

ALIVE TO GOD: CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST

Study Thirteen

THE LIFE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

This final study in the series takes up something of what it means to be ‘alive to God’, following on from what is entailed in being ‘crucified with Christ’. The previous three studies, on being crucified to self, sin, the flesh, the law and the world, have brought us to the brink of this, as we have been opened up to the glories of what we have now been made alive to in Christ: living for him who for our sake died and was raised, as slaves of righteousness, looking towards the resurrection body, walking by the Spirit, seeing the just requirement of the law fulfilled in us, as citizens now and in the future of the new heavens and new earth where righteousness dwells supreme.

What does it mean to be ‘alive to God’? The phrase comes from Romans 6:11:

So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Being ‘alive to God’ is linked here with being ‘dead to sin’. Paul enunciates the contrast between sin and death on the one hand, and life and righteousness on the other:

No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness . . . Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness (Rom. 6:13, 16–18).

With regard to the ‘obedience, which leads to righteousness’, we will need to see where this ‘obedience’ lies. It appears that it is not the same as ‘righteousness’, but ‘leads to’ it. For the moment, we note that being ‘alive to God’ has to do with living a life of righteousness.

RESURRECTION LIFE

There is a traditional prayer that is sometimes prayed at funerals:

Merciful God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the resurrection and the life of all who believe in him, and who has taught us not to grieve, as people without hope, for those who sleep in him: raise us, we pray, from the death of sin to the life of righteousness, that when we depart this life we may rest in him as, our hope is, our *brother* does, and that at the resurrection on the last day we may be found acceptable to you, and receive the kingdom prepared for all who love and fear you; grant this, merciful Father, through Jesus Christ, our mediator and redeemer. Amen.¹

¹ Funeral Collect, *An Australian Prayer Book*, Anglican Information Office, Sydney, 1978, p. 595.

The prayer, ‘raise us, we pray, from the death of sin to the life of righteousness’, is prayed on the occasion of a physical death and burial, and has in view ‘the resurrection on the last day’. What is the connection between ‘the life of righteousness’ and ‘the resurrection on the last day’?

The Hope of Righteousness

In Romans 4, Paul the apostle speaks of when Abraham was justified through faith, when it ‘was reckoned to him as righteousness’ (Rom. 4:22). This ‘faith of Abraham’, which we are to share (see Rom. 4:16) has to do with the God who raises the dead:

in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist (Rom. 4:17).

This faith, through which righteousness, or justification, is reckoned to us, is then shown to be in Jesus as the one who was raised from death:

Now the words, ‘it was reckoned to him,’ were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification (Rom. 4:23–25).

Consequently, Paul is able to say:

For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness (Gal. 5:5).

In Romans 5:2, Paul calls this ‘hope of righteousness’ nothing less than ‘our hope of [sharing] the glory of God’ (there is no word for ‘sharing’ in the Greek). In speaking about our being reconciled to God, Paul says the reason God made Christ ‘to be sin’ on the cross was ‘so that in him we might become the righteousness of God’ (2 Cor. 5:21). This ‘hope of righteousness’ is clearly looking towards the fullness of something that will be in the future. What Paul has in mind is the resurrection of our bodies, that is still to come:

we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience (Rom. 8:23–25).

We find the same train of thought also in Romans 6, where our ‘newness of life’ (Rom. 6:4), later identified as ‘righteousness’ (Rom. 6:13, 16, 18, 19, 20), is related to Christ’s resurrection, and to our being ‘united with him in a resurrection like his’ (Rom. 6:5), which is still to come. This is later called ‘the free gift of God . . . eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Rom. 6:23).

We already sense that the order of righteousness envisaged here is not something we can come to by seeking to improve our performance or ‘lifting our game’. It is of the order of God’s own righteousness, and we come to it by nothing less than death and resurrection in a faith-union with Christ. Perhaps this is what Jesus meant when he said that our righteousness is to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 5:20).

We see the larger context when we look at the world we will inhabit in the resurrection:

in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home (2 Pet. 3:13).

In this renewed creation (see Rev. 21:1, 5) there will be ever and only righteousness—the righteousness, or glory (see Rev. 21:23), of God, as manifested and established in Christ. This will be the air we breathe, in which we live and fully participate. Anything that is not that righteousness will not be there:

nothing unclean will enter it . . . Nothing accursed will be found there any more (Rev. 21:27; 22:3).

