

OPEN LETTER TO ANGUS BUCHAN

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I HAVE BEEN ENCOURAGED BY YOU

My Dear Brother Angus

It is with great joy that I have watched you make use of the opportunities God has given you. Opportunity to speak for God is a privilege you have been granted. This was Paul's attitude when he said, "make the *most* of *every* opportunity" (Colossians 4:5. See also Ephesians 5:16). He saw them as precious gifts to be used properly for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I have also been encouraged by your zeal as you speak for God. This was one of the distinguishing features of the Lord Jesus Himself as he lived in this cursed world (John 2:17). In fact, Paul instructs Christians never to be lacking in zeal but to keep their spiritual fervour (Romans 12:11).

Another commendable thing I have seen in you brother, is your boldness over the issue of sin. Far too many Christians are ashamed of the word "sin" today in the face of a world that makes fun of sin. Scripture says that it is *fools* who mock at making amends for sin—they think sin is a trivial thing (Proverbs 14:9). You have stood in front of fools and have boldly spoken on the issue of sin. That is commendable. This was the way in which the writers of Scripture spoke as well (Matthew 23, Mark 7:20-23a, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

Furthermore, you have done well to place accountability on the individual, insisting that he/she deals with their own relationship with God rather than saying, "But what about *them*?" (Remember, the Lord even rebuked Peter for doing this—John 21:21-22). Scripture sees each individual as standing or falling before God as an individual (Romans 14:4) and insists on each individual making sure that his own personal life is pleasing to God (1 Thessalonians 4:11). Particularly for those who preach the Word of God or serve in the church of Christ, they have a responsibility before God to manage their own families well (1 Timothy 3:4-5). Your teaching and attitude in this regard has been a refreshing change from the self-pity emphasis that comes from many pulpits today. Modern preachers tend to see their hearers as *helpless victims* who are so affected by things other people have done to them that they can't possibly be expected to live exemplary lives. Thank you for that!

Other things I would like to commend you for are these:

- Your declaration that you stand on the Bible, the Word of God.
- Your declaration that it is critical to be born again
- Your declaration that it is faith in God that is important and not faith in faith
- Your declaration that there is no alternative but to trust in God
- Your call to your hearers to humble themselves before the Lord
- Your call to your hearers to forgive others unconditionally—dealing with relationships before issues, as does Scripture

I HAVE WRITTEN AN OPEN LETTER BECAUSE...

I have written to you, brother, and have chosen to write this as an open letter, for the following reasons:

- You have become a very well-known and prominent person, and therefore, anything you do has an impact on a wide audience. You know more than anyone, I'm sure, what kind of responsibility you bear, being in such a visible position. It is because you are a public figure, and what you say is said in public, that I have written a public letter.
- I also am a man who serves the Lord by preaching the Gospel of the Lord Jesus on a regular basis, and as such, people regularly ask me what I think of your ministry. Now I do not desire to speak negatively about you nor slander you, so I am writing my position formally so I can direct people who ask me about you, to this letter.
- Finally, I write this letter to you as an appeal, from one Christian to another. I am your friend, not your enemy. As such, I desire for you even greater opportunity to preach, to find joy in your preaching and to know that your preaching is honouring God.

I DESIRE TO BUILD YOU UP

I am aware, dear brother, of the attacks you have received in the press. You have also surely been attacked in many letters from irate people. I humbly request that you view my letter, not as an attack, but as a word of encouragement. I desire to build you up, not break you down (Ephesians 4:29); to help you, not to assault you. I desire to be a friend, if you so desire, to whom you can speak on spiritual issues.

As I stand with you brother, allow me to share something with you that frightens me. I can think of few scenarios more alarming than being a prominent public figure, and unwittingly teaching something in error, and no-one loved me enough to call my attention to it. Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses (Proverbs 27:6). I know what it is to speak in public and to have people write me opposing letters. Immediately my pride inflates indignantly, and thereafter, I have to go through a process of confessing my sin to God, becoming humble and receiving the truth of what was said to me. May I respectfully ask you to consider what I have to say, even if it makes you angry at first?

THE SHOCK OF JOB'S "COMFORTERS"

You will remember what God said to Job's "comforters" after they had mashed him with their counsel:

After the Lord had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, "***I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken of me what is right***, as my servant Job has.⁸ So now take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and sacrifice a burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly. ***You have not spoken of me what is right***, as my servant Job has." (Job 42:7-8 NIV Emphasis mine)

What a shocking thing it must have been for those men to have sat with Job in his calamity, and to have advised him according to what they *thought* was accurate, God-

honouring counsel, and then have God declare that He is *angry* with them *because* they had *not spoken of Him what is right*. What they *thought* was right and what *was actually right* were two different things. In fact, in verse 8 God calls their application of what they thought was right to Job's case, *folly*.

THE CHURCH IS TRANSFORMED BY THE TRUTH

Down the centuries since then, human minds are still plagued by the haze of sin. Our thinking has been damaged by sin so that what we *think* is right may not actually *be* right at all. What a blessed thing it is to sit under the teaching of a true servant of God who has uncovered some element of truth from Scripture, and he teaches it so clearly that our sin-warped perspective is suddenly cleared in that area! To grasp a glorious new truth from Scripture is a wonderful thing. Something like this happened at the time of the Reformation. **A central truth of Scripture** that had been hidden in the blackness of the 1000-year Dark Ages was suddenly re-discovered. Coming to understand this basic teaching of Scripture revolutionised the church, so much so that God's people were willing to have their blood spilt to protect this new ray of light, beaming from the pages of Holy Scripture.

UNIVERSAL PRONENESS TO COME TO WRONG CONCLUSIONS

What I am saying dear brother is that the fallen human race—as you surely know—is *prone* to coming to the wrong conclusions about their standing before God, about God, about God's universe, the meaning of life; everything. Neither you nor I are exempt from this wretched haze of sin. What *seems right* to a person in this world may actually be the pathway to death (Proverbs 14:12 and 16:25). Our thinking is deceptive (Jeremiah 17:9). God says that there is *not one* person who *understands* accurately (Romans 3:11). Our thinking did not escape the fall of Genesis 3.

I SPEAK AS A SON TO A FATHER

Brother, I speak to you with the respect of a son to a father; If the entire human race fell into this erroneous thinking (among other things) with Adam as Romans 5:12-21 teaches, it is entirely possible that *you and I have both believed a certain degree of error*, and have *both taught a certain degree of error*? Would you not be filled with joy if this error could be shown to you clearly and you could see the truth? I surely would, and I surely have been filled with joy as my beliefs have been challenged over the years and my errors have been pinpointed. It is the wise man who listens to advice, but the fool who persists in his own way because he thinks it is right (Proverbs 12:15).

WHAT DID WE SAY WRONG?

If God were angry with you as he was with Job's counsellors, because they didn't speak of Him what was right, wouldn't you want to know what it was you said that made God angry? Wouldn't you want to repent of what you had said and believed and wouldn't you

want to go out and preach the truth with full confidence that what you are saying has God's blessing? I certainly would! Supposing you have agreed with what I have said, may I put before you, for your consideration, what I have noted while watching your sermons on DVD? I have made it my express purpose not to nit-pick, but to be helpful on major issues in which it appears to me, brother, you have *not spoken of God what is right*. May it never be said of you or I that we are *zealous for God*, but our zeal is *not based on knowledge* (Romans 10:2).

WHAT MUST I DO TO BE BORN AGAIN?

The first issue I would like to raise is the issue of being born again. You will remember that this is one of the items I commended you for at the start of this letter. I was so thrilled when you announced at Loftus that by the end of this event, everyone will know what it is to be born again. Brother, I waited in eager expectation for you to preach to the people on what it is to be born again, but I was left hungry. The people went away not knowing what it is to be born again.

I took notes and tried to understand from your preaching, what concept you have in mind when you speak about being born again. You spoke about *personal decision*, you seemed to be *challenging the people to do what is right*, you taught that people should be *committed to Christ*, and you even ended your message with the statement that it is not *good people* who go to heaven, but *believers*. Don't misunderstand me, I support you wholeheartedly in your appeals to the people to do these things. My concern is that these things do not add up to what it means to be born again. Dear brother, the Lord could use you so powerfully if you laid hold of the true, potent Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and preached it with the passion He has given you! I desire to see you drawn up higher in your spiritual understanding so you shine with a new vibrant message!

GUTTING A FISH

Before I describe something of the wonderful landscape of the glorious Gospel of the Bible, may I quickly make one more observation that saddened me? There is so much wrong teaching today that guts the Gospel much like we gut a fish we have caught. It urges people to believe that the critical focus of the Gospel is that there needs to be reconciliation between *people* and *people*. While I agree sincerely with reconciliation between people, that does not form the heart of the Gospel. People who have been genuinely born again do exhibit a sense of urgency about being reconciled to people they have sinned against and who have sinned against them. Reconciliation between people is a breathtaking *result* of being born again, but it is not the substance of being born again. If a person makes a decision to be reconciled to a father, son, mother, daughter, friend, as a result of hearing the preaching of the Word of God, that is something to praise God for, but that doesn't mean the person has been born again. Please forgive my repetition; it is not meant to be disrespectful, but to bring clarity, that I may not be misunderstood.

THE GLORIOUS GOSPEL OF THE BLESSED GOD

The Gospel of the Bible is all about *people* being reconciled to *God*, **not** *people* being reconciled to *people*. Even as you read this, I'm sure you know this, but there is an astonishing element to the Gospel that I believe I need to describe in more detail. Please brother, if you are feeling annoyed at my personal manner, I humbly request your forgiveness. Please do not let my awkward, perhaps abrasive words stop you from sitting back now and enjoying with me the subject that thrills our hearts the most—the glorious Gospel of the blessed God (1 Timothy 1:11). For the purpose of clarity and organization, I have arranged my comments on the Gospel under three headings: Your Hearer's Need, Your Hearer's Hope, and Your Hearer's Reward.

Your Hearer's Need

People Resembled God

God created man in His image (Genesis 1:27, 9:6). God created man more like Himself than any other creature on the face of His newly created earth. Man was a glorious being, who, when the animals and angels looked upon him, resembled God. This is how the words *image* and *likeness* are intended to be understood in Genesis 1:27 and 9:6, judging from the way Moses uses the words *image* and *likeness* again in Genesis 5:3. Just as a son is *like* his father in a limited number of ways, so mankind was *like* God in a number of ways. Surely he was a superb being.

People are Disgraced

This glorious resemblance to God, however, didn't last long in its unstained form. Oh the disgrace as Eve, then Adam, choose the lies of the devil over the promises of God. We find them disgracing themselves in front of the kind, spotless, radiant God, hiding in the garden because they are afraid and ashamed. Instead of holding their heads high in joy and purity, they now hang their heads in shame. They have reason to be filled with shame because they have done an immeasurably shameful thing. One can only imagine the sorrow in the hearts of the heavenly host as Adam and Eve are driven from Paradise and out into a weed-infested, thorny, cursed, unfriendly environment. While work in the garden was always a thrill and brought satisfaction, work was now harsh, unpleasant and slavish (Genesis 2 and 3).

People are Seriously Separated from God

Mankind, who had once been nearer to God, in fellowship and likeness, than any other created being, is now driven from God's presence in disgrace. Man is now alienated from God, separated from God, in exile from God. The wonderful fellowship in the garden is smashed. The majority of unbelievers today don't consider this separation from God to be a serious thing. They still think that all that is needed for a person to come back into the presence and favour of God is a decision, a commitment to Christ,

an effort to live a more holy life. This mindset is at war with what the Bible teaches about man's true, macabre position before God.

People are Dead!

Scripture gives us the perfect analogy for this condition of separation from God; **death!** (Ephesians 2:1, 5, 5:14, 1:19-20, John 5:21, 25, Romans 8:2, Colossians 2:13, 1 John 3:14, etc.) When a person dies a natural death, death brings about such a changed state in his person that his body is no longer *able* to communicate in this world. You can speak to a corpse, but he *can't hear*. You can urge a corpse to make a decision, but *he can't*. You can urge a corpse to commit his life to Christ, but *he can't*. (See Jesus teaching on this *inability* in John 8:47) God says that the barrier between Himself and the unbeliever is like the barrier between a living person and a dead person. That is how you and I need to think about unbelievers. They are dead.

People are Avoiding and Blaming God

The effects of this *death*, (the fulfilment of the warning of God before Adam and Eve fell into sin—Genesis 2:17) are immediately visible, even in Paradise. Look at Genesis 3. They sin against God and as soon as they hear Him walking in the garden they feel *shame* (verse 7), they *hide* from Him (verse 8), they *fear* Him (verse 10), and they *make excuses for their sin, shifting blame* (to God ultimately) (verses 12-13). See how radically they have changed. Judgement has come crashing down upon their heads. The Judge of the Universe is confronting them on this tiny spec of cosmic dust (earth), and they think they can *argue their way out* of the offence they have caused! Notice further that their minds are so warped that even though they are gripped with fear, their fear is like that of a self-preserving scavenger dog. They no longer have a twitch of respect for God, even daring to blame Him for their sin! (verses 12-13, see also Psalm 36:1, 55:19 and Romans 3:18).

People Won't Beg God for Mercy

Still more needs to be seen. Notice that when God does what He is obligated to do—judge sin—Adam and Eve are so disrespectful and so righteous in their own eyes that it doesn't even occur to them to beg God for mercy. Doesn't this whole situation scream out "Mercy!?" Don't you want to shout out on their behalf, "God have mercy on me, a sinner!?" (Luke 18:13). But no, this is what death looks like; spiritual death. No ability to see God clearly. No ability to understand God's economy. No ability to see the desirability of doing what is right.

Death is Universal

Sadly, this was not the end. Paul thumps the corpse down before us again in Romans 5:12. (This theme is taught forcefully in many texts in between Genesis 3 and Romans 5, but I am moving ahead to Romans 5 for the sake of brevity.) See what he is saying. Paul

is reminding us of a sobering fact. At exactly the same time that Adam stood before God and received his death sentence (dying spiritually, and the process of death beginning in his physical body) so you and I, along with the entire human race died. No, of course we weren't born yet, but when a "dead" person marries a "dead" person, they bear "dead" children. This condition of death has passed from Adam to every single person born into this world. The unsaved person is dead. He cannot see God, he cannot see the kingdom of God (John 3:3), he cannot sense his sinfulness or his true distance from God (Psalm 36:2). Oh the dreadful sadness of this state. Being so blind that you cannot even see your own need!

