter.

Yet God is a God of mercy too. Clear thinking is necessary here. It is important to understand that God's mercy is never in conflict with God's justice. What happens, rather, is that God's mercy is extended to those who acknowledge His justice. Those who say that the death sentence is just are not spared this sentence, but through Christ they are offered life beyond the grave.

The Lord Jesus was a member of the human race. He was "in all points tempted like as we are".⁹ Because Jesus was, by his birth, a child of Adam, God required that he too should die. Jesus was not rebellious. He accepted death. But, because he had never sinned, God could, without being inconsistent with his own righteous principles, raise him from the dead and make him immortal.

The uniqueness of Jesus

Jesus accepted death. In this he was different from other men He did not kick against God's righteous law. The fact that he had never sinned makes the lesson more impressive. If he could humbly accept death, how much more should we, who have earned it so abundantly.

The uniqueness of Jesus can be expressed like this. Whereas other men sin freely, but resent the death which comes because of sin, Jesus resisted sin completely, and accepted death. He upheld God's righteous laws completely. No wonder God restored to him his life.

Jesus was made like us...

The uniqueness of Jesus concerned his character, and not his nature. His nature was human — just like ours.

To avoid misunderstanding, let it be stated emphatically that Jesus Christ was, in a unique sense, the Son of God. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

⁹ Heb. 4: 15.

But he was born of a woman, and "in the days of his flesh", he partook of human nature and human infirmity. (After his resurrection he partook of "the divine nature"). The humanity of Jesus is another "hard" fact that many people are not willing to receive. Yet the Scriptures are emphatic — indeed dogmatic — on the point. Consider the following statements:

"Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same..." (Heb. 2: 14).

"For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham. Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest... For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted" (Heb. 2: 16-18).

"For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:

To deny that Jesus possessed a nature that could be tempted is to deny Scripture. Moreover, it reduces the temptation in the wilderness to a piece of play-acting. If Jesus possessed a nature that was above temptation, then the temptation was not real. We do not dishonour the Lord Jesus when we say that he had a nature like ours. We honour him the more, for we say that *although* he had a nature like ours, he never yielded to temptation, whereas we often do.

If we believe that Jesus was "touched with the feeling of our infirmities", we can better understand the purpose of his death.

Look at it this way. Because Jesus came in our nature, he himself had to wage war against sin. His Father told him what to do. There were two vital steps:

1. Never was he to yield to temptation and become a sinner. "He was in all points tempted like as we are, *yet without sin.*"
2. The impulses of his human nature — the nature that he inherited from Adam had to be completely overcome. As long as the nature remained alive, temptation was a possibility, and the battle against sin was not completed. So "he put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb. 9: 26). In doing this he completely submitted to the will of God and conquered his human will.

Thus Jesus, in his life and by his death, completely and consistently vanquished sin in himself. Sin was destroyed, but Jesus died in the process. God completed the work by raising him to life and immortality.

... and we must be like him

The way of Adam is the way of disobedience, self-indulgence, sin and death. Adam grasped at life, and obtained death.

The way of Christ is the way of obedience, self-denial, righteousness and life. Jesus accepted death, and obtained life.

Thus Jesus began a new order. Naturally, we belong to Adam. We are on the broad way of sin and death. We are invited to renounce Adam, and transfer our allegiance to Christ.

The Scriptures tell us that Christ died for us. Many people take this to mean that Christ died instead of us, and therefore we need not die. This is not the message of the Bible. Instead, we must die with Christ. We must identify ourselves with him in death, that we may share in his life too. We must take up our cross and follow him — to the place of crucifixion.

We are not asked to die with him *literally*. We crucify our Adamic impulses. We die to sin. That is what repentance means.

This great theme is expounded by Paul in Romans 6:

"So many of us as were baptised into Jesus Christ were baptised into his death. Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life... Our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin" (verses 3-7).

Suppose we decide to make a start. We want to forsake Adam and follow Christ. How do we set about it? The answer has been given in the passage from Romans 6: baptism. In the words of Peter:

"Repent, and be baptised every one of you" (Acts 2: 38).

8. NEW CREATURES

Priorities

Living for ever with Christ, in an earth filled with the glory of God: the prospects are boundless! But our minds are not big enough to appreciate the true worth of these eternal blessings.