Our justification through faith in Jesus Christ—having sin not-reckoned to us, and being brought into the righteousness from God (see Rom. 4:6–8; Phil. 3:8–9)—is not just to free us from sin. Its purpose is primarily to fit us for the ‘new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home’, which is to be our true and eternal dwelling-place. Nothing less than the saving righteousness of God in Christ can do that.

The Righteous Deeds of the Saints

This has absolute implications for how we live here and now. The apostle John speaks of how it will be at the coming of Christ, when those who belong to him will be raised from death (see 1 Cor. 15:23):

Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is (1 John 3:2).

He then says what follows from this for the here and now:

And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure (1 John 3:3).

The result of this purification (whatever that may be—see below) is that those who are born of him will do right:

And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming. If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who does right has been born of him (1 John 2:28–29).

Paul taught that to believe or not in the resurrection of the dead has clear moral consequences. Without Christ’s resurrection, and ours, there can be no escape from sin:

For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins (1 Cor. 15:16–17).

Later in the same chapter, Paul quotes from the Greek poet Meander:

Do not be deceived: ‘Bad company ruins good morals’ (1 Cor. 15:33).

If we thought this chapter to be a sublime doctrinal treatise on the resurrection of the dead, with no impact on how we live now, we may wonder what such a down-to-earth statement is doing there. It is apparent that the ‘bad company’ that Paul is warning against here is those who deny the resurrection of the dead. Participation in the eternal life and righteousness of God, as the true destiny of human beings, could not be further from their thinking. They join in the cry of those who go about their lives with no regard for God, and refuse to repent (see Isa. 22:8–14):

If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die’ (1 Cor. 15:32).

They consider that this life is all that there is—there is no judgement and no future life—so they figure that they can do what they like with impunity. Over against such, Paul tells the believers:

Come to a sober and right mind, and sin no more; for some people have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame (1 Cor. 15:34).

‘Come to a sober and right mind’ could be translated more literally: ‘Wake up from your drunken stupor righteously, and do not sin’. That it is possible to wake up to righteousness from being intoxicated and deceived by sin is a remarkable claim. Paul concludes all he says about the resurrection of the dead with this practical exhortation:

Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:58).

It is Paul’s anticipation of what will happen to him after he dies—as yet unseen—that has brought him to live a life that is pleasing to God. After speaking of the resurrection of the dead in terms of ‘what is mortal’ being ‘swallowed up by life’ (2 Cor. 5:1–5), he says:

So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord—for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him (2 Cor. 5:6–9).

Paul’s overall desire is to be found in Christ, ‘not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith’, which for Paul is akin to knowing ‘Christ and the power of his resurrection’ (Phil. 3:9–10).

Concerning ‘our hope of [sharing] the glory of God’ (Rom. 5:2), Paul says:

hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us (Rom. 5:5).

This ‘love’ of God that the Spirit brings is that ‘while we still were sinners Christ died for us’ (Rom. 5:8). With that, we are set for ‘the hope of righteousness’ that we have ‘through the Spirit, by faith’ (Gal. 5:5; see above). Elsewhere, Paul speaks of the Spirit as the ‘seal’ or present guarantee of ‘our inheritance’ on ‘the day of redemption’, that is, in the resurrection of the dead (Eph. 1:4). As he speaks of Christ’s resurrection, and how the Father ‘who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you’ (Rom. 8:11), Paul says:

if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness (Rom. 8:10)—

or, as it could be translated, ‘the Spirit is life through justification’. Again, the point is made: the righteousness that we are now in, and that we now do through faith in Jesus Christ, is there by virtue of the gift of the Spirit, not by anything we try to make of our own flesh and not by any self-justifying pursuit of God’s law:

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God (Rom. 8:6–8).

We will need to bear this in mind when we ask how we come to do righteous deeds. For the moment we note that, in the present, ‘we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life’ (Eph. 2:10). These are the works which, after we have died, follow us into the new creation:

And I heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord.’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them’ (Rev. 14:13).

These are indeed our wedding gown, ‘granted’ to us:

‘Hallelujah!
For the Lord our God
the Almighty reigns.
Let us rejoice and exult
and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready;
to her it has been granted to be clothed
with fine linen, bright and pure’—
for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints (Rev. 19:6b–8).

Question for Reflection

- *How do our present righteous deeds relate to the future resurrection life?*

THE CLEANSING OF PAST SINS

Christians are agreed that faith in Christ is to issue in righteous living. How that comes to be so can be a point of contention. Does the life of righteousness now come by our own strength of will and exertion, in response to God’s great salvation? Some speak and act and expend themselves as if this is so. Others, fearing a reversion to a ‘gospel’ of salvation by works of the law rather than by faith in Christ, tend to refrain from exerting themselves in any way. How do righteous deeds come to characterise the life of a Christian believer?