We Preach to Dead People who Need Life

Brother, it is to dead people that we preach. What is their **need**? They are **dead** and they need to be raised to **life**. I will discuss this *raising to life* under the next heading, but allow me the liberty to comment on one more matter in your Loftus sermon. You asked your audience what their need was. Oh I was so saddened when you elaborated on their need. Instead of their true need, *dead* people who need to be raised to *life*, you identified their needs as things like *cancer, sickness, financial problems, relationship problems*, etc. Oh dear brother, see that lost, miserable crowd's need! They are deprived of the truth, starved to death, suffocated. They are dead and face the terrible wrath of God for ever and ever (See the terrifying truth of Romans 1:18-32). Whether they *appear* this way or not, God says they are *hostile* toward Him in their hearts and they *cannot* (like a corpse) submit to God's law (Romans 8:7). What they need is not a cure from a painful sickness. They need **LIFE!** (John 10:10). (Incidentally their pain may be accomplishing God's purpose of driving them to Christ in repentance (Psalm 107:12, Revelation 16:11)) The modern scourge is that the masses see Jesus as the great genie in the lamp. They are happy for Him to respond to their expedient rubbing of the lamp to heal their sicknesses and cause their businesses to prosper, but He must leave them to be the kind of people they want to be (John 5:40). Yes, you preached against sin, but you didn't deal with their real need.

Your Hearer's Hope

How are Dead People Raised to Life?

Upon grasping the gravity of man's true need before God, the thought must begin to prick within our minds. If an unbeliever is truly dead, as Scripture declares, then how does he come to life? How can I even speak to him about Jesus? How is it that he ever comes to see Jesus at all and call out to Him for mercy (like blind Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46-52). It is here that **the** Gospel shines so brightly. This is why I have been so burdened that I have felt compelled to write this letter. It is *only the* Gospel that God uses to blast life into unbelieving corpses so that they can see God, see the kingdom of God, see their true sinfulness and repent (John 3:3).

Faith Comes From Hearing THE Message

God uses the medium (the “hosepipe”) of *faith* to grant salvation life from spiritual death. This is exactly what Paul is teaching in Romans 10:17, “Consequently, ***faith comes from hearing the message***, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.” Is this not remarkable? You have a corpse who can’t hear a thing because he is dead. But there is *one point of access*, and that is *faith* that is *given* to that corpse, *as he is exposed to the Gospel message*. Do you see what is happening? The preacher preaches and the sound waves of his voice shake the surface of the eardrums of the dead person. Nothing happens, just as nothing happens when you preach to a tree. But then suddenly, ***faith comes!*** How does it *come*? God *gives* that corpse, at the moment of His (God’s) choosing, *faith* (Ephesians 2:8).

WHAT Faith Comes?

What is this *faith* that God graciously gives this corpse as a *gift*? Look at Hebrews 11. In this chapter, the author is showcasing some of the *results* of the kind of faith we are speaking about. He traces the lives of many of the saints to whom God gave this faith and shows how radically different their lives were from the lives of the faithless masses.

Just a quick comment before we look at the Hebrews 11 kind of faith. I am aware that some people teach that *everyone has faith*, and they use the old (worn out) idea that *everyone* exercises ***faith*** when they—for example—sit on a chair. They ***believe*** that the chair will hold them. They swig out of a Coke can by ***faith***, simply believing that the black, sticky substance in the tin *really is* Coke. They then go on to tell you that all you have to do is direct ***that faith*** toward Christ. This is contrary to what Paul taught in 2 Thessalonians 3:2 when he said, “*not all men have faith*”.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones called that idea of faith the principle of *mathematical probability*. You simply use your experience in calculating a situation to make a decision as to whether you can do a certain thing or not. With experience, a person can, at a glance, estimate the strengths of materials. The chair has always held you so it will probably hold you again etc. I also think that this kind of talk about faith is ***confusing and unhelpful***.

True God-Given Faith Produces Results

Back to Hebrews 11, let us examine the nature of true saving faith.

Many people jump into Hebrews 11 and declare that verse 1 is a *definition* of faith. Rather, I believe, with people like John Calvin (see his commentary on Hebrews 11:1), that Hebrews 11, including verse 1 is speaking about *some* of the *results* of saving faith. In other words, *if a person has saving faith, this is the kind of action that will progressively become natural to him/her*. Surely then, if you or I are struggling to live holy and exemplary lives (the results of God-given faith), the first question we must ask, has to do with our *faith*. Do I have the kind of faith that drives and empowers me to live the life of faith? Remember what I said a moment ago, not all men have faith! (2 Thessalonians 3:2)

What is True God-Given Faith?

If Hebrews 11:1 is not a *definition* of faith, then *what is faith*? Are you satisfied with the pat answer that faith is “believing in God”? I hope not, because even the *demons* do that—remember? (James 2:19). You and I must ask ourselves the question, “Is our faith any different?” Please follow me into this discovery of true saving faith.

True God-Given Faith is the Ability to See

Read Hebrews 11 again and notice the emphasis on *seeing*. It begins in verse 1 and is spoken about in verses 3, 7, 13, 14, 23, 26 and 27. As I read these verses, I become excited about the vast possibilities for the person who has this faith. It appears to me that *at the heart of saving faith* is the *ability to see God and His kingdom*. There is something thrilling about the fact that when God grants a dead sinner the *gift of faith*, (Ephesians 2:8-10) God is thereby granting that person the *ability to see God and His kingdom*. Although the person, to whom God has miraculously given saving faith, is not able to see God or His kingdom with his physical eyes (as Hebrews 1:1 teaches), he does have the “spiritual eyes” to see and know the reality of God and His kingdom in such a way that it radically changes his life.

I would like to show, at a glance, a few other texts in Scripture where this *faith-as-seeing* is taught.

Matthew Teaches Faith as the Ability to See

In **Matthew 13:13**, the Lord says, “Though *seeing*, they do not *see*; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.” (NIV, emphasis mine). This passage brings out such dearness between the Lord and His disciples. Although there are crowds pressing around Him most of the time, the majority of them *can’t* see. Yes, they have eyes, and they are *looking* at Jesus, but there is *something in particular they can’t* see. What is that? The Lord answers that question in verse 11, “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.” So God has given those disciples (and all true believers) the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but He has not given them to everyone. Remember, not all men have faith!

“But what does that have to do with *seeing*?” you may ask. Again, the Lord answers that question in verse 16, “But blessed are *your eyes* because *they see*, and your ears because they hear.” Is it not obvious that the disciple who has been given the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven is the disciple who can *see*? Those who have not been given that knowledge are those who cannot *see*. The God-given ability to see (saving faith) is what distinguishes the believer from the unbeliever. Please take some time to take this passage apart because I have hardly even touched on it here.

Mark Teaches Faith as the Ability to See

Consider **Mark 8:17-18**. The disciples are in the boat and the Lord speaks to them in response to their concern about the bread supply. He asks them if they still don’t *see*. Of course they can *see*; they are looking at Jesus as He speaks to them. Jesus was asking them something far vaster however. He is shaking them awake because while they are

gawking at him with their physical eyes, they *can't* see that they are looking at *God-with-us!* Don't they grasp the magnitude of this moment? The Creator of the universe is speaking to them! Do they have any idea of the measureless eternal concepts in the mind of Jesus? Do they have any true appreciation for the stupendous privilege of being called by God—twelve men out of a world of wasted sinners? Jesus is asking, "Can you see?"

Paul Teaches Faith as the Ability to See

In **Romans 15:21** Paul speaks about the fact that his practise is to preach in places where Christ is not known. *As a result of his preaching*, people who have not heard about Christ will come to see. Here the word "see" and the word "understand" are synonymous. As you read this verse, probably the most prominent text that comes to mind is Romans 10:17, "Consequently, *faith comes from hearing the message*, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." I conclude that in the mind of Paul, to receive the faculty of *saving faith* is to receive the faculty of *sight* (or *spiritual understanding*).

John Teaches Faith as the Ability to See

Then there is **John 3:3** (which we have already referred to). This verse encapsulates such visions of glory that the believer will only grasp it in any significant measure when he comes to see Jesus, in eternal glory, as *He is*. (1 John 3:2, Psalm 11:7, Revelation 22:4) So many people have interpreted this verse to mean that unless a person is born again he will never get to heaven so he will never see the kingdom of God. It appears to me however that it should be taken to mean that unless a person is born again, *he has no ability to perceive* the kingdom of God. Here, the person who is born again is the person who has the *ability to see* the kingdom of God. This, I understand, to be one of the simplest, most direct, most delightful statements of *faith as seeing* in the whole Bible.

You know the wonderful story of **John 9**. Here we have a man born blind. I find this chapter a stirring analogy of *faith as seeing*. The Lord graciously reaches into this miserable blind man's life and grants him the ability to see. This is not the whole story here however. The Lord Jesus declares in verse 3 that the *reason* this man was born blind was that the work of God might be displayed in his life. Now to most who saw Jesus give this man his sight, it was *amazing* (v16b), and it really is amazing. All true miracles are amazing. But this wonderful action, this *miracle*, on the part of the Lord Jesus is only a small *sample*, an *analogy*, of the *far greater work* He is doing here; giving this blind man the ability to *truly see!* (The perception of spiritual things).

God is glorified in this man's life by giving him his sight, but God is glorified in this man's life by God giving him *sight* in the sense of *saving faith*. In verses 13-34 the Pharisees are *looking* at this man born blind and are *perceiving*, in their hearts, the significance of what has just taken place. *But they can't see* what has really happened here. When Jesus tells them that they are like *blind men* trying to see what is going on here, they take offence and say, "What? Are we blind too?" They had begun to despise the blind man and resented the fact that Jesus compared them to him.

How wonderful that on that day, Jesus' giving physical sight to a blind man is a perfect analogy of how God gave *the gift of spiritual perception* to a *spiritually blind* person. This is what happens every time God saves a sinner—see how it looks in John 9. See how the Lord Jesus uses the terms *believe* and *see* as *synonyms* in verses 35-39 as He discusses the new *belief* of this sinner and the *belief* of every person to whom God will give this ability to *see*. I really love this account, please don't rush through this thought, it truly is precious.

Luke and the Author to the Hebrews Teach Faith as the Ability to See

Other texts to consider in this regard are: Matthew 5:8, John 1:50-51, 11:40, 12:40, Acts 2:31, 7:56, 22:14, 1 Corinthians 13:12, 2 Corinthians 4:4, Hebrews 2:9, 12:14 etc. There is still so much to say, but I will leave it here. It is clear that saving faith is the ability to *see/perceive/understand/grasp* spiritual things, and this ability is a *gift from God*.

It should be thrilling your heart, dear brother, as you mull over these wonderful teachings with me. In a nutshell, we are speaking about a magnificent miracle God performs. The preacher preaches the Gospel, the dead eardrums rattle, and at the moment of God's glorious choice, He attaches the optic fibre of spiritual sight to that corpse and he bursts to life! He can now shout, "Praise God, I can see!" (John 9:25)

To the World, Faith Coming from Preaching THE Message is Stupid

To the world this whole concept sounds bizarre (1 Corinthians 1:18-31). They scrape it aside and begin to preach mere *moral reform*; that people should improve themselves, be more holy, stop lusting, stop committing adultery, stop drinking or using drugs; stop sinning. But we know that it is futile to tell a corpse to do such things, don't we? God has chosen the method by which He is pleased to grant life to spiritually dead people—the preaching of **the** message of Christ. It seems so simple, yet it is a mystery beyond our grasp. Surely, if our *only means* of seeing spiritual corpses raised to life is *preaching the message*, we had better make sure we have **the** message! Would it not be so desperately sad, dear brother, for one of us to find ourselves before God, looking back upon a lifetime of passionate preaching, and find that all we have done is urged people to be more committed to Christ, to live a more holy life, to watch less filth on TV, to visit less immoral websites? Does your heart not ache to see men and women *truly* born again and begin to thrive on the truth, feasting on God's awe-inspiring word? May I appeal to you then, respected friend, to make absolutely certain that you are preaching **the** message?

What is THE Message?

Maybe you will be asking, "Well then, if you say I am not preaching **the** message, then *what is the message?*" Allow me to lay before you the glorious Gospel of the blessed God. Too many critics find fault with other people's teaching, without coming to them in

love with something true and constructive to put in its place. Here I would like to describe ***the*** message as something so full and wonderful and breathtaking that you will have eyes for nothing else! May God fill your heart with a vast, eternal message—***the*** message of the Gospel.

You will remember that we began in Romans 10:17, where Paul says that "...faith comes from hearing the message..." Obviously Paul had ***a*** message in mind. What did he have in mind? Clearly, at the very least, it is the message he has *just finished delivering in the letter he is writing*. This whole letter is the clearest exposition of the Gospel of God in the whole Bible.

THE Gospel is the Power of God

After greeting his readers and making a type of summary regarding the theme of his letter in the first half of chapter 1, he makes a powerful statement that every preacher should glue permanently onto his own eyeballs. Whenever he is tempted to preach *any other* message than ***the*** message God wants him to preach, he should stare at this text again. The text is this, "I am not ashamed of ***the*** Gospel, because *it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes...*" (Romans 1:16) *What is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes? The Gospel is.* What Paul is referring to here is something extremely specific. If you or I want to see God raising spiritual corpses to life, we had better be certain that we are preaching *that specific Gospel*, that specific message that is *the power of God* for the salvation of our hearers.

THE Message Begins with Danger

Praise God, Paul doesn't leave us guessing as to what specific message this is. He applies his pen to chapter after chapter, explaining carefully what the Gospel is so we are left in no doubt. You will notice immediately after verses 16 and 17, he bursts into a shocking description of the horrific *need* of the human race. This is the *need* of the people to whom you and I preach. What is their *need*? You will remember this theme from the previous section (Your Hearer's Need); Your hearer's *need* is that he is *dead* (Ephesians 2:1) and *under the wrath of God* (Romans 1:18, Colossians 3:6, 1 Thessalonians 2:16).