We are concerned with other matters. The things of this world crowd in on us, and take possession of our minds. Compared with the great, eternal realities, the matters that usually occupy our minds are footling. They present themselves in a friendly, innocent sort of way; and, all unsuspecting, we welcome them. But soon they become tyrants that completely rule our lives. The tyranny of narcotics is feeble in comparison with this vast, self-induced brainwash that determines the course of human life.

Indeed, some of the things that interest us are harmless enough in themselves. It is our attitude to them that is wrong. Take sport, for example. A little healthy recreation can fulfil a useful purpose. It can invigorate the body and refresh the mind, preparing it for higher purposes. But to let sport make massive demands on time and energy is to escape, like children, from the responsibilities of life.

There is a more subtle temptation. Some things may be described as necessities of life. We need food, clothing, a place to live and a few material possessions. It is right that we should work to earn money to procure these things for ourselves and our dependents.

But it is wrong to make the quest for these things the great purpose of our lives. We do not live for the purpose of acquiring these things. We acquire these things for the purpose of living. Then, with lives thus provided for, our business should be to fulfil the higher purpose to which we have been called. Most people know of no higher purpose. They get money, and the things that money can buy, in order to live, in order to seek more money and buy better things... They cannot see that they are going round in circles, like puppy dogs chasing their tails.

The stern words of the Lord Jesus concerning the folly of being obsessed with material things have gone unheeded. Never has there been such a materialistic age as ours. But hear the words of Jesus, from Luke 12:

"Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth" (verse 15).

"The life is more than meat, and the body is more than raiment" (verse 23).

Our great purpose, says Jesus, must be to seek the kingdom of God:

"But rather seek ye the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added unto you. Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (verses 31, 32).

If we strive to enter into the kingdom of God, it will be God's pleasure to give us a place in that kingdom; and we can be assured that He will keep us supplied with other necessary things as well. If, however, we are obsessed with these other things, we cannot expect a place in God's kingdom, and there is no guarantee that we shall receive these things in which we are so interested, either.

God's work

We must then get our priorities properly sorted out. God's kingdom must be priority number one.

Expressed in another way, we must renounce Adam and follow Christ. That was the theme of Romans 6. Those who have been baptised into Christ must "walk, in newness of life"; their lives must be "in the likeness of his resurrection".

The words of Paul to the Corinthians are startlingly vivid: "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature" (2 Cor. 5: 17).

New creatures in Christ: how can we ever rise to such a high calling? If we have tried to live more worthily, we will have learned the hard way how feeble human nature is. Ultimately we are forced to confess that we cannot make the grade.

Let's change the emphasis: *we cannot make the grade*. The creation of a new creature in Christ is God's work. We must invite God to take over.

How then does God work in us and through us?

The word, *miracle*, can rightly be applied to this divine operation. But we must be careful not to confuse miracle with magic. God does not produce effects without adequate causes.

"The seed is the Word"

The creation of a new creature consists of a process, and an event. The process is a long one. It involves the gradual transformation of the mind. Only those who are willing to submit to the discipline will be privileged to receive the divine education that effects this change.

At the end of the process comes the event. Those who have undergone the mental transformation will be given bodies to match their spiritual minds. After the resurrection, they will receive new natures, free from all sinful impulses, and immortal.

We are concerned here with the mental change that should be taking place now. There are two notable passages in the New Testament concerning rebirth, and in each of them the positive factor which causes the rebirth is the Word of God.

"Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures" (James 1: 18).

"Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever" (1 Peter 1: 23).

Not only is the birth of a child of God effected by the Word of God: the subsequent growth is an operation of the Word too. Both James and Peter follow up their statements concerning rebirth by the Word with an exhortation to stifle all such human impulses and utterances as would resist the free course of the Word of God.

James says:

"Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear (i. e. to hear the Word), slow to speak, slow to wrath ... Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls. But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only..." (James 1: 19-22).

And Peter:

"Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings, as newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby" (1 Peter 2: 1, 2).

The lesson is clear. We must read, and continue to read, the Scriptures, We must approach the Word of God with a teachable spirit, and allow its benign influence to be a decisive factor in the shaping of our lives. This attitude to the Bible is quite exceptional. We have to be exceptional people.

There is no substitute for regular, systematic reading of Scripture.

It was the Lord Jesus who said, in expounding the famous parable of the Sower, "The seed is the word".¹⁰

¹⁰ Luke 8: 11.

9. THE VITAL STEP

Counting the cost

Sooner or later we have to make a decision. We have seen that there are several ways of expressing it. Shall we follow Adam, or Christ? Shall we seek the things of this life, or the kingdom of God? Shall we be carnally minded, or spiritually minded? Shall we be crucifiers of Christ, or shall we be crucified with him?