Peter the apostle insists that we already have all that is needed to participate in godliness here and now, with a view to our coming participation in the righteousness that will be in the new creation:

His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:3–4).

Becoming ‘participants of the divine nature’ should be understood in a practical rather than in any metaphysical way. We do not somehow become as God ourselves (as in Gen. 3:5). We will be fully involved in the things that characterise God’s own nature and action—‘his own glory and goodness’. God’s righteousness will be the character of all we do and say.

Peter then tells us to live accordingly now:

For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love (2 Pet. 1:5–7).

All of these things together surely constitute the ‘life and godliness’ spoken of in verse 3. Peter designates these as the expected effect and fruit of belonging in a relationship with Jesus Christ:

For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 1:8).

How then do these things come to be ours and increase among us? Peter gives the key:

For anyone who lacks these things is nearsighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins (2 Pet. 1:9).

Peter does not say: ‘Anyone who lacks these things is not trying hard enough’. A lack in these things comes from being ‘nearsighted and blind’—not being able to see something clearly, or to keep it in view. And what is it that must be kept in clear and bright focus, for these things to abound? If ‘anyone who lacks these things . . . is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins’, then to abound in these things is to keep in remembrance the cleansing of past sins. Goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection, and love—these all come to be ours and increase, not as we focus on these things in themselves, but as we continue in a clear appreciation of ‘the cleansing of past sins’ that happened to us in the action of the cross of Christ.

The benefits of this continual remembrance (such as we are exhorted to in the Lord’s Supper) are twofold. We cannot be in remembrance of the cleansing of past sins without being reminded of the past sins themselves. This should be sufficient to keep us from ever having any illusions about ourselves and what we are capable of, and to hold us in a position of right humility. But this is never as a morbid or depressing exercise, since the past sins are only ever recalled as having been cleansed by the blood of Christ, such that the magnificence and wonder of that great work of God’s mercy and grace and love will never leave us. Thus it is this great mercy and grace and love of God that we will be living in, and not any construct of our own separate from that.

Geoffrey Bingham writes tellingly:

II Peter 1:9 suggests that forgetfulness of being forgiven is a cause, if not the cause, of loss of love. Certain it is that he who has been forgiven much, loves much (Luke 7:42–47). How then, this dullness? Is it that we forget in order to escape the deep obligations of forgiving love, or is it that we have had a deficient view of love? Is it both?

John makes it clear (I John 4:19) that we love (only) because He first loved us. If there is a deficient view of His love for us, then there will be a weak response. Romans 5:5–10 shows that only the Holy Spirit can reveal the truth of the Cross—His love, and so flood our hearts with that same divine love. We never, of ourselves, love God, but being captured by the Cross, we then respond in love, and indeed must respond. The Spirit reveals to us those things which ‘eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered in the heart of man’. In other words, the Spirit reveals the mystery of the Cross, and so works savingly upon our spirits.²

Question for Reflection

- *What does the cleansing of past sins have to do with our present, and future, godliness?*

² Rev. Geoffrey Bingham, *Return to the Dynamic*, leaflet, NCPI, Blackwood, n.d.

THE OBEDIENCE OF FAITH

At the beginning and end of his Letter to the Romans, Paul speaks of ‘the obedience of faith’ among all the nations (Rom. 1:5; 16:26; compare 15:18). Of this, P. T. Forsyth writes:

And by this obedience of faith, of course, is not meant the obedience that grows out of faith but, here as always, the obedience that is faith—faith being the greatest act a will can do, as its absolute self-assignment to the grace of the Holiest and His holy love.³

When asked about doing the works of God, Jesus replied with the absolute necessity of faith in himself as sent from God:

Then they said to him, ‘What must we do to perform the works of God?’ Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent’ (John 6:28–29).