People are Overfed with Good News

The Western world is fed fat with the good news. Christ is always preached as someone who can perform miracles for you in your health and wealth. When Christ is preached like that, He is considered an optional extra, which a person may choose if he so desires, and not choose if he prefers not to. But the Gospel of the New Testament doesn't start like that. It doesn't offer Christ as a panacea to life's discomforts. The biblical Gospel begins with the terrifying state of man, offending God, being banished from Paradise, refusing to repent, refusing to thank God for life, breath, food, etc. (See Romans 1:21). Paul says in Romans 1:18, "*The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness...*"

But Doesn't THE Gospel Start with the Love of God?

I often ask people this question when I'm trying to understand whether they understand the Gospel or not, "What do you think is the beginning point of the Gospel in the Bible? If you had to begin somewhere, explaining the Gospel to a person who is lost, what would be the most important place start?" Sadly, I've seldom had someone tell me that, like Paul, they would begin with the *danger* and the *need* of the unbeliever, because he is under the wrath of God. Normally people tell me the best place to start is telling them about the *love* of God. Now I ask, if you don't see your need for Christ, will you embrace Him? If you are not sick, will you go to a doctor? (Luke 5:31-32—the Pharisees *didn't see their need*)

THE Gospel Begins with Shocking Need

The Gospel begins with the shocking *need* of the hearer. He is under the active *wrath of God*. If you study the rest of the chapter (Romans 1), you will see that God's wrath is manifested by *allowing* sinners to persist in their sin and to reap the hellish consequences. They are *storing up wrath* against themselves says Romans 2:5. All they can see is the pleasure of their sins. They have their eyes and hearts focused on the pleasant experiences and things in God's created world, rather than on God. They disregard God's requirements brazenly by indulging in promiscuity and sexual perversion. They practise the skills of sin in their hearts in order to get what they want. (See the downward spiral in Romans 1:18-32). Sadly, as the masses, through the centuries have pursued their lusts rather than pursuing Christ, God has *handed them over* (literally: *abandoned* them Romans 1:24, 26 & 28) to the enjoyment *and eternal consequences* of their sins. Further, some try to *better themselves* by being *religious* in chapter 2. Religion is an offensive, thin, life-like garment on a dead corpse. It is a decaying corpse trying to look as if it is not decaying. Religion is an attempt to deceive God. (See the warning in Galatians 6:7)

THE Gospel Begins with an all-Pervading Need

Paul comes to his summary of this whole argument of the *need* and *danger* of the person hearing ***the*** message in Romans 3:9-20.

- Every human being is wrapped up in this death-blanket of sin, from which they cannot escape (3:9b). The *need* is universal.
- As God looks at the human race, close examination shows that there is not one single person whom He can call righteous (10).
- Every single person is wandering around in a daze, unable to think clearly, unable to see their danger, unable to see their sinfulness before God, unable to see that the most logical thing for them to do is surrender to God (seek God) and beg Him to have mercy on their souls—not one single person understands (11).
- Every person who has ever lived has turned away from God in their desires, their pursuits, their actions, their thoughts—all with their backs toward God; rejecting Him (12a).

- Like a cheap electrical appliance that burns out on the first day you use it, and you cannot repair it, the entire human race has become *useless*. They have lost their value and are *worthless* (12b).
- Out of the entire human race, there is not one single person who does anything good that will count in their favour before God on judgement day; it is all stained and disqualified (12c).
- Every living person's mouth, compared to the pristinely pure mouth of God, is like the decay associated with death and the grave. The language and concepts we use *seem* so clean and acceptable to us because we are speaking from minds that *haven't a clue* about the cleanliness of God's words and concepts (13a and 11a).
- Every human being has grown up in a world where our speech is so artfully trained in deception that we deceive and lie to each other by *habit*. We are no longer even aware that we are doing it! One moment you are muttering about the fact that you can't stand a certain person, but the moment they walk in, you say, "It's so nice to see you!" (13b).
- Every human being uses his mind and words to lure other people into a position where they are most beneficial to the speaker, regardless of whether that position is dangerous to the other person or not. Consider the smooth-speaking sales pitch that is designed to get as much money as possible, for as little as possible. A person purchases his own ruin by believing the lies of a financial adviser who has his own commission at heart (13c).
- One cannot turn on the television and not hear the cursing and bitterness that saturates the speech of the world, grumbling, arguing, and bitterness. This is a natural, universal phenomenon (14).
- The unrestrained human heart will so protect its own interests that it would not even consider the destruction of another human life as too much of an undertaking. The human heart is bloodthirsty at the core—look at Cain and Abel; the first two children born into this world, and one murders the other (15).
- **Because** the human race is living in such a lawless, dangerous, depraved way, they reap the temporal consequences of that lifestyle. It is as the proverb says, "Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned?" (Proverbs 6:27) A person who jumps from the roof of a skyscraper must naturally expect to be smashed. In the same way, the race of human beings who live in this self-destructive way Scripture has been describing, must expect life to be miserable and ruinous. They must expect miserable interpersonal relationships. They must expect a raging conscience. They must expect to ruin their physical bodies through injury, sickness and disease (including sexually transmitted diseases). They must expect ruined marriages and abused children. This is a natural result of living in this way (16). May I just add a point here? These consequences and this misery *do not constitute the sinner's need before God*. Yes, they truly are terrible and shocking, but their true need is to be radically changed into a different kind of being—alive and not dead—able to communicate with God for the first time. The way to stop perspiring is not to wipe the sweat from the brow, but to *stop running*. The way to help the lost sinner is not to wipe the perspiration of sin from his life, but for him to be radically changed *by God* into a person whose deepest desires are no longer exclusively sinful.
- In spite of the fact that every single generation has had faithful preachers of ***the*** message of the Gospel, the masses roll on, millennium after millennium, *not knowing ***the**** way of peace; God's way of peace; the way of peace that comes through ***the*** glorious Gospel of the blessed God (17).
- In this moribund state, the masses strain towards their lusts with *no fear of God*. Blasphemy is rife and trivial. As Adam and Eve walked out of Paradise, banished

from the presence of God forever, and didn't look back to beg for mercy, so the billions of history and our age live with the mindset that God is a trivial thought (18).

THE Gospel stands out against the Deathly Black Backdrop of Human Need

This was Paul's summary of the *need* of the entire human race. Please dear brother, preach *this* true state of need. It is against *this* deathly black backdrop that the diamond of ***the*** Gospel shines so gloriously. It is because of this *death* and *danger* and *misery*, and for *God's own glory* that He has provided a radical salvation that meets every single facet of the ruined human race's unspeakable need. When Paul begins in verse 21 of Romans 3, he has so forcefully described the lostness and hopelessness of the human race that ***the*** Gospel explodes in a magnificent show! In effect he is saying, "Yes, that truly is how lost every human being is, ***BUT...!***" It is that "*but*" that draws the vast distinction between the utter *blackness* of man's true state before God and the indescribable *glory* of ***the*** powerful, saving Gospel! ***The*** Gospel of God is the only hope of the masses. If they miss *this* message, the misery they experience in this world is only a small foretaste of the misery they will experience under the wrath of God for ever and ever. Preaching ***the*** Gospel is absolutely critical. The eternal state of millions hangs upon your and my faithful declaration of ***the*** Gospel of God, which is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes (Romans 1:16).

What is THE Gospel?

So let us immerse ourselves in this glorious message of the Gospel. Let us examine this jewel without equal, this exquisite provision and salvation of God. *What is ***the*** Gospel?*

Turning our attention to Romans 3:21, Paul explodes into the magnificent theme of ***the*** Gospel. In the next 6 verses, he will pack in so much grandeur that it will not be possible for me, in a letter such as this, to go any deeper than a superficial observation of what the text is saying.

²¹ But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— ²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:21-26 NIV)

These words pulsate with enthralling energy! Verse 21 begins, "But now a *righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known*, to which the Law and the Prophets testify." (emphasis mine) Then, verse 22 expands this declaration to magnificent proportions, saying, "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe."

THE Gospel is about Something God is Doing

It is critical that the reader understand that *the Gospel* is a message that says something about God. What is the Gospel saying about God? It is saying that there is some glorious “package” that is the possession of God, and that “package” is moving in a direction; it is travelling *from God* to another destination. What is this “package”? It is “a righteousness”. Where is this “righteousness” going? Verse 22 tells us. Notice verse 22 uses the words “from” and “to”. These obviously describe the “journey” of this “package” of righteousness. This “package of righteousness” comes *from God*, *to* all who believe. This is where the Gospel begins, after the need of the fallen world has been fully appreciated. God has in His possession the exact “package” the fallen sinner needs, and the *glorious news (the Gospel)* is that *God is giving that “package” out*. The Gospel is a message about something that *God is doing*.

THE Gospel is about HOW God is Saving People

Surely God is not simply giving this “package of righteousness” out to any person indiscriminately? If that were the case, what would be the point of preaching? What would be the point of all of our urging sinners to repent? It is here that the message becomes thrilling beyond description. Notice *how* this “package of righteousness” is being distributed by God. Verse 22 contains the secret. This “package of righteousness” comes *through faith* to the person who believes! But we have been arguing forcefully that the unbelieving person is *dead* in sin (Ephesians 2:1). How then can he have faith if he is dead? We answered that question from Romans 10:17, “Faith comes from *hearing the message...*” Doesn’t this make it clear that we are speaking about salvation as a *work of God*? The sequence is this: The preacher preaches, the eardrums of the dead hearer vibrate, and nothing happens. *But* at the moment of *God’s choosing*, He gives the *gift of faith* (Ephesians 2:8), in other words, *faith comes*, and as God gives that dead sinner that saving faith, he is able to see for the first time. He can now see the things of God. Now that he can see God handing him the “package of righteousness”, he is able to receive it.

THE Gospel is about WHAT the God-Given Eyes of Faith can see

These verses we have been looking at, Romans 3:21-22, answer the question, “What does he see?” He *sees God providing him* with this “package of righteousness”. He has no righteousness (Romans 3:10). What he desperately needs is *righteousness*. And the Gospel is that *God is giving people the “package of righteousness” through the means of faith*. He is giving faith and He is giving righteousness.

THE Gospel is about People Receiving God’s Righteousness through Faith IN JESUS CHRIST

There is however more to **the** message of the Gospel. Verse 22 specifies the unique kind of faith as well. Notice (as you rightly observed) this is not just a general kind of faith (mathematical probability or the faith of the demons—James 2:19), or the wrong notion of faith in faith, this is *faith in Jesus Christ*. This faith involves believing certain things about Jesus Christ. Verse 25 shows that *God presented Christ as a Sacrifice of atonement*. Paul teaches in Romans 6:23 that the principle of God's universe is that "the wages of sin is death". For every sin, someone must die; someone's blood must be spilt—normally the person who sinned (Hebrews 9:22). Now we have billions of people sinning grossly over millennia. That means that billions of people *must die*. Billions of people's blood must be spilled. That is justice. But by *grace*, God presents Christ as a sacrifice of atonement so that God can now justly hold that sacrifice as a *just death* for the sins of any sinning individual He chooses. So the person to whom God has *given* faith, sees God's righteousness in providing Jesus as a sacrifice in *his* place. And as a result of that sacrifice, he knows that *he no longer has to die for his sins!* This is the most glorious news to a person whose eyes God has opened, whose sensitivity to sin God has awakened and he feels his need earnestly for the first time! Christ has *purchased* that person with His blood (Romans 3:24). What he sees by faith is that God has bought him with the currency of the blood of Christ. **The** Gospel is glorious to that person because it tells him of something *God has already done for him*, only now, he is seeing it for the first time, because God chose, at that moment, to give him eyes of faith.

THE Gospel is not only about the Death of Christ, but about the Life of Christ as Well

But there is more to **the** Gospel message still. When we consider this "package of righteousness" coming from God to the person to whom God has first given the eyes of faith, we should consider another aspect of this "package of righteousness". Not only does this "package" contain the benefits of the **death** of Christ, to make God's judgement of death to the sinner no longer applicable, but it includes Christ's **life** of righteousness. If God had simply taken away the punishment the sinner deserves, where would that leave him? Does his life of rebellion commend him positively to God? Does his life of sin delight God? This leads us to consider whether Christ's life delighted God. The answer to that question is a resounding "Yes!" God said, "This is my Son, whom I love; *with him I am well pleased.*" Nothing delighted God the Father more than His Son. Not only did Jesus *never* sin (Hebrews 4:15), but in everything He ever did, He pleased His Father (John 8:29). In the day-to-day life of Jesus, His life was so morally pure and glorious that the Father's heart pulsated with overflowing love for Him, moment by moment. Christ's life was marked both by a total absence of sin, and also by a total positive righteousness and devotion to His Father.

Now we draw a contrast between *that* life, and the lives that we live. Not only is there the overwhelming positive presence of sin (as we discussed earlier when we went through Romans 3:9-20), but there is a total lack of any positive quality that pleases God (Hebrews 11:6). So, a part of this "package of righteousness" that comes from God, is the **sinless, delightful** life of Jesus Christ. God not only supplies the benefits of the **death** of Christ, but He supplies the benefits of the **life** of Christ. So when God gives a lost sinner true saving faith through the preaching of **the** message, he is able to see for the first time, that by God's grace, he as an individual no longer has to die, **and** that God

is giving him the package of the life of Jesus in the place of his own messed up, sinful life. What a thing to see! How glorious!

THE Gospel is God's Solution for People who are Inescapably Ruined

You are preaching to people who meet the description of Romans 3:23. Here we have a wonderful summary of our hearer's *need*, and God's gracious work of salvation. In verse 23, it is the tenses in the words that bring vivid meaning to what Paul is saying. He echoes the terrible situation in which the lost sinner finds himself. He, along with "all" has sinned. He has lived a whole life, no matter how old he is, that has been marked by the controlling principle of sin *from conception* (Psalm 51:5, John 8:34, Romans 6:17, 20). He has been driven like a slave in every thought, decision, desire, interpretation, conclusion, feeling and action, by the principle of sin living in his inner person (Genesis 6:5). He has had no ability or inclination to do what is right (righteous) (Romans 8:7). When Paul says that "all have sinned", he is speaking of the state in which the masses find themselves where they have lived a life of sin and *no matter what they do, they can't take that life back*. They can do nothing to make it vanish. They are like Adam and Eve hiding in the garden under their scanty veil of leaves before the consuming, piercing eyes of God. They have sinned and there is nothing they can do to retract that dreadful fact. There is no way in which they can erase that life. **But now**, in God's "package of righteousness" He deals with that vast need. He provides Christ's death as the solution to that problem, and it is a solution that *totally satisfies God* (Romans 3:25). They can now throw away the "fig leaves" of religious effort!