Those who, by neglect or indecision, will not face the issue, have, by their very attitude, already made their decision. Those who do not resolve to follow Christ, show their preference for the way of Adam.

It will surely be understood, from all that has been discussed, that a great multitude of professing Christians are, despite their protestations, followers of Adam. The Lord Jesus himself leaves us in no doubt about this. Immediately after speaking of the broad and narrow ways, he says:

"Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits..."

"Not every one that saith to me Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name ? and in thy name have cast out devils ? and in thy name done many wonderful works ? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Matt. 7: 15-23).

Here then is the stark challenge of Christianity: shall we follow Adam, and perish, or shall we follow Christ, and live for ever?

A caution here! The Lord Jesus has no respect for those who make vows, but do not fulfil them enthusiastically. His condemnation of the lukewarm Laodicean community is terrifying in its severity:

"I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth" (Rev. 3: 15, 16).

So, to use again the Lord's words, we must *count the cost*.¹¹

But, as we have kept reminding ourselves, human nature is very deceitful. Let us not make this business of counting the cost an excuse for evading our responsibilities. Life is very short, and very precarious.

Baptism

Let us return to a question that was raised earlier. Suppose that, after prayer and diligent reading of Scripture, we decide that we want to renounce Adam and follow Christ: how do we make a start?

The answer has been given: "Repent and be baptised, every one of you."

Many people quibble about baptism — some about the question of its necessity, some about the age when it should take place, some about the method.

Example and precept

Is baptism really necessary?

You will remember the occasion when Jesus asked John to baptise him, John tried to put Jesus off. He was too good. "He had no sins to wash away. But Jesus insisted:

"Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness"
(*Matt. 3: 15*).

Notice how Jesus used the word *us*: "... thus it becometh *us* to fulfil all righteousness." He insisted that he *and we* must be baptised. Dare we challenge his authority?

Let us turn again to the words of Paul concerning baptism in Romans 6. He not only tells us that baptism is necessary, but also explains why. By baptism we formally declare that it is our intention to die with Christ — to crucify our sinful Adamic impulses:

¹¹ Luke 14: 28.

"So many of us as were baptised into Jesus Christ were baptised into his death. Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life... Our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin, for he that is dead is freed from sin" (verses 3-7).

The decision to be baptised is the greatest decision of our lives. It is as grown people, and not infants, that we must face this fateful issue. To quote Jesus again, "He that *believeth* and is baptised shall be saved".

Belief comes first; then baptism.

The only method

If the New Testament is our guide, the question of the method of baptism will be quickly settled.

The New Testament knows only one method of baptism: immersion in water. The Greek word, *baptizo*, means, to *dip* or to *immerse*; and a number of scriptures show that this must have been the method. For example:

"And Jesus, when he was baptised, went up straightway out of the water" (Matt. 3: 16).

Clearly, Jesus must, first, have gone down into the water.

The two following passages speak for themselves:

"And John also was baptising in Ænon near to Salim, because there was much water there" (John 3: 23).

"They went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptised him. And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip..." (Acts 8: 38, 39).

In the next quotation, the words, "buried with him by baptism into death", are only appropriate if the method is immersion:

"Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6: 4).

In conclusion

The issues of life and death have been put before you. Now it rests with you. God does not force people to accept the gospel despite themselves. It has been aptly stated that God draws men, but He does not drag them.

If you reject God's invitation to receive eternal blessings, you give proof of your own unworthiness to receive these blessings. That is how divine selection works.

if you accept God's invitation — if you make your vows, and, by God's grace, fulfil them — yours will be the unspeakable joy of hearing the great Judge saying, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world".¹²

The promised kingdom cannot be very far away, but there will probably be *some* waiting period. This will have a meaning and a purpose for those who follow Christ. It will be a time of preparation.

There will be some tribulation — let us not conceal this fact. That is a part of the training. But there will be blessings too, and a hope that will provide a solid anchorage when people everywhere will be distraught with fear.

Already we can see the beginning of the fulfilment of the Lord's prophecy concerning "distress of nations with perplexity... men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth".¹³ This is the time when true disciples can look up and lift up their heads, for their redemption draws nigh. The return of their Lord is near.

Peter Watkins

¹² Matt. 25: 34.

¹³ Luke 21: 25-31.

You are invited to write

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