Thus we hear of those who ‘became obedient to the faith’ (Acts 6:7), and those who do not ‘obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus’ (2 Thess. 1:8). To ‘obey the gospel’ is to be obedient to the reality that we are forgiven sinners who have been made children of God through the gifts of repentance and faith in Christ. This is something different from obeying church authorities; it is also different from obeying the Old Testament commandments, or even the New Testament precepts, as a separate or consequent consideration:

The perfect obedience is not the obedience which is *associated with* faith or from it, but the obedience of the soul which *is* faith, and which is the saving power and perfection for all. To be perfect is to be in Christ Jesus by faith. It is the right relation to God in Christ, not the complete achievement of Christian character.⁴

Not that keeping the commandments and precepts of the gospel are inconsistent with faith in Christ—quite the opposite (see Matt. 5:17–20). It comes as part and parcel of the faith-relationship with God in Christ. Jesus did not say: ‘If ye love me, keep my commandments’ (John 14:15, KJV), as if the faith-relationship comes first, and the keeping of the commandments follows from it as an obligation. He said: ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments’ (NRSV).⁵ So P. T. Forsyth expounds:

Faith is the very highest form of our dependence on God. We never outgrow it. We refine it, but we never transcend it. Whatever other fruits of the Spirit we show, they grow upon faith, and faith which is in its nature repentance. Penitence, faith, sanctification, always co-exist; they do not destroy and succeed each other; they are phases of the one process of God in the one soul. It is untrue to think of holiness or sinlessness as a possession, a quality, an experience of the soul, and so distinct from a previous and qualifying faith. There is no such separate experience.⁶

There is an old chorus:

Trust and obey,
For there’s no other way
To be happy in Jesus,
But to trust and obey.⁷

³ P. T. Forsyth, *The Principal of Authority* [1913], NCPI, Blackwood, 1952, p. 67.

⁴ P. T. Forsyth, ‘Christian Perfection’, in *God the Holy Father and Other Sermons* [1897, 1957], NCPI, Blackwood, 1987, p. 119.

⁵ τηρήσετε (*tērēsete*) is future indicative, not imperative.

⁶ Forsyth, *God the Holy Father*, p.101.

⁷ Rev. J. H. Sammis, from Alexander’s Hymns, No. 3, in *Scripture Union Choruses*, Scripture Union, London, Combined Edition, 1964, no. 202.

‘Trust and obey’ is fine, if it is taken to be the one action of faith, but not if it means ‘Trust, and then obey’. The translators of the *New International Version* fall prey to a prevalent evangelical heresy when they translate ‘the obedience of faith’⁸ as ‘the obedience that comes from faith’ (Rom. 1:5, NIV) and ‘believe and obey’ (Rom. 16:26, NIV), or ‘faith and obedience’ (Rom. 1:5; 16:26, TNIV), as if they were separate, with one consequent on the other. On this, Walter Marshall commented:

It is also the ruin of souls to seek only remission of sins by faith in Christ, and holiness by our endeavours, according to the terms of the law; whereas we can never live to God in holiness, except we be dead to the law, and live only by Christ living in us by faith. That faith which receiveth not holiness, as well as remission of sins from Christ, will never sanctify us, and therefore it will never bring us to heavenly glory (Heb. xii. 14).⁹

Marshall wrote similarly on what has become our present penchant for ‘how to’ principles:

Think not that you can effectually incline your heart to the immediate practice of holiness by any such *practical principles* as do only serve to bind, press, and urge you to the performance of holy duties: but rather let such principles stir you up to go to Christ first by faith, that you may be effectually inclined to the immediate practice of holiness in him, by gospel principles, that strengthen and enable you, as well as oblige you thereunto.¹⁰

Question for Reflection

- *What is the difference between obedience to the law, and obedience to the gospel?*

MAKE THE TREE GOOD

To obey the gospel, to remember with all our heart and soul the cleansing of past sins and our belonging as children to our heavenly Father in Christ: this is where the effort is to be expended; this is where the battle is fought and won.

The danger of any alternative focus is that we may be seeking to obey, as the New Testament puts it, ‘according to the flesh’ (as in Rom. 7:14–8:17; Gal. 3:1–5; 5:16–20). Only in the transformation that takes place in a person when we are ‘born anew . . . through the living and enduring word of God’ (1 Pet. 1:23)—that is, through the gospel, by repentance and faith—only in that, and in constant recourse to that, will any attempt to obey God succeed. Jesus said that good words and works come only from a person who has been transformed:

Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure (Matt. 12:33–35).

Jesus believed that it is possible, as far as persons are concerned, to ‘make the tree good’. No doubt he knew this on the basis of what he had come to do in his cross and resurrection.

⁸ ὑπακοὴν πίστεως (*hupakoēn pisteōs*).

⁹ Walter Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification* [1692], Reformation Heritage Books, Grand Rapids, 1999, p. 144. Accessed <www.covenantofgrace.com/gospel_mystery_of_sanctification.htm> 25th September 2007.