But there is the other side of Romans 3:23 as well. Not only has the sinner lived a sinful life in the past, but he is *continually in the habit of sinning against God*. He continually lives in a way that falls far short of the high standard that God has set universally for all people. And it is for this very problem that God includes the righteous life of Christ in the "package of righteousness". Inside this package He has placed the benefits of the death of Christ to deal with the penalty of all of the sinner's sins, but also, the benefits of the life of Christ to make this sinner positively attractive before God as Christ is attractive in His positive righteousness. See how Paul rejoiced in this righteousness in Philippians 3:9, Romans 10:1-3 and 2 Timothy 1:9.

THE Gospel is about what God does with the Sinner's Ruined Life and Habitual Rebellion

So what does God do with the sin-stained, ruined life of the sinner whom He saves? What does He do with all of those offenses the sinner has committed against God? You will see in Romans 3:25 that God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement. Simply put, God put the sinner's ruined life of sin onto Christ on the cross, and God punished Christ as if He were that sinner. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:21, possibly one of the most profound things said anywhere in Scripture, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." While the sinner to whom God gives the "package" of the benefits of Christ's life and death, rejoices in God's grace, Christ receives the sinner's life of sin and death penalty, and suffers unspeakable horrors instead of him. (See also Isaiah 53:6)

THE Gospel Leaves no Room for People to Claim Credit

You will notice, if you continue to read in Romans 3, Paul clarifies one more important point (he clarifies a number of things here, but I would like to draw attention to just one for the purpose of this letter). He asks the question, “Where then is boasting?” and then he answers it, “It is excluded”. What is he doing? It seems clear that as a person reads the preceding section (Romans 3:21-26) he may come to the simple conclusion, “If this package of righteousness can be mine by faith, then, *all I have to do* is exercise faith.” What would be the obvious conclusion to that? Well, if a person “*exercises faith*” and as a result, receives this package of righteousness, he would be able to *boast* saying, “*I exercised faith* and as a result I am saved.” Paul wants to make it very clear that the element of *boasting* is excluded in God’s way of saving. Paul wants you to know that if you have understood faith in *that way*, you have not understood what he is saying. He is saying that salvation is a work of God. God takes the dead sinner who is unresponsive and incapable of doing anything, *gives him faith*, through that faith *gives him righteousness* and *God then calls him just*. Paul wants his reader to know that salvation is entirely the initiative and work of God. You and I preach; God saves.

The reason there is no *boasting* is because God grants this righteousness to wicked sinners (Romans 4:5), through God-given faith. Paul then goes on to describe in the entirety of chapter 4 what this faith is. Because I have spent so much time on describing the nature of saving faith—incorporating the teachings of Romans 4, I will not go over that chapter now. But I do want it to be unmistakably clear dear brother, that salvation is a work of God. God gives faith. God gives the benefits of Christ’s death. God gives the benefits of Christ’s life. A person to whom God has given these items in the “package of righteousness” is then called “**Justified through faith**”. It is **this** transaction that **God** brings about through the simple preaching of **the** message of the Gospel. At the same time, it is **this very teaching** that forms **the** message of the Gospel. Forgive me for rushing over critical areas with such little explanation, but there are other items I desire to comment on.

THE Gospel is the Mechanism God Uses to Infuse Spiritual Life

Another part of your hearer’s hope must not be overlooked. There are a few other final matters I would like to discuss in this area, and I will do so by using both a scriptural analogy and a contemporary one.

A Biblical Analogy

To come back to the issue of being **born again**; how does this fit in with what I have been saying? The analogy that will best explain this is the incident where Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead (John 11). Just as Lazarus lies dead in his tomb, unable to hear human voices, unable to respond, so lies your spiritually dead audience before you. Notice, in verses 41 and 42, Jesus is *speaking*, but Lazarus is still unresponsive; dead. However, the moment Jesus calls in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” Lazarus instantly comes to life and responds to Jesus’ call. Something outstanding has just taken place

before our eyes! It is exactly the same in our preaching of the Gospel. We faithfully preach **the** message, issuing the **Gospel call** to anyone who has physical ears (or eyes to read). Everyone in the stadium who has the faculty of physical hearing is able to hear what you are saying. But it is not everyone who hears the **effectual call of God** as Lazarus did. God calls *individuals*, not *crowds*. This is what Paul is teaching in Romans 8:30, “And **those he predestined, he also called**; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.”

One of the reasons I have used this text (John 11) is because this is what it is like to be born again. You may be preaching and people may be listening with their physical ears (some gripped, some interested, some bored). But at any moment while you are preaching **the** message of the Gospel, God may issue the **effectual call** (Romans 8:30) into the heart of one of the *dead* people (like Lazarus) to whom you are preaching. At the **same instant** that God calls, He issues spiritual life. The exact moment in which Jesus called Lazarus, Jesus also gave Lazarus life. Having life, Lazarus was able to hear the call and respond to Jesus. Lazarus received from Jesus, life and the ability to respond at the same time. This is the way in which God still saves souls. The preacher preaches. At the moment of God’s choosing, He issues life and faith. Through faith, the sinner receives the “package of righteousness”. Because the sinner’s sin is now atoned for by Christ and he is dressed in Christ’s beautiful righteousness, God calls him just! He has been **justified through faith** (Romans 3:22-24, 5:1). It is at the point where God issues *life* that the sinner is *born again* (2 Corinthians 4:6). That is what Scripture is referring to when it speaks of being born again. It is rebirth. It is regeneration. Consider this in Acts 5:20, Romans 6:4, John 3:3, 7, 1 Peter 1:23, James 1:18, Titus 3:5, John 1:12-13, 1 John 5:1 and Acts 16:14-15.

A Contemporary Analogy

While this analogy is based on a true story, I have altered some details to make it suit my point.

After leaving school, a personal friend began studying to work in the field of ambulance work. He was not very well liked at school, particularly by a select group of boys who made his life very miserable. Having studied for some time and after gaining significant experience on the road as a paramedic on an ambulance, he reported for night shift one evening. It was a quiet shift, and at about midnight, he went to Hillbrow, to stop in at a fast food outlet for something to eat. He got out of the response car he was working on that evening and began walking toward the shop when he heard an outburst of laughter. Turning his face, he immediately recognized the group of school-mates who had made his school years so miserable. They had been having a night out on the town and were quite drunk. They mocked him for the reflective clothing he was wearing and the job he was doing. They were saying things like, “Look at him, the *big paramedic!*” in the most contemptuous way they knew how. Listening to them for a while, keeping himself composed, my friend eventually said to them, “Don’t worry, one day the *big paramedic* will come and scrape you up off the road.” He then turned and went into the fast food shop.

When he came out of the shop, the “friends” were gone. As soon as he got back into the response car, a call came through on the radio. There had been a motor vehicle

accident on the M1 South freeway. Laying his food aside, he responded to the scene of the accident. A driver had obviously driven his vehicle down the freeway at such speed that he was not able to stay on the road when he came to a right-hand bend, and had crashed spectacularly into an open field, the vehicle rolling several times.

When my friend arrived on the scene, there was still a haze of dust in the air as he walked briskly toward the vehicle, medical kit in his hands. The vehicle had come to a standstill on its roof and one man was visible, lying on his back on the ground, protruding from the driver's side window. As my friend approached, he recognized the man. As soon as the man recognized him, he began to cry. My friend said to him in a friendly voice, "Don't worry, the *big paramedic* has come to help you."

A little distance from the car however, lay one of the other men, deathly still in the long grass. He had been thrown from the vehicle and was critically injured. Leaving the less seriously injured man in the care of another ambulance attendant on the scene, my friend went to examine the other man. He had sustained a fractured femur and was bleeding badly. He had lost so much blood that my friend couldn't even find a pulse; his life was in grave danger. With such serious blood loss, my friend began to infuse fluids through a high capacity drip, while other paramedics (who were now arriving on the scene to help) helped to immobilize him and strap him to a spine board. My friend was very dirty from crawling around in the sand as they loaded this close-to-death man into the back of a waiting ambulance.

On the way to the hospital, the man's blood pressure began to rise. His rushing pulse rate began to slow down to a more normal speed, and the man began to twitch. He was beginning to regain consciousness. When the ambulance arrived at the hospital, my friend helped lift the man on the stretcher from the ambulance and then from the stretcher, in the hospital, onto the hospital bed. A new, clean environment where there were qualified people to help him from there.

Before my friend left the hospital, the man managed to open his eyes; slightly at first, and then, after a few moments, more fully. Tears began to trickle down his face when he too saw who it was that had come to save him. Moments before, he had been ridiculing this paramedic, and through a series of events, he had ended up totally helpless, at this friend's mercy, at death's door.

The experience of being born again is something like the experience of that man who was rescued by my friend. He had lived in a hostile way toward my friend as the sinner lives in hostility toward God (Romans 8:7). He had ended up totally helpless, unable to help himself, through this terrible accident, just as the world of sinners is unable to help themselves after the fall in Genesis 3. He was facing certain death if my friend didn't help him, as the sinner faces eternal death if God doesn't save him by grace.

What I want you to notice in this analogy (even though it is far from perfect), is that the injured man was not even conscious of the fact that the paramedic was applying his life-saving equipment to him. The paramedic did all of the work. He drove to the scene and got down into the dust to help him (as did Christ in His incarnation). He identified the man's need, he was as good as dead (in the sinner's case he is far worse off, he is actually dead). The paramedic opened his "package" of medical equipment and applied it to the patient—the paramedic had everything that man needed as the preacher has everything the sinner needs in the message. Notice then that eventually the man began

to open his eyes, as the sinner begins to open his eyes when God grants him saving faith. The fact that the man opened his eyes and looked into the face of his rescuer was a sign that he was indeed alive. He had the ability to see and he had life. What did he see? He saw that **he had already been rescued**. If a sinner opens his eyes and sees God applying the rescuing “package of righteousness” to him, and in tears realizes that God has saved him, he has been saved. If, however, as it often happens, **the** Gospel is preached and the sinner doesn’t open his eyes and see that God has rescued him, he remains dead.

May God graciously grant that this analogy—in spite of all of its problems—will be helpful in clarifying the great, glorious message of **the** Gospel.

Your Hearer’s Reward

God is Giving Himself!

Having considered something of your hearer’s *need* and your hearer’s *hope*, let us move on to the final element of critical importance in **the** message. **The** message spreads out before the radically saved believer, a prospect of glory beyond the conception of his mind. John Piper has written an excellent book called, “*God is the Gospel*” where he contends that the majestic reward God desires to lavish on His people is **himself!**¹ A text that has long thrilled me regarding the reward, or the future glory of believers is Titus 2:11-14. Allow me to quote what I have written on that text in my book *Unending Hope for the Exhausted Addict* (www.pleasantwordbooks.com, www.graceunlimited.co.za)

Compelling Liquid Beauty

“What are you doing right now? What are you doing with your life? God says you are waiting (Titus 2:13). You may be like the man in Bruce Springsteen’s song who was sitting around waiting for his life to begin, while it was all just slipping away. You could be waiting for anything, but ultimately, you are either waiting for Christ to return (or your death, whichever comes first) or to be admitted to the unspeakable horrors of hell.

The children of God, while they live and struggle against personal sin, are waiting in expectation as a person waits for a friend they haven’t seen for a long time. Christians are excited, filled with a sense of anxious anticipation, because Christ will appear at any moment. Joseph of Arimathea, who went boldly to Pilate who had condemned Jesus to death, was a man who was waiting for the kingdom of God (Mark 15:43). He was longing with joyful anticipation to be received into Christ’s eternal glory, and he is there right now. For him, the long wait came to an end, and he has already been in the blazing presence of God for two millennia. To know that life in this fallen world will not meander aimlessly forever is immense motivation. If you are a child of God, you are waiting for the blessed

¹ Available from www.desiringgod.org or www.augustine.co.za (in South Africa). Another brilliant book by John Piper, that every Christian should read is *Future Grace* available from the same outlets.

hope (Titus 2:13). Something so extraordinary looms ahead of you that when you are enveloped by it, you will be completely satisfied at last. It will be something so wonderful that it will entirely change your whole being and surroundings. You will be snatched from this corrupt, decaying, temporary, miserable sphere of life, leaving it behind as a distant memory. This blessed hope will most certainly come upon you and is, even now as you read this page, rushing toward you at an immeasurable speed. It will transform you. It will free you. It will so elevate you and expand your mind and senses that you will not be able to compare your renewed state to anything you have ever experienced in this fallen world. To know that your life will not just fizzle out into blackness, but will explode into brilliant new life is outstanding motivation. You are living toward a certain hope, not inevitable defeat.

Not only will the coming of this blessed hope be a thrill to experience, but while you wait, the tingle of excitement mounts in anticipation. You find delight even just thinking about it. It consumes your life with joy regardless of your circumstances. Finding daily joy in contemplation of the blessed hope does not depend on your being rich, or well fed, warm or well clothed, appreciated, respected, or any of that. Christians who long for this blessed hope do so with a desire that is strengthened by hardship in this world. You may have come into misery in this world in any number of ways, but if the way you have come to ruin is through your addiction, you can have the blessed hope of the children of God this instant. You need to confess to God that you are in misery because of the self-gratifying way in which you have lived in rebellion against Him. Receive His forgiveness and lay hold of the blessed hope toward which you will persevere in this fallen world for the rest of your life. The fact that there is a great sense of anticipation involved in waiting for the blessed hope brings more motivation.

So what is this blessed hope? This blessed hope is the moment when the great Jesus bursts upon this world to take His own people to be with Him in His kingly splendour forever (Titus 2:13). What will His coming be like? It will be like the coming of a hero to rescue you when you are trapped in agony, about to die. It will be deeply emotional because the Rescuer has come to save you personally. His rescue has cost Him dearly, to the point of being crushed to death under the most atrocious torture. From His heroic body, His lifeblood has poured; compelling liquid beauty. As passionate as was His first coming in agony and blood, with loud cries and tears, forcing His way through tearing opposition, so will be the passion of His second coming. The eternal hero of God—the great warrior Jesus Christ—the suffering servant—will blast through the veneer of this sick, insulting world and free His dear people from the mangled wreckage of sin. This rescue will be dramatic beyond anything this world has ever seen. It will be jealously focused on His own. It will be visible and magnificent in the fullest sense. Because Christians are waiting for a Person, we have motivation that is personal.

Beyond all of this is the fact that the coming of the Lord Jesus, our blessed hope, will be marked by glory (Titus 2:13). The only word that will come to mind when Christ appears is “Glory!” Language restricts us from conveying the weight of the glory of Christ’s coming. What will assault the eyes and senses of every person who sees Him on that day will be the unbearable splendour and brightness. The sun is likely the brightest light most people have ever seen, but on that day, the

sun will be like a spark, drowned by effulgent glory. Christ's brightness will be saying something. It will shout out His magnificence, excellence, dignity, and grace. You will suddenly realize that you are in the presence of a supreme ruler who emanates an atmosphere of absolute perfection, majesty, and deity. His sheer presence breathes unfathomable wealth and unassailable power. At His coming, Christ will be far removed from the man who died in shame on the cross, yet at the same time, He is exactly the same Christ. In His hands and feet, still visible, will be the marks of the nails that pierced His surrendered flesh, bleeding compelling liquid beauty. The fact that this glorious God bled for the likes of us will be too terrifying for us to contemplate at His return.

To the children for whom He died, the thought will be one of wonderful, staggering grace, but to those who by their rebellion continually nail Him to that cross, it will be the most frightening thought conceivable. His enemies will filter like ash to the floor in the blazing glory of His presence. This is the glory of Jesus. This is the glory of God, one and the same. And as God's people gaze upon this glory, they shall be transformed by it and clothed with it forever. Their God came into this world for them once as a sacrifice for their sins and has returned to take them home. They will be completely removed to unspeakable resplendence without end. The very thought of mundane life being swallowed up into this glory is staggeringly motivating.

What will happen to God's people then? Scripture uses an extravagant word to describe what happens next. The people for whom Christ will return will be his own special possession. They will be His very own. The Greek word used here (Titus 2:14) speaks of something that a person owns over and above the things he needs for ordinary expenses. It speaks of something that he owns as his own special possession that nobody can interfere with. It speaks of something, like a person's jewels that he keeps in a very safe place so that no-one else can gain access to them. It is something that the person has especially selected for his own use. Even in his own household, he keeps it aside for himself alone. It is something he treasures because it is special, unique, distinctive, one-of-a-kind.

Can you grasp the concept that the glorious God of whom we have just spoken would hold His people in His hand in this way? They are jealously guarded from everyone for His own personal enjoyment, treasured beyond and above all He owns in His measureless treasury. Don't take this to mean that human beings are that valuable. We are not. Take this to make you appreciate the blessing God is going to lavish upon His people in spite of our worthlessness and rebellion. That speaks of the glory of God. It is a stupendous thought that God would jealously guard His people, close to Himself, as His very own special treasure. The intimate, personal nature of Christ's intentions toward His people is reason for unparalleled motivation.”²

True believers, who were once in a shocking state of need, who have been brought to life by God, through **the** message of the Gospel, surely have a glorious hope and reward for the future. It is this everlasting glory that is shown throughout the New Testament as

² Lester A. 2008 *Unending Hope for the Exhausted Addict* www.Pleasantwordbooks.com or www.graceunlimited.co.za:132-136

the great motivating factor in the lives of God's people. This is a ***gigantic*** reward, a ***huge*** future prospect.

God Glorifies His People

You will remember, brother, that when we were discussing your hearer's hope, we glanced at Romans 8:30. There we saw that God foreknows His people, predestines them, calls them, justifies them and ***glorifies*** them. From before the beginning of the world, God can relish the moment of His full glory being revealed in how He has graciously overhauled and transformed rebel sinners. It is this glorification that the preacher of ***the*** message paints across the sky for his hearer to see. It is this relief from the scourge of a fallen world and a sin-ruled heart that should appear more wonderful to your hearer than anything else in time or eternity. It is the prospect of living in the direct presence of his omnipotent rescuer—Jesus—that should completely consume the passions of the hearer.

May I simply say, in contrast, dear brother, that as I considered your presentation at Loftus, you described your hearer's *need* (which I discussed above), you spoke of your hearer being *born again* (which I discussed above), and you also presented to your hearers, an element of *reward*. May I respectfully consider the *reward* you placed before them?

You testified to the way in which God responded to prayer in a number of incidents. One of those was the incident where the Lord sent the rain to douse the runaway fire on your farm. Another incident was the one in which the Lord had blessed the farmers in Australia with rain, ending a long drought. You must understand, brother, that I praise God for the way in which He blessed you and those people in those situations. He truly was good to you and to them.

God is doing something Infinitely Greater than a Miracle!

What am I saying then? What I am asking is this: When you repeated to the people, both at Loftus and at the MMC, that God would come through for them, were you presenting *miracles* as the *reward* they should look forward to? When you were urging the crowd to be *born again*, were you, as it appears, motivating them by the attraction of a great miracle in their lives, as you and others have had in your lives?

Living Life with Everything Invested in Future Glory

Please take a moment to think of what Peter is saying in 1 Peter 1:13. He is speaking to Christians who are suffering in the most inhumane way. Peter is putting *the reward* of the Christian life before them to encourage them. This is what he says, "*Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.*" (NIV emphasis mine) What is he saying? He is holding up before them the unfathomable relief of Christians being received into the glorious presence of God. They must ***set their hope fully*** on ***that*** prospect. For the true believer, a supernatural work of God in providing food when they had none is truly

wonderful, but it is not even close to the thrill of the hope Peter is describing and what Paul described in Titus 2:11-14. Remember, it was the believer's *glorification* in Romans 8:30 that was the epitome of the believer's joys. The same thing is true in Romans 5:2. Verse 1 begins with *justification* and ends with *glorification*. Living life with *everything* invested in future glory is the way in which God's people live.

Future Glory is the Goal of the Faith

Peter is very specific about the reward of the Christian life when he says in 1 Peter 1:3-5. There he packs in **the** message we have been considering, by praising God for the work He has done in saving His people. That work is described as *giving us new birth*. But then he goes further and shows how inextricably linked this *new birth* (being born-again) is with the *living hope*. That living hope is the glorious inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade, kept in heaven for those to whom God has given *new birth*. Notice verse 6 (1 Peter 1:6). Peter says that it is **in this** that God's people **greatly rejoice because** the faith God has given us is being demonstrated to be genuine through difficulties. As Christians shine in their difficulties, God is praised because of the nature of the faith He has given them—they are different from the people of the world. Christians who are in this process are filled with inexpressible joy. Why? Because they see God working miracles for them? No. But because such Christians are receiving the **goal of their faith** (verse 9). What is the goal of their faith? ***Glorification***.

Christians Have Always Been Driven by Future Glory

Hebrews 11, if I have observed correctly, is certainly one of your favourite passages of Scripture. Although this view of the believer's *reward* is *everywhere* in Scripture, I will let this section of my letter rest with this final application.

In Hebrews 11, we see a number of saints who had this God-given faith. It was obvious that they had this kind of faith, judging by the way they responded to the onslaught of the world (verses 32-38). But specifically, we should consider what the *reward* of their faith was. Consider Abraham from verse 8. When God instructed him to leave his country and go to a place God had not yet shown him, he went. When he arrived, he lived in the discomfort of a tent-lifestyle all his life. Why did he go? *Because* (verse 10) he was looking forward to something far greater than just another piece of land on earth. He was looking forward to the delights of his eternal home with God.

Verses 13-16 confirm this and show that these men of faith *did not see their reward as something on earth* (even the most extravagant miracle), but as a *heavenly city* (verse 16). In verses 24-26, Moses endured mistreatment and disgrace, refusing temporal pleasures, *because* he was looking *ahead* to his *reward*. He had the eyes of faith to see Him who is invisible (verse 27). Notice how the author closes this chapter. He puts *all of these people of faith together* and says of them that *none* of them received what had been promised. Why? *Because* God has something better planned for them. God's plan (verse 40) is that *all of these people of faith* will be *made perfect* together will all true believers throughout history.

What I am saying brother, is that the preacher of **the** message dare not preach any reward that is smaller than the reward God has presented to us in His word (Job 42:7-8).

To preach the small reward of personal miracles is to preach something that distorts ***the*** message of the Gospel. I appeal to you to preach a bigger Gospel. I urge you to preach ***the*** message of the Gospel, including a true biblical ***need***, a true biblical ***hope***, and a true biblical ***reward***.

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

How God Relates to His Created Universe

To move on to a different issue brother, may I humbly comment on something else you have taught in which I don't believe you have spoken of God what is right (Job 42:7-8). What I am referring to is the way in which you have referred to natural weather phenomena (drought and El Niño for example) as coming from the devil and coming from hell. Grant me please the opportunity to put before you a summary of what Scripture teaches about the way in which God relates to His created universe. This is commonly known as *providence*, often spelled with a capital "P", showing reverence for the close connection between God and His actions in His created order. Please don't be influenced by a system of thought that ignores this critical issue. Once again, may God grant you and I, my brother, the grace to teach, in this area, what honours Him.

Providence is Difficult to Understand

As we begin to consider this very difficult-to-understand issue of God's providence, we will benefit from a definition that compacts all of the information we are about to study into memorable statements. We will then look at them carefully in Scripture.³

Definition

God is continually involved with all created things in such a way that He: 1) keeps them existing and maintains the properties with which He created them; 2) co-operates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do; and 3) directs them to fulfil His purposes.

Corresponding to the three elements of the definition above, we find three elements that describe providence⁴. (1) *Preservation*, (2) *Concurrence*, and (3) *Government*.

Please Note: This is a doctrine over which there has been substantial disagreement among Christians over the centuries. The reader must understand that *this* is not the *only* view of providence held among evangelical Christians. For other views, consult any standard systematic theology manual.

³ The following section on Providence is taken from my Summary of Wayne Grudem's Systematic Theology, available as "CDI" (Christian Doctrine Instruction) for free download at www.graceunlimited.co.za

⁴ Although the term "providence" doesn't appear in the Bible, it is a term that has been used traditionally to summarise God's ongoing relationship to His creation.

Preservation

God keeps all created things existing and maintains the properties with which He created them.

Hebrews 1:3 shows Christ as *actively involved* in the work of providence. The word “sustaining” is a present participle suggesting a *continual action*. The action however is not vague but *active, purposeful control* over every created thing. Further, in Colossians 1:17, it is Christ that keeps all things existing. *Both verses indicate that if Christ were to cease His continuing activity of sustaining all things in the universe, then all except the triune God would instantly cease to exist.* Consider also Acts 17:28, Nehemiah 9:6, 2 Peter 3:7.

God gives us breath each moment (Job 34:14-15, Psalm 104:29). God preserves the properties of water so that it is always the same. The same is true of grass and trees and sand and everything else in His creation. *He causes the paper on which this sentence is written to continue to act like paper so that it does not spontaneously dissolve into water and float away or change into a living thing and begin to grow!*⁵ This is *not* (as some have taught) a *continuous new creation* (as if God were actually re-creating the molecules every moment) rather, it is a *preservation* of what God originally created.

Further, created things *are real*. I don’t just *imagine* (as others have taught) the hard, heavy rock in my hands, it is *real*. And when I drop it on my toes, the pain is *real* and the broken bones are *real*.

God’s preservation of the properties of His created things provides the only basis for science. If an experiment is done with normal water today, and if it is done under the same conditions a hundred years from now, one will get the same results, because God preserves the properties of water. Providence is the foundation of technology. The petrol that made my car’s engine run yesterday will make it run today. Not because “*This is the way it has always worked*” but because God sustains His creation in this way. Both the believer and the unbeliever depend on God’s providence every day. The unbeliever puts petrol in his car’s tank and knows it will make his car’s engine run. The believer does the same. But the difference is that the believer knows the God who has made petrol stable for the purpose that he can use it with that result. The reliability of the elements becomes a *personal* matter between God and His child, stimulating worship in the heart of God’s people.

Concurrence

God co-operates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do.

This section *expands* on God’s *preservation* that we have just seen, but focuses on how God deliberately *brings about* all things he wills to bring about.

⁵ This is true until some other element of creation, such as fire, has an influence on it and thereby changes its properties.

Scripture shows that **inanimate things** such as snow, rain, ice and lightning, fulfil God's command (Job 37:6-13). This, brother, includes **drought** and **El Niño** (Deuteronomy 28:22, Job 12:15, Jeremiah 14—especially verse 12, Haggai 1:11) See also Psalm 135:6-7, 104:4, 14, Job 38:12, Matthew 5:45. It is a fearful thing to attribute the glorious work of God in nature to the devil.

Animals too, says the Bible, are preserved by God. See Psalm 104:27-29, Job 38:39-41, Matthew 6:26, Matthew 10:29.

Seemingly “random” or “chance” events (as seen by people), like the casting of lots (the ancient equivalent of throwing a dice or flipping a coin) have an outcome determined by the Lord (Proverbs 16:33).

Events fully caused by God and fully caused by the creature as well.

Just because science can *explain* how rain and other natural phenomena occur (from observation), does not mean that *God* does not *cause* them. Every one of these phenomena is 100% caused by God. Yet, they are also 100% caused by factors in creation itself.

The Affairs of Nations

Scripture plainly shows that God has full control over the nations. (Job 12:23, Psalm 22:28, Daniel 4:34-35) This control even extends to the *times* and *places* of their activities (Acts 17:26, 14:16). Consider Psalm 135:8-14.

All Aspects of our Lives

God brings about the very food we eat every day (Matthew 6:11). Although we obtain it—from a human perspective—by the ordinary *means* of work, salary, purchase, these are the *means* by which *God supplies* (Philippians 4:19). He plans and brings about the day of our *birth*, including the way we are made (Psalm 139:13-16, Job 14:5, Galatians 1:15, Jeremiah 1:5). All our *actions* and individual steps are directed by the Lord (Acts 17:28, Jeremiah 10:23, Proverbs 20:24, 16:9, 1), as well as our *successes* and *failures* (Psalm 75:6-10, Luke 1:52). The Lord gives *children* (Psalm 127:3) and *talents, abilities* and *skills* (1 Corinthians 4:7, Psalm 18:34-36). God influences our decisions (Proverbs 21:1, Ezra 6:22, 1:1, Psalm 33:14-15, Philippians 2:13). Can any aspect of our lives, including our words, steps, movements, hearts, abilities etc, be excluded from God's providence?