¹⁰ Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery*, p. 173.

Walter Marshall called this ‘that effectual working of the Spirit, whereby we are made good trees, that we may bring forth good fruit’.¹¹

Walter Marshall (1628–1680), one of the English Puritans, wrote the classic work *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, which was published after his death in 1692. Written against the antinomians, it set out ‘to teach you how you may attain to that practice and manner of life which we call *holiness, righteousness, or godliness, obedience, true religion*; and which God requireth of us in the *law*, particularly in the *moral law*, summed up in the ten commandments, and more briefly in those two great commandments of *love to God* and *our neighbour* (Matt. xxii. 37, 39). And more largely explained throughout the holy scriptures. My work is, to show how the duties of this law may be done, when they are known.’¹² Marshall had a high view of ‘the great dignity and excellency of these duties of the law’, as being ‘the chief works for which we were at first framed in the image of God, engraven upon man in the first creation, and for which that beautiful image is renewed upon us in our new creation and sanctification by Jesus Christ, and shall be perfected in our glorification’.¹³

Marshall insisted that the practice of these duties comes only in union with Christ:

*The way to get holy Endowments and Qualifications necessary to frame and enable us for the immediate Practice of the Law, is to receive them out of the Fullness of Christ, by fellowship with Him; and that we may have this Fellowship, we must be in Christ, and have Christ himself in us, by a mystical Union with him.*¹⁴

By ‘mystical union’ he means simply the union we have with Christ by faith through the gospel:

*The Means or Instruments by which the Spirit of God accomplishes our Union with Christ, and our Fellowship with him in all holiness, are the Gospel, whereby Christ entereth into our hearts to work faith in us; and faith, whereby we actually receive Christ himself, with all his fullness, into our hearts. And this faith is a grace of the Spirit, whereby we heartily believe the gospel, and also believe on Christ, as he is revealed and freely promised to us therein, for all His salvation.*¹⁵

Marshall’s thesis is well summarised in these words:

... a hearty propensity to a holy practice cannot be attained without some good persuasion of our reconciliation with God by justification, and of our everlasting happiness, and of sufficient strength both to will and to perform our duty; and that these, and all other endowments necessary to the same end, are to be had only in Christ, by union and fellowship with him; and that Christ himself, with all his fullness, is united to us by faith; which is not a condition to procure a right and title to Christ, but an instrument whereby we receive him actually into our hearts, by trusting on him for all salvation freely promised us in the gospel.¹⁶

Recourse must be made constantly to all these wonderful things, and not otherwise, if there is to be any ‘holy practice’:

All these means of a holy practice, are things therein our spiritual life and happiness doth consist; so that if we have them, everlasting life is begun in us already; and because they are the necessary means of a holy practice, therefore the beginning of everlasting life in us must not be placed after such a practice, as the fruit and consequence of it; but must go before it, as the cause before the effect.¹⁷

¹¹ Marshall, *Gospel Mystery*, p. 103.

¹² Marshall, *Gospel Mystery*, p. 1.

¹³ Marshall, *Gospel Mystery*, p. 2.

¹⁴ Marshall, *Gospel Mystery*, p. 27.

¹⁵ Marshall, *Gospel Mystery*, p. 40.

¹⁶ Marshall, *Gospel Mystery*, p. 77.

¹⁷ Marshall, *Gospel Mystery*, p. 77.

Marshall cites 2 Thessalonians 2:16–17 to make the point that ‘*We must first receive the Comforts of the Gospel, that we may be able to perform sincerely the Duties of the Law*’:¹⁸

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.

This is a very direct, full, and fruitful relationship.

Questions for Reflection

- *On what grounds, in connection with his own person and work, did Jesus say: ‘make the tree good, and its fruit good’?*
- *How does our Lord Jesus Christ and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort our hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word?*

IN HIM THERE IS NO SIN

It follows from this, as the apostle John said, ‘No one who abides in him sins’, and ‘Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God’s seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God’ (1 John 3:6, 9). Yet there is a conundrum here, for those who recognise, as we have been emphasising, the continuing presence and action of indwelling sin in the believer.

John has already said: ‘If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us’ (1 John 1:8). He has also said: ‘if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses [*lit.* goes on cleansing] us from all sin’; and ‘If we confess [*or* acknowledge] our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness’ (1 John 1:7, 9).