Guard Against Misunderstanding

We must however *guard against misunderstanding* here. Yes, God *does* move His creation in a meticulous way, but Scripture also affirms that *we* really do *cause* events to happen! God has made us *significant* (meaningful) and *responsible*. We do have choices and these choices do bring about real results.

Some “solve” the problem of this *seeming* paradox by saying that if our choices are truly free, they *cannot* be caused by God. This is however to deny a clear teaching of Scripture. *It seems better to affirm that God causes all things that happen, but that he does so in such a way that He somehow upholds our ability to make willing, responsible choices, choices that have real and eternal results, and for which we are held accountable.* Scripture simply does not explain how this works. So rather than denying one aspect or the other, we should simply accept both in an attempt to be faithful to the teaching of all Scripture.

The analogy of an author writing a play may help us to grasp how both aspects can be true. In the Shakespearean play “Macbeth”, the character Macbeth murders King Duncan. Now the question may be asked, “Who killed King Duncan?” On one level, the correct answer is “Macbeth”. Within the context of the play he carried out the murder and is rightly to blame for it. However, on another level, a correct answer to the question, “Who killed King Duncan” would be “William Shakespeare”: he wrote the play, he created all the characters in it, and he wrote the part where Macbeth killed King Duncan. Simply because Macbeth killed King Duncan, does not mean that William Shakespeare didn’t, and because William Shakespeare did, doesn’t mean that Macbeth didn’t. They both played a 100% role. This analogy isn’t without problems, but we do not have the space to unfold them here.

What about evil?

If God does order *everything* in His world, then what is the relationship between God and evil in the world? Does God actually cause the evil actions that people do? If He does, then isn’t God *responsible* for sin?

First look at some passages of Scripture that affirm that God did indeed cause evil events to come about and evil deeds to be done. ***But we must remember that in all these passages it is very clear that Scripture nowhere shows God as directly doing anything evil, but rather as bringing about evil deeds through the willing actions of moral creatures.***

Moreover, Scripture never blames God for evil or shows God as taking pleasure in evil, and Scripture never excuses human beings for the wrong they do. God can *never* be blamed for the wrong we do, be held responsible or be said to take pleasure in it. Such a conclusion contradicts Scripture.

The first clear example is found in **the life of Joseph**. Consider all of the wickedness of his brothers in Genesis 37:11, 4, 5, 8, 20, 24, 28, and yet Joseph could say that God has meant those things for good (Genesis 50:20, Psalm 105:17).

Then, consider **the Lord hardening Pharaoh’s heart** (Exodus 4:21, 7:3, 9:12, 10:20, 27, 11:10, 14:4, 8). This is a good example of the concurrence we are dealing with. God even hardened the hearts of the Egyptian people who pursued Israel into the Red Sea! (Exodus 14:17, Psalm 105:25)

Further we see **the Lord’s dealings in the hearts of the Canaanites** in Joshua’s time (Joshua 11:20, and see also Judges 3:12, 9:23).

After that, we see that **Samson’s insistence on marrying an unbelieving Philistine woman** was from the Lord (Judges 14:4).

Also consider 1 Samuel 2:25, 16:14, 2 Samuel 12:11-12—fulfilled in 16:22, 12:15-18, 16:5-8+11, 1 Kings 22:23, Acts 2:23, 4:27, 2 Thessalonians 2:11-12, 1 Peter 2:8, among many more.

An analysis of verses relating to God and evil

God Uses All things to Fulfil His Purposes and Even Uses Evil for His Glory and for Our Good

A knowledge of this is particularly comforting to the believer when evil comes into our lives, because we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28). Joseph understood this when he announced “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” (Genesis 50:20) Further, we understand that without the presence of evil, God would not be glorified in the punishment of evil (Proverbs 16:4). But the clearest statement of how God uses evil for His own glory and the good of His people is afforded us by Pharaoh (Romans 9:14-24).

Nevertheless, God Never Does Evil, and Is Never to Be Blamed for Evil

See how *God's foreordination of the crucifixion* is combined with *moral blame* on those who carried it out (Acts 2:23, 4:27-28). See also Luke 22:22, Matthew 18:7, 26:24 and Mark 14:21. We are *warned* not to blame God for our experience of temptation (James 1:13-14). The text doesn't say that God never *causes* evil, but declares that when it comes, it is *us* who bear the responsibility for our folding before temptation. Notice that even Isaiah 45:7 doesn't say that God Himself *does* evil, but that *He ordained that it would come about through the willing choices of His creatures*.

So, considering the last two points, *God uses evil for His purposes* and that *He never does evil and is not to be blamed for it*, we *must* insist on *both* of these truths. If we don't, we walk into a minefield of horrible possibilities! If we were to say that God Himself does evil, we would have to conclude that He is not a good and righteous God, and therefore that He is not really God at all. On the other hand, if we maintain that God does not use evil to fulfil His purposes, then we would have to admit that there is evil in the universe that God did not intend, is not under His control, and might not fulfil His purposes. This would make it very difficult for us to affirm that “all things” work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28). If evil came into the world in spite of the fact that God didn't intend it and did not want it to be there, then what guarantee do we have that there will not be more and more evil that He does not intend and that He does not want? And what guarantee do we have that He will be able to use it for His purposes, or even that He can triumph over it? Surely, this is an undesirable alternative position.

God Rightfully Blames and Judges Moral Creatures for the Evil They Do

This terrible truth is shown in Isaiah 66:3-4 and Ecclesiastes 7:29. The blame for evil is always to the responsible creature, whether man or demon, who does it, and the creature who does evil is always worthy of punishment. Should we persist in declaring that God is not right in punishing us for our sin, we should consider Paul's treatment of this very question in Romans 9:19-20. We *know* that every time we do evil, we *willingly* choose it and we realise that we are rightly to be blamed for it.

Evil Is Real, Not an Illusion, and We Should Never Do Evil, for It Will Always Harm Us and Others

Scripture consistently teaches that we *never* have a *right* or *need* to do evil, but we should persistently oppose it in ourselves and in the world. (Matthew 6:13, James 5:19-20) We shouldn't even *will* in our hearts for evil to be done, for entertaining sinful desires in our minds is to allow them to "wage war" against our souls and thereby do us spiritual harm. (1 Peter 2:11) Furthermore, the person who calculates that he can do evil so that good can come of it, deserves his judgement. (Romans 3:8) We should also remember that there are some things that are right for God to do, but wrong for us to do. For example, requiring and accepting worship, and using evil to bring about good purposes. Herman Bavinck uses the analogy of a parent who will himself use a very sharp knife, but will not allow his child to use it. Although we are to imitate God's moral character in many ways (Ephesians 5:1), this is not one of those ways.

In Spite of All of the Foregoing Statements, We Have to Come to the Point Where We Confess That We Do Not Understand How It Is That God Can Ordain That We Carry Out Evil Deeds and Yet Hold Us Accountable for Them and Not be Blamed Himself

We can surely affirm all of the foregoing statements because they are all taught in Scripture, but Scripture does not tell us exactly how God brings this situation about or how it can be that God holds us accountable for what He ordains to come to pass. Here Scripture remains silent, and we have to agree with Berkhof that ultimately "the problem of God's relation to sin remains a mystery."

Are We "Free"? Do We Have "Free Will"?

Scripture nowhere says that we are "free" in the sense of being outside of God's control or of being able to make decisions that are not caused by anything. Our ability to make relatively free choices is after all only a reflection of that attribute of God with which He created man in His image. True freedom in that sense will only be found in God Himself. Anything less than that cannot properly be spoken of as being "free" in the way most people understand the word today. Neither does Scripture say that we are free in the sense of being able to do right on our own apart from God's power. Our "freedom" is seen in the fact that God has made us with the ability to make *willing* choices that have *real effects* (if this were not the case, we would fall into the trap of fatalism or determinism where the creature's choices are either not willing or don't really matter at all). The creature is *not aware* of any restrictions on his decisions when he makes them.

If, as we considered under the heading preservation, Jesus Christ is continually carrying along things by His word of power, can there be any kind of freedom that exists outside of God's providential sustaining, controlling activities? Anything outside of *that* simply doesn't exist! Therefore, absolute freedom for the creature and God's providential control are not compatible and cannot co-exist. Either God is in providential *control* or He is not.

Government

God has a purpose in all that He does in the world and He providentially governs or directs all things in order that they accomplish His purposes.

We read something of this in Psalm 103:19, Daniel 4:35, Romans 11:36, 1 Corinthians 15:27, Ephesians 1:11, Philippians 2:10-11 and Romans 8:28.

(Here it is helpful to refer to lesson 15 on the will of God. Available for free download from www.graceunlimited.co.za CDI Part 2: The Doctrine of God)

Although God makes his revealed will known to mankind and states that that is what He requires from them, He continues to govern His creation by His providential government, also known as His secret will. This includes even the evil acts of men, as discussed under concurrence. Some claim this to be a "self-contradiction" in God. But even in the simplest sense we can understand something of this by the unpleasant things we must sometimes endure in this life in order to come into greater benefits. Examples are: the painful discipline received as a child to drive even more painful folly from our hearts, the sickness that follows the inoculation that saves us from the disease, etc. Surely with the God who is infinitely wiser than mankind, we should understand that He is able to will for His creatures to do things that in the short term displease Him, but in the long term He would receive the greater glory.

Consider the fact that this complete government of God in every detail was set in the mind of God before He even created the universe. Psalm 139:16, Job 14:5, Acts 2:23, 4:28, Ephesians 1:4, 2:10 and Jude 4. It should be obvious that God doesn't make up plans suddenly, rather, His government of His creation is a part of His ordered, eternal knowledge and will. Should this not greatly increase our trust in Him?

THE WORD OF GOD

God's Word Alone

My dear brother; in your sermon you also expressed enthusiastic allegiance to the Word of God. This is in fact one of the things I commended you on in the opening of this letter. As I have been showing, however, some of your teachings have been marked by a distinct lack of biblical content. May I humbly comment on this for a moment?

For your encouragement and blessing, I have included a summary of what the Bible itself says about the Word of God, specifically about its *sufficiency*. The reason I have

done this is because Scripture teaches that if we have Scripture as our source of information on all matters of faith, life and godliness, we have *everything we need*.

God Speaks Through Nature

Now I think I know what you are saying when you say that God speaks to you through nature. I am hoping that you mean that you see in nature, analogies of things you already know from Scripture. Surely you are not saying that God gives you secret, personal information that can be placed on the same level of authority as Scripture. Nature does “speak” about God (Psalm 19:1-6). It speaks about God Himself; God is powerful, God is God, therefore people should worship Him (Romans 1:20). Specifically, however, God speaks in detail about people, sin, salvation, reward and punishment, only in His word, the Bible. Once a believer has discovered the glories of God in the Word of God, he can go back and appreciate something of God’s handiwork in nature. Nature will never, however, reveal secrets about God that are not expressly taught in Scripture. The backbone of our knowledge about God *must* come from our personal study of God’s word.

God Speaks Through His Word

When we study Scripture, we find that it says certain things about itself. The first is that it is the final **authority**. It also claims to be **clear**. It insists that the Bible is **necessary** for a person to come to salvation—the reason I have laboured the point about **the** message so heavily. But the Bible also claims to be **sufficient**. While you can download my summary of the first 3 (at www.graceunlimited.co.za CDI Part 1: Introduction to Theology and Doctrine of the Word), I would like here just to touch on what Scripture says about its own **sufficiency**. Please take special note of application number 4 at the end of this section.

The Sufficiency of Scripture: Is the Bible Enough For Knowing What God Wants Us To Think Or Do?

DEFINITION: The sufficiency of Scripture means that Scripture contained all the words of God He intended His people to have at each stage of redemptive history, and that it now contains all the words of God we need for salvation, for trusting Him perfectly, and for obeying Him perfectly.

The Bible Itself Claims To Be Sufficient

We have concluded that it is in Scripture alone that we find God’s words to us. But a further truth is that God declares the contents of His word to be *enough* for us so that we can rejoice in His great salvation and be content in it.

Paul reminds Timothy how from *childhood* (This says something about the clarity of Scripture, doesn’t it?) he had known the Holy Scriptures “...which are *able to make you*

wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” 2 Tim 3:15. The words of God contain everything we need for *salvation*. See also James 1:18 and 1 Peter 1:23.

But the Bible is sufficient also to equip us for *living the Christian life*. See 2 Timothy 3:16-17. No matter what good work the Christian may want to do, the word has everything that he will find necessary to equip him for the task. You will also notice that if Scripture has what it takes to equip us for *every good work*, it follows that *every good work* must be described in Scripture. The Bible explains everything we will need to do in our lives.

We find this teaching also in Psalm 119:1. The Psalmist speaks there of the blessedness of the person whose ways are *blameless*. How does he become blameless? He walks according to the law of the Lord. To do what the Bible instructs us to do is to be blameless in God’s sight.

God does not require anything of us that must be learned from outside of Scripture.

We Can Find All That God Has Said On Particular Topics, And Answers To Our Questions

James 3:2 and 1 John 1:8-10 teach us that we will never perfectly obey all of Scripture in this life. So, of what use is it to us to know that *all we have to do* to be blameless is to do everything in Scripture to be blameless? Of what use is that teaching to us?

It narrows down our search in a dramatic way. We can rest assured that everything God wants us to know is found in ONE BOOK! We don’t need to frantically rummage through all of the books ever written, through newspapers, novels, movies, church creeds, through our feelings, impressions and circumstances in fear that we may be missing something crucial! We can focus on ONE BOOK.

If we want to know about one topic, and we collect every verse in Scripture on that topic, we have in our hands everything that God has said on that topic. In studying any topic like this, we can know finally exactly what God requires us to think or do on that topic. Whatever the answer this study brings to light, this is the final answer to your question.

Roman Catholic theologians would deny that we have all that God wants us to know before we have also listened to the official teaching of the church throughout its history. Others search in other places for knowledge on the history of Christian experience to find what God is saying to us today.

The Amount of Scripture Given Was Sufficient at Each Stage of Redemptive History

We are not saying that God cannot add to Scripture if He so desired. We are saying that man cannot. We are also saying that God has not spoken any words to mankind, which He requires us to believe and obey other than what we find in the Bible.

See how, in Moses’ day, God had given His people everything they needed to please Him. (Deuteronomy 29:29) Yes, God did add to those words at a later stage, but at that

point, He had given them enough. God has discerned exactly how much He would tell His people at every stage of history, and how much He would withhold. At every stage, He always gave exactly enough. So, in our day, God has given us exactly what He requires us to know, believe and do. The *final* additions to Scripture were God's words through His apostles to interpret the coming, life, death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ. These are necessary for all people who may live on earth for all subsequent time. This is why, at different stages in Scripture, we find warnings about adding to or taking away from Scripture.

Deuteronomy 4:2, *“Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you.”*

Prov 30:5-6 *“Every Word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar.”*

Revelation 22:18-19 *“I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.”*

Practical Applications of the Sufficiency of Scripture

- 1) We should be encouraged by the fact that in Scripture, God tells us how He wants us to think, what He wants us to do and that He has not left anything out that we will ever need. Obviously God doesn't answer any question we could conjure up, but if we are facing a problem that has real bearing on our Christian lives, God has spoken about it in His word.
Should we encounter an issue over which the Bible doesn't directly teach, such as “order of worship”, and we have submitted to the more general principles for Christian conduct and Church government (in the above example) we may safely conclude that there is not a specific way in which God requires us to do it. The more regular effort one puts into studying the word for instruction on how God wants him to think and live in everything, the more one will find the Scriptures to be very specifically directive. Obedience leads to the knowledge of God and the knowledge of God leads to obedience.
- 2) We find people who claim to believe in the Bible, but they set other works up alongside it. The Mormons have the *Book of Mormon*, Christian Scientists have their *Science and Health With a Key to the Scriptures* by Marry Baker Eddy. Some rely on the “truth” learned by people who claim to have died and come back to life, having been in heaven or hell. We can rest assured that we need no other words to put alongside God's words in the Bible to make God's words more complete. They are complete already.
- 3) The sufficiency of Scripture also tells us that God does not require us to believe anything about himself or his redemptive work that is not found in Scripture. Some other writings, such as the apocrypha are of historical interest to the believer, but we are not required to believe what they say or adhere to their teachings. To find what God requires of us, we need to confine our search to the Scriptures alone. This puts an end to our endless hours of struggles, “trying to find God's will for us”. If a believer is not confident that he has found God's will, he will not confidently strive to do it and will consequently not grow significantly in holiness! The sufficiency of Scripture

should encourage us to search out God's will. This brings great joy and peace in the Christian life. See Psalm 119:44-45, 165.

- 4) The sufficiency of Scripture shows us that no modern revelations from God are to be placed on a level equal to Scripture in Authority. Our attention is drawn to the spate of modern "prophecies" today. We are not required to believe or obey any such prophecy. Especially when it directs thoughts or actions that are not in line with the teachings of the Bible. It is interesting to note that whenever other writings or prophecies have been put alongside the Bible, they tend to have one or both of the following effects: (1) they de-emphasise the teachings of the Bible itself, (2) They begin to teach some things that are contrary to Scripture.
- 5) With regard to Christian living, the sufficiency of Scripture reminds us that nothing is sin that is not forbidden by Scripture either explicitly or by implication. Remember Psalm 119:1. Scripture contains principles, which are binding on all people for all time. This is important to notice when we come across the tendency to neglect the searching of the Scriptures in favour of thinking and doing what "we have always" thought and done such as denominationalism. Will God empower believers by His Spirit to do things that He has not required of them? Will our subsequent failure not bring discouragement? These "new rules" can destroy unity, evangelism and church growth.
- 6) The sufficiency of Scripture means that we must be content with what God has emphasised in His word and what He has not. It is noteworthy how some cults and false teachers major on relatively obscure and difficult-to-understand texts such as the Mormons on 1 Cor 15:29. God has not put a lot of emphasis on some things in Scripture, and we will generally find that those are not to be emphasised among believers either. We ought to be aware of the potential for division over such issues among even evangelical Christians. (Examples are: "Proper" church government, the exact nature of Christ's presence at the Lord's supper, the exact sequence of events surrounding the Lord's return, the categories of persons to be admitted to the Lord's supper, the application of salvation, the meaning of "baptism of the Holy Spirit" etc.) None of these are unimportant issues, but the point is that they are emphasised in Scripture to a degree that should determine how we should emphasise them. What is the final motive behind such fervent attachments to fine details that make very little difference to the whole of the Christian faith?
- 7) When a person goes to a counsellor, is there any standard of authority or source of information that is more sophisticated, reliable, comprehensive, dependable or wise than the living word of the living God?

WHAT IS REVIVAL?

Introduction to Revival?

As you preached, dear brother, you asked a question, to which I would like to suggest an answer, if I may. You said, "If this is not revival, then what is revival?" Allow me please the opportunity to discuss the issue of revival for a moment.

A Modern Revival Meeting

Revival seems to have become a hot word in our day. How often have we seen big posters and banners advertising a “revival” and then announcing the dates set? We hear that such-and-such a church is having a revival, all welcome. And it causes one to become weary with the superficial use of the word in our times. Because revival seems to be a term that is synonymous for a big public address system, turned up to explosion volume, a big band with many “performers” and a shouting, sweating showman trying to whip up the emotions of the crowd.

Not that long ago, I was unfortunate enough to accompany my brother to one such function. He was invited by an acquaintance and felt compelled to oblige. Even the noise and performance couldn’t hold a candle to the “revivalist” who stood up at a particularly feverish peak and began to pace up and down like a caged tiger and bellow frivolities into his microphone. The point where we (my brother and I) decided we had had enough was when this gentleman had been doing his best for about half an hour to inflame the crowd with “holy zeal”, and he declared, “There is such an atmosphere in this place tonight, we are not even going to turn to the Word of God!” He said that we didn’t even need it on that occasion! How empty! How misguided! How pitiful is this whole superficial, modern, “revival” trend! It is bankrupt! It is merely horizontal and as such has no real power! It sure seems to be a form of godliness (if it can be ranked that highly) that shows no evidence of power. No power to resist sin in the life. No evidence of “The Life of God in the Soul of Man”.⁶

Revival within the Last Century

Oswald J. Smith recalls a revival in Wales in 1904. He briefly explains the low moral state of the nation—drifting away from God. He then recounts the sudden moving of the Spirit of God like an unexpected tornado. Churches became crowded, holding services from ten in the morning until twelve at night. He then goes on to say, “Evan Roberts was the human instrument, but there was very little preaching.”⁷ He then goes on to describe some events in the life of Chas G. Finney where the crowds became so noisy that he had to stop preaching until the volume had subsided. He speaks of incidents where the crowds were sometimes already crying out for mercy before Finney even arrived!⁸ Smith claims that the results were permanent. In validation of that claim he tells of an incident where Finney preached in a place where it was so packed that he could hardly find standing place near the door. The point is that from that meeting, “...one of the young converts became a most successful minister of the Gospel.”⁹ Smith cries out for such a revival today. He asks, “How may we **secure** such an outpouring of the Spirit?”¹⁰ After quoting a few Scriptures, such as Isaiah 59:2 and Joel 2:12-29, he comes to the conclusion that the trouble is not with God but with us. He says that God is willing, more than willing, but we are not ready and God is waiting for us. And in this vein, he attempts to motivate—whether intentionally or unintentionally—out of a sense of pity for God.

⁶ I am of course thinking of Henry Scougal’s book by that title.

⁷ Smith, O.J. *The Revival We Need* 1933-55:1

⁸ Smith, O.J. *The Revival We Need* 1933-55:3

⁹ Smith, O.J. *The Revival We Need* 1933-55:6

¹⁰ Smith, O.J. *The Revival We Need* 1933-55:6

Some “Revival” Looks Down on Preaching and God’s Word

I was intrigued to see in this book, the attitude to the preaching of the Word of God—an attitude that borders on scoffing. They seem to ignore the Scriptural basis for the preaching of the word and attempt to form a type of evangelism that is measured by its results. In fact, he goes as far as to question the very words of God by declaring, “And I knew that this wonderful promise had not been fulfilled in my preaching.”, in response to Isaiah 55:11! He complains that he had no evidence that this was true and he had a right to such evidence!¹¹ He says later on in his argument, “But with me, the Gospel was not “the power of God unto Salvation.” God did not “confirm His word, “set to His seal”, “or “bear witness to His word”, when I preached. And I knew I had a right to expect it...”¹²

Can we “Secure” a Revival?

The final formula for “securing” an outpouring of the Spirit, according to Smith is subjective. He advocates nothing more than a return to prayer and new enthusiasm in dealing with personal sin.

It is very sad to see this low view of God spread across the pages of a book that has been read by so many people. It is also sad that even though Smith claims that the results were permanent, we have a view of history that challenges that evaluation. “James Boyle wrote to Finney in 1834: ‘I have visited and revisited many of these fields, and groaned in spirit to see the sad, frigid, carnal and contentious state into which the churches have fallen... within three months after we left them.’”¹³

Personal Revival and Large-Scale Revival

Roy Hession has also written a book on revival—“The Calvary Road”.¹⁴ His book stands far taller theologically than that of Smith. Although there are similarities between the teachings of Smith and Hession, and I am thinking of the subjective formula for “securing” a revival, Hession has a far greater respect for the Word of God and a far more carefully-thought-out approach to revival. Drawing a conclusion from an overview of his teaching, it seems that what he is putting forward as revival is “personal revival”. The idea is that as every individual believer gives attention to the process of sanctification in his life and to his relationships with those around him—family, friends, etc.—then revival is being experienced.

Is the Holy Spirit a PERSON?

The first teachings, those of Smith, seem to be marked by a sense of mystery and almost irrationality surrounding the work of the Holy Spirit. It almost seems as if the Holy Spirit is no longer a Person in this view. This is drawn from the narrow formula which is

¹¹ Smith, O.J. *The Revival We Need* 1933-55:14

¹² Smith, O.J. *The Revival We Need* 1933-55:17-18

¹³ Quoted in Van Zyl, J. *Introduction to Christian Doctrine* Bible Institute of South Africa
Date?:145

¹⁴ Hession, R. *The Calvary Road* 1950-97

prescribed in order to secure a revival. The other example seems to remove the mystery and possibly even the likelihood of an outpouring of the blessings of the Holy Spirit. This puts the believer who is presently being sanctified into a state of revival. Although there is an element of truth in each of these teachings, they apparently miss the mark when the nature and definition of *true revival* is under scrutiny.

Parts of the Church are Sluggish

The suggestion that a true revival of God's church may actually take place in our time has been reduced to meaninglessness. We not only associate the word "revival" with the modern trends that go under that banner, but because we live in relative ease and comfort, we do not see that we need a revival. We have everything we want. What more could a revival give us? We say, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing." But we do not realise that we are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.¹⁵ With an attitude like this, the church has lost her position of power in the world. She is no longer taken into consideration, no longer a factor in the dealings and plans of men from the man in the street to the heads of state.

The Lines Have Become Blurred

But there is more. The outcomes of the lives of believers are not much different from the outcomes of the lives of unbelievers. We are barely distinguishable from one another. There is no vehement statement that brings the division, hard and cold, into view. One thinks for example of martyrdom. What a statement martyrdom is to the world. In western-type society with its humanistic, people's rights type mentality, few opportunities present themselves for such statements. The church is like a sleeping volcano around whose base little communities of the ungodly have taken up residence. It is to remedy such a state of affairs that God has in history, graciously poured out His Spirit onto His church and revived her position of uniqueness and power in the world. May I lay before you the wonderful features of the God-given revivals in history that should stir up our hearts in longing for God to again do such a work among us, in our age?

Personal Revival

We as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ have a privilege and responsibility to give ourselves to the process of sanctification, so that our Lord will be glorified through the way we live. Each of us ought always to be hungering and thirsting after righteousness so that we may be filled.¹⁶ We ought to be delighting ourselves in the Lord and be receiving the desires of our hearts. We ought to be filled with the Spirit, singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, making music in our hearts to the Lord.¹⁷ Often, although we know what we should be doing, we don't do it! We see no immediate need to be putting to death the misdeeds of the body.¹⁸ We see no rush. We serve a

¹⁵ Revelation 3:17

¹⁶ Matthew 5:6

¹⁷ Ephesians 5:19

¹⁸ Romans 8:13

merciful God! We sometimes tend to antinomianism. My point is this: We do have everything, as believers, from God's gracious hand, in order for us to live life in a godly way and to please the Lord. In that lifestyle, we should know personal revival. I am saying this in order to commend Roy Hession on his book, "The Calvary Road". What he describes as revival is simply this kind of lifestyle. This should be normal for the believer, to live in this state of humility, meekness and repentance for sins—maintaining his privilege of sweet fellowship with God. So although this is the privilege and responsibility of every believer and Hession has written an excellent book on this subject, this is not what we are speaking about when we speak about revival. We will now give our attention to some of the notable facets of true revival and then formulate a definition.

Revival is from God and Not from Man¹⁹

What I have described as "personal revival" and what I would like to describe as "revival" are two different things. The first has to do with the fellowship of the individual believer with his heavenly Father, while the second is that which has been seen in history when God suddenly, dramatically and unusually revives large sections of **His church**. One writer says that when God desires to show mercy, He stirs up prayer!²⁰ When God is pleased to come in mercy and revive His church, it is the church herself that He revives. So much effort is expended in getting the unsaved into the church while the members of the church themselves are in the state mentioned earlier—"un-revived"! All our efforts are in vain. We see no souls saved. The Gospel is no longer attractive to those who live around us!²¹ They see no loveliness, no desirability, there is nothing in the church that appeals to them. The church seems dead and lifeless and boring. The church—in their eyes—has no answers to the problems of life, because they are just normal people like them, doing their best to survive in modern culture. One lady in the church has even told me about a theory she has been working on. It is a theory that suits the lover of psychotherapy. It claims that no person has the solution to another person's problems. They need to be taken through the problem to find the answer to their problem themselves! This attack has even been aimed at those who counsel from Scripture alone!