We should not be too quick to try and resolve or flatten out the conundrum. We should let each of the statements John makes have its full impact on us, without giving one precedence over the others. Even the observation that the word for sin is in the aorist (punctiliar) tense in chapter 1, relating therefore to one-off instances, and is present continuous in chapter 3, relating to habitual practice, true as that may be, could still be a grammatical cop-out from an existential dilemma. Sin is sin. No amount of special pleading can let us off the hook, or make us feel more relatively comfortable in sin’s presence.

The effect of letting each of John’s statements have their full impact on us should be to drive us always and only to Christ, in whom there is no sin, who alone can keep us from sin and from the evil one (see 1 John 3:5, 5:18), that we might always know and be in that great cleansing and freedom.

We may assume that John himself saw no contradiction in what he had written.

P. T. Forsyth¹⁹ looks to the further statement in chapter 5 for clarification:

If you see your brother or sister committing what is not a mortal sin, you will ask, and God will give life to such a one—to those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin that is mortal; I do not say that you should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not mortal (1 John 5:16–17).

¹⁸ Marshall, *Gospel Mystery*, pp. 102, 104, 106.

¹⁹ Forsyth, *God the Holy Father*, p. 105.

The amazing thing here is that there should be ‘sin that is not mortal’. Did not Paul say that ‘all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’, and ‘the wages of sin is death’ (Rom. 3:23; 6:23)? How could there be ‘sin that is not mortal’? Only in the one who suffered the dreadful mortality of our sin in us and for us, with whom we are one by faith. What then is the ‘sin that is mortal’, that we are not obliged to pray for? Only the sin of anyone who finally refuses to come to the Saviour and so be cleansed. So, in keeping with Romans 7, Forsyth is able to spell out how this appears in practice:

We may be essentially parted from our sin while yet it hangs about us. The constitution is renewed, but the disease recurs in abating force. The new nature asserts itself over the head of reactions. We lust for the fleshpots of Egypt, and we return upon our tracks and move in a circle; but it is, after all, but a loop upon our larger line of onward march. The enemy is beaten, though he makes guerilla raids and carries off something we deplore. Our progress is a series of victories over receding attacks which sometimes inflict loss. And the issue turns on the whole campaign, not on a few lost battles. We sin, but we are not of sin. We are its master, though at times the convict seizes the warder and gets him down. But it does not reign in us. It is not our life-principle, though it may get expression in our life. We sin, but not unto death. We still have and still use the Advocate with the Father. Against our sin we plant ourselves on God’s side.²⁰

Along with this, we are given a way of living largely, and nobly. Forsyth speaks of ‘the greatness, amplitude, magnanimity, freedom’ that the great spiritual realities lend to life, away from ‘moral or mental scrupulism’, and ‘above the bondage of the small moralities and punctilios of life, to a noble carelessness’, to the ‘true, sound, and steady view of life’ which ‘belongs to the judgment of God, Who judges the world in Christ’. It comes from being saved through being crucified with Christ: ‘we are at once saved and judged. Salvation is quite as much judgment as privilege. And being judged, we sit secure upon the world. There is no fear or favour to deflect our own judgment. We are united with Him Who is Himself the final, and therefore faultless, Judge’.²¹

For Forsyth, as for Walter Marshall, this union with Christ is everything:

What we need is the personal impression of Christ, the personal sense of His cross, the fresh, renewing, vitalizing, sweetening contact of His soul in its wisdom, its tenderness, its action for us—and all so freely for us, so mercifully, so persistently, so thoroughly. What we need is the touch, the communion of that kind of perfection . . . You must let that come home to *you*, to your own peculiar case. To be perfect with God you must have Christ come *home*, come HOME, to you and sit by your central fire—come home to *you*, to YOU, as if for the moment mankind were centred in the burning point of your soul, and you touched the burning point of God’s. You must court and haunt His presence till it break forth on you, and it becomes as impossible not to believe as to believe is hard now. Then we realize what we were made for, made to be redeemed; we lay hold by faith of our destiny of perfection in another; we are already in spirit what it is latent in redemption that we shall be . . . And all things with us are returning, through Christ, to the perfection of God from whom they came.²²

To be alive to God, through being crucified with Christ, is not another technique, or right doctrine, or spiritual discipline, by which we can be saved. It is this personal consuming union with the Saviour of the world.

God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life . . . And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life (1 John 5:11–12, 20).

²⁰ Forsyth, *God the Holy Father*, p. 111.

²¹ Forsyth, *God the Holy Father*, pp. 114–115.

²² Forsyth, *God the Holy Father*, pp. 147–8.