And it is this point to which we come that drags the earnest believer to his knees! Why? Because God in His mercy has filled such a believer's heart with sorrow and grief at the state of the church! She is mocked and ridiculed. And it is this dissatisfaction with the plunge of the church that is the gracious work of the Holy Spirit! And when God revives His church, it must be seen beyond any doubt that God Himself has come to help His people!²² So the first thing we need to note is that true revival is always the work of God and not the efforts of men. That is why talk of "revival" wearies us so. Because men's efforts can be spotted miles away and they are weak and they fail! It takes the extraordinary power of God to bring about a revival that completely changes and challenges the stagnant hearts of men. When God deals with men in such a way, the world appears to be a different place! It takes on the features that the angels in Isaiah

¹⁹ These headings—except for this first one—are taken directly from Van Zyl, J. Introduction to Christian Doctrine Date?:149-159

²⁰ Possibly Thomas Watson

²¹ Titus 2:10

²² Luke 7:16

spoke of, "...the whole earth is full of His glory."²³ But we cannot stress it enough, revival is the work of God in renewing the life of the church. After that, God works through the glowing testimony of His church to reach more and more lost sinners who come or are brought into contact with that church. Revival is the gracious work of God!

So revival is a discovery of the Theology of the Sovereignty of God.

Revival is a Rediscovery of the Holy Spirit

When God is pleased to revive His people, one unmistakable feature is noticeable. Suddenly, the doctrine of the immanence of God is no longer just a doctrine. Believers suddenly become very aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit! Christians become overwhelmed with wonder. They have a new sensitivity to the fact that "**in Him** (God) they live and move and have their being".²⁴ He is no longer far away and remote. Just as the atmosphere changes when a loved one whom you haven't seen for a long time comes into a room where you have been all alone, so the atmosphere is distinctly alive and vibrant when the Holy Spirit makes His presence known. "Revival is a Theology of the rediscovery of the Person, Presence and Power of the Holy Spirit."²⁵

To those who claim that it is what *we do* that **secures** a revival (Smith) we need to realise that God is a Person. He will not be operated as a man operates a machine. Once I heard a man saying to some others who were congregated around him, "It is by our faith that we **control God**."! I had to interject and remind Him that God is the Supreme Sovereign Ruler of the universe—no-one **controls** God! He will not be controlled! We are not in a position to **secure** a revival. In God's grace He does, from time to time, revive His church. We live godly lives as is our privilege and responsibility, by His gracious empowerment, but God will suddenly and unexpectedly revive His church when He sees fit.²⁶

So revival is a discovery of the Theology of the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit.

Revival is a Rediscovery of Prayer

Surely it was for nothing less than revival that the psalmist cried out, "My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God."²⁷ And in a world that is becoming more and more godless and wicked²⁸, and the church is panting for their God like a deer pants for water²⁹, is not revival the thing that we most desire? The weary long for life! Those wandering in the desert long for the first sight of Elim!³⁰ And it is this desire, stirred up graciously by God that bursts out in the prayers of His saints, "O that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the

²³ Isaiah 6:3

²⁴ Acts 17:28

²⁵ Van Zyl, J. Introduction to Christian Doctrine Date?:151

²⁶ Van Zyl, J. Introduction to Christian Doctrine Date?:151

²⁷ Psalm 84:2

²⁸ Romans 1:18

²⁹ Psalm 42:1

³⁰ Exodus 15:27

mountains would tremble before you.”!³¹ This is the cry of the heart that longs for the power of God to command a renewed respect in this world!

The Christian who truly loves the Lord and desires Him above all things³² knows more than anything that men’s efforts come to nothing without the life-giving power of God!³³ What this Christian sees is the means God Himself has given us—prayer—by which we may boldly stand before the very throne of grace and earnestly **petition God Himself!** We have the only and direct means of speaking to God. No, we don’t “*control God*” by our prayers either! But we have the privilege of pleading with a merciful God, who will in infinite wisdom do the best thing in the best possible way. We can leave it in His hands. Possibly, He may at that time choose to revive His church.

Apart from laying the situation before our Lord in petition, we have another, more intense way of praying. We remember Daniel’s argument in prayer. He was so convinced and compelled by the promise of God in Jeremiah’s writings that God would restore Jerusalem to His people, that when he saw nothing happening he “...turned to the LORD God and pleaded with Him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.”³⁴ Then in the end of his prayer he turns to the Lord in argument. He appeals to the character of God! He says, “We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy”³⁵ Then he appeals further that the Jews and Jerusalem bear His name!³⁶ God’s glory is at stake! His name is being slandered! So the argument and the appeal are for God to act in such a way that His name will again be held in high honour in His world.

So revival is a discovery of the Theology of Intercessory Prayer.³⁷

Revival is a Rediscovery of Preaching

The more we look around today, the more we become aware of the myriad of “true-church-look-alikes” in the world. So many cults, false teachers and self-fashioned “evangelists” are slinging around Christian jargon, drained of its true meaning. Our terminology has become cheap and easy in this world. The Gospel has been so bent out of shape and urged onto people by insincere “servants of righteousness”³⁸ in a form that has no power, that it has become over familiar to the lost sinner in the street! He listens for key words and laughs it off as something he has heard before. The god of this age has blinded their minds!³⁹ And the true church is so scared to be identified with the hullabaloo outside that they have no confidence in the glad tidings of the Christ which are the power of God into salvation to everyone that believes!⁴⁰ So the first thing that happens in the realm of preaching, when God revives His church, is that men are

³¹ Isaiah 64:1

³² See Psalm 73:25

³³ John 15:5

³⁴ Daniel 9:3

³⁵ Daniel 9:18

³⁶ Daniel 9:19

³⁷ Van Zyl, J. Introduction to Christian Doctrine Date?:153

³⁸ 2 Corinthians 11:15

³⁹ 2 Corinthians 4:4

⁴⁰ See literal interpretation of Romans 1:16

infused with a flaming zeal for **the** glorious Gospel of the blessed God. They begin, like the Puritan, Richard Baxter, to preach it in the way that a dying man preaches to dying men as if sure never to preach again!

When God revives His church, preaching is central, and in that preaching, God is central. It is the kind of preaching that honours God. The kind of preaching that tells people about God and their standing and state before Him. The kind of preaching that once again takes those Christian terms that have been dragged around in the religious filth of our age and cleans them up, empties them of their content of lies and inflates them with new meaning—the truth! It is preaching that addresses sin. It is preaching that is done by men of God who long more than anything else to see the life of God in the soul of man! It is the kind of preaching that God is pleased to use to send the crowds of infidels scampering in terror to the church to hear just something of the words of truth. How can they be saved? Don't we long to see "God with us" evident in our humble, urgent proclamation of His word? Horatius Bonar once said this about the preachers in the times of revival through the centuries:

"They felt their infinite responsibility as stewards of the mysteries of God and shepherds appointed by the Chief Shepherd to gather in and watch over souls. They lived and laboured and preached like men on whose lips the immortality of thousands hung. Everything they did and spoke bore the stamp of earnestness, and proclaimed to all with whom they came into contact that the matters about with they had been sent to treat were of infinite moment... Their preaching seems to have been of the most masculine and fearless kind, falling on the audience with tremendous power. It was not vehement, it was not fierce, it was not noisy; it was far too solemn to be such; it was massive, weighty, cutting, piercing, sharper than a two-edged sword."⁴¹

One of the reasons why God has always brought about revival in His church and not in the world—apart from the obvious—is because of the fact that the church in an unrevived state is not in the shape to be nurturing new souls in the life of faith. The church is the setting in which new converts must be helped to change toward maturity. Without a revived church, these new-born Christians are left to the elements to perish.

So revival is a discovery of the Theology of Preaching.

Revival is a Rediscovery of God and His Presence

How casual we can become at times in our walk of faith. This is not the case when God graciously revives His church. Isn't it amazing how we tend to behave differently in the presence of different people? Compare the ways we behave, for example, when seated before an important interviewer for a job, with the way we behave in the presence of our kids. The Lord Himself asks in Isaiah 57:12, "Is it not because I have long been silent that you do not fear me?" Surely that question must be answered in the affirmative?

But when God revives His church, there is an overwhelming sense of the terror of God! We remember Daniel's words in his vision, "I am overcome with anguish because of the vision, by lord, and I am helpless. How can I, your servant, talk with you, my lord? My

⁴¹ Horatius Bonar is quoted in Piper J. The Supremacy of God in Preaching 1990:104

strength is gone and I can hardly breathe."⁴² Or Isaiah's words of awe when he saw the Lord in the temple, "At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."⁴³ It is this sort of atmosphere that pervades a true revival! An atmosphere of the sheer fearfulness of the Holy One who is a consuming fire! We are warned in Hebrews 10:31 that it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God! And in the time of a revival, it is this fear of falling that seizes the hearts of sinners with terror and they cling to the hem of the robe of Christ for all they are worth! The holiness of God becomes real to those who are justified without even speaking of the sinner in rebellion towards Him!

And in the full view and terror of His holiness, how wonderful does His grace and mercy now seem! How lovely does the name of the Lord Jesus Christ now sound! How costly and precious does His spilled blood now appear! How we begin to grasp something of His dying agony, suffering the terrible wrath of *this* God for us! In fact, suddenly the multifaceted jewel of doctrine of God springs to life as we bask in the glories of His presence.

So revival is a discovery of the Theology of the Person and Presence of God.

Definition

A revival is the sudden, unexpected, unusual blessing of God, brought about entirely as a free act of His will, whereby He grants believers a fresh sense of the presence and power of His Spirit, gives unction to the prayers and preaching of the saints, renews His people's delight in Himself and in the process sweeps many lost souls into the blessing of His Salvation.

Conclusion

Revival is not when people begin to feel guilty about their sinful lifestyles and commit themselves to change. Revival is when ***the*** Gospel is preached faithfully, God grants faith, new birth, righteousness, freedom and new life, ending in glorification to many. Revival is when God begins to stir up the glowing embers in His church, fanning them into devouring flames. Revival is when God begins to raise many from spiritual death and usher them into the community of saints who have been prepared beforehand to nurture them. How wonderful it is when God graciously deals in an unusual, unexpected way with His people, reviving them in the same way that we may revive a drooping plant with a bucket of water. How delightful when He begins to show us our helplessness in the face of the wickedness in the world, urging us on to desire Him more. What a mercy to begin to know the presence of the Holy Spirit, to begin to pray and preach passionately and to know that the Living God is present with His people to bless in power!

⁴² Daniel 10:16-17

⁴³ Isaiah 6:4-5

*How lovely is your dwelling-place, O Lord Almighty!
My soul yearns, even faints, For the courts of the Lord;
My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.
Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere;
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
Than dwell in the tents of the wicked.*
(Psalm 84:1-2, 10)

IS GOD ALL-KNOWING OR DOES GOD FORGET?

Could God Forget *Me*?

As I conclude this letter and appeal to you my dear brother, may I turn our attention to one final item? I am speaking of the statement that you made about God *forgetting*. If I didn't believe that this too is speaking of God what is not right, I would not even mention it. It does however impact what the Bible says about God knowing everything. If God can forget, can He still know *everything*? If God could forget *one* thing, how many other things could He forget? If He could forget my *sin*, could he one day forget *me*? Could He forget the *church*? The thought of a God who is able to forget is very fearful. Rather, let us cling to the glorious truth that God is all-knowing. (Job 37:16, 1 John 3:20) (This too can be downloaded from www.graceunlimited.co.za CDI Part 3: The Doctrine of God)

Does God Have a Faulty Memory?

While Scripture does declare that God will ***not remember***, does this mean that God forgets? Certainly not. When God says He will ***remember their sins no more*** (for example: Jeremiah 31:34 and Hebrews 10:17), He is teaching something far more wonderful than the fact that God has a faulty memory.

God Sees Christians through the “Package of Righteousness”

You will remember when I was speaking about your hearer's hope; I spoke of the benefits of Christ's death being given to the sinner, to satisfy God's demand that he be punished, and the benefits of Christ's perfect life being given to him to make him positively beautiful in the eyes of God. Is it conceivable that once God has dealt with your and my sin in that way, when we one day stand in the throne room of God, there by Christ's work, dressed in Christ's righteousness, that God doesn't remember who you are or how you got there? No. He knew each one of His people from before the beginning of time (Romans 8:30). If God is eternal and all of His knowledge is eternal, every thought God ever has is always with Him forever (2 Peter 3:8). Everything God knows about you and I when we are received into heaven is present in His mind. He knows you and I were lost sinners before we even fell into sin in Adam. He knitted us together in our mother's wombs (Psalm 139:13). He knew every sinful thought, intention, attitude and action. He drew us to Himself at the right moment. He gave us the eyes of faith. He gave us the ability to repent (Acts 5:31, 11:18). He credited the benefits of the death of Christ to us. He credited the perfect life of Christ to us. He drove us along the

road to personal holiness by His Spirit. He received us into eternal glory at the time of His choosing. Now as we stand before Him, does all of that information vanish? No. God is glorified in our salvation. His glory shines all the more brightly against the backdrop of our sinful rebellion.

God Deliberately Chooses Not to Remember

When God says he will remember our sins no more, He is saying that he will no longer allow those sins to be a factor in the way He deals with us. He is completely aware of the sins of the person whom He has saved, but ***because of what Christ has done on that sinner's behalf***, God will deal with that sinner as he would deal with the perfect Son of God Himself. The saved sinner now gets every reward that Jesus has ever earned through His perfect obedience.

God Promises Not to Hold This against You

I highly recommend Dr. Jay E. Adams' book *A Theology of Christian Counselling*. (available from www.augustine.co.za) In that book he has an absolutely brilliant chapter on forgiveness. There he shows very carefully from Scripture how *forgiveness* is the *opposite* of *holding something against* someone else. When you forgive, you don't automatically forget. What you are doing is making a *promise* to a person, *not to allow that offence to impact the way you relate to each other* in the future. This is very much like what God is doing when He deliberately chooses not to remember. He is deliberately taking the sins of His child, placing them on Christ, punishing them in Christ on the cross, dressing His child in Christ's perfect life and turning aside His wrath because Christ bore his sin on the cross, and responding to that believer according to that eternally binding transaction. This is something too wonderful to ever have the last word on. It just keeps swelling and becoming more glorious!

CONCLUSION

While there is still so much more I would like to say to you my dear brother in Christ, to encourage you and build you up, please accept this letter as a token of my love for you and as an earnest appeal to you to boldly preach of God what is right.