

What Is God Like? (Volume 3)

Introduction

When we began to compile the Biblical details about the character of God we anticipated there would be only one *Sound Words* study booklet to cover the series of radio programmes entitled ‘What Is God Like?’ that this accompanies. However, soon after beginning the first volume it was obvious a second would be required, and as that volume developed it was obvious a third booklet would be necessary to cover the material our study of the Bible produced! The reason is that the very details God has given us about himself in the Bible are immense, and indeed far more than we have covered in these study booklets. God of course is very wonderful. He is great and glorious and infinite, and therefore it is not surprising to discover the Bible has so much to tell us about him. It indicates to us the importance of our theme, because there is no one more important than the living God, and he should be at the very centre of our lives. The enormity of the Biblical data also indicates the great kindness of God to reveal so much about himself to us. He could have kept us in total ignorance about himself, but in his great grace he has made himself known to us in his Word, the Bible.

It is our prayer that what you discover about God in this booklet will stimulate you to look into the Bible yourself to discover the great treasures about God that are outlined there. It is also our prayer that that in turn will cause you to trust, love, worship and revere God with all your heart. If

you’ve not yet begun to do so, we pray that you will see your need to follow his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, without whom we can never know God personally in our own lives. Peter tells us in 1 Peter 3:18 that this was the very reason why Jesus was crucified, “*For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.*” It is as we come and follow and learn from the Lord Jesus that we come to know and understand God more and more. Jesus himself put it in these words in John 14:9: “*Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.*” And if you already do follow the Lord Jesus, we pray that you will want to follow him even closer and learn and enjoy more and more about the Lord our God. For this to happen you will need to read this booklet prayerfully, seeking God’s help to show you how majestic he is. Have your Bible with you and turn to the many passages and references you will find throughout this booklet, and may the Lord himself teach you how glorious he is.

The series of programmes on which this book is based was produced with the very helpful contribution of Colin Vincent, the pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Bexleyheath, Kent, England. It has been a blessing to work with Colin on these studies and I am indebted to him. Our own understanding about God has deepened through engaging in this work together, and it is our longing that you will discover the same, as God is pleased to reveal himself to you.

Derek French
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Chapter 1 God is holy

The fact that God is holy is taught throughout the Bible. It is a very glorious truth that shines like a bright light in contrast to the darkness and wickedness of men and women in our world.

1) God's holiness described.

God's holiness means two things.

[i] He is absolutely distinct from all his creatures and exalted above them in infinite majesty.

God is exalted above absolutely everyone and everything. A term that Christian scholars sometimes use to describe this is the word transcendent. That word simply means God is above all things and is not limited in any way at all. God is transcendent (Exodus 15:11): *"Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you – majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders."* (Isaiah 57:15) *"For this is what the high and lofty One says – he who lives for ever, whose name is holy: 'I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit.'" These Bible passages are teaching us that no one can compare with God. Indeed we are told this specifically in Isaiah 40:25: "To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?"*

[ii] He is absolutely pure and free from all sin and impurity.

God's holiness is absolutely perfect and spotless. His purity is unique. We see this in Hannah's prayer to God when she had dedicated her son Samuel and given him to

serve the Lord in the tabernacle at Shiloh. In that prayer she uttered these words found in 1 Samuel 2:2, *"There is no-one holy like the Lord; there is no-one besides you; there is no rock like our God."* Elihu, the friend of Job, stated something similar in Job 34:10: *"Far be it from God to do evil, from the Almighty to do wrong."* When Isaiah saw the Lord in the Temple, the seraphs, those angelic beings who live in the presence of God, worshipped God by saying to one another (Isaiah 6:3), *"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."* The prophet Habakkuk said of God in Habakkuk 1:13, *"Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong."* When we come into the New Testament we discover that the Apostle John wrote in 1 John 1:5, *"God is light; in him there is no darkness at all."*

The idea of separation in holiness is seen in a number of ways when applied both to other people and other things in the Bible. For example, it is used to describe parts of the Tabernacle. They were holy because separated from the evil and sin found in the world. The inner sanctuary was called the 'holy place' or 'holy of holies' (Exodus 26:33-34), and was dedicated to the service of God. Those who were to serve God in the Tabernacle were separated from ordinary work and were consecrated to God for the period of their service. Because of this we discover that Aaron and his sons were set apart for God (Exodus 29:44). Then we can think of how the Old Testament Sabbath day was called holy because it was dedicated to the worship of God and therefore was separate from the other days of the week (Exodus 20:11, cf. Gen 2:3). From these illustrations we

are helped to see that when the Bible teaches us that God is holy it means he is entirely separate from all that is unclean and impure – he is perfectly holy.

2) God's holiness is attractive.

All that is good, lovely, pure and spotless is found in God alone. This is a wonderfully pleasing aspect of God's character, and all who love God find that this is something they delight in, because God is so different from the very ugly and unattractive sinfulness we find in our world. A Christian pastor of a former generation was Stephen Charnock and he described God like this: *"Power is God's hand or arm, omniscience his eye, mercy his heart, eternity his duration, but holiness is his beauty."* And this is based very much on the teaching of the Bible (2 Chronicles 20:21): *"After consulting the people, Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the Lord and to praise him for the splendour (or beauty) of his holiness..."*

We need to remember that all of God's works are good and beautiful because he is holy. For example, we read in Psalm 145:17, *"The Lord is righteous in all his ways and loving towards all he has made."* Only that which is excellent flows from him. Consider how this was true right at the beginning of time. In Genesis 1 we are told all that God had made he declared good (Genesis 1:31): *"God saw all that he had made, and it was very good."* And this is because there is no imperfection or unholiness in him. And this beauty of God's holiness is seen in his law (Romans 7:12): *"So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good."* And how good his laws are! They are so right, and breaking them is so wrong. For

example, God says we should not murder, and what misery comes when that command is disregarded. God also says we should not steal, and what distress this brings when this instruction is broken. This led the Psalmist to write in Psalm 19:8-9, *"The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring for ever. The ordinances of the Lord are altogether righteous."* The holy beauty of God's law is seen in that it forbids all forms of sin, in whatever form it might appear. Further, this beauty and splendour of God's holiness that is seen in all that God does, causes heaven itself to ring with joy and delight as the great song of heaven recorded in Revelation 15:4 declares, *"Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your holy name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed."*

3) God's holiness is comprehensive.

By 'comprehensive' we mean that the Bible teaches us holiness belongs to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

i. The Father is holy.

In the last book of the Bible we are taught that God is worshipped continually in heaven with these words in Revelation 4:8, *"Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come."* Then we have the very precious way the Lord Jesus Christ addressed his Father while he was in prayer. He was called 'holy Father' in John 17:11. It is very important for us to note that this

title is never used in the Bible to describe any man, and neither should we use it to describe anyone else in the same way. Some have done that and it is very wrong. Let me underline this point again, this attribute belongs to God alone, and we should never elevate any man or woman or anything else to this exalted position. Sometimes well meaning people have committed a grievous sin by calling mere men by this title, 'holy Father'. We must therefore guard against making the same mistake, and ensure we only ever honour God himself in this way.

ii. The Son is holy.

When the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would be the mother of the Lord Jesus Christ, the very Son of God, she asked him how this was possible. Gabriel replied in this way in Luke 1:35, "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So **the holy one** to be born will be called the Son of God.*" We see this holiness so wonderfully illustrated in the life of the Lord Jesus, because he obeyed God perfectly. He remained absolutely pure throughout his life and was without sin. One day Jesus asked his enemies this searching question in John 8:46, "*Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?*" They could not find a single thing to accuse him of because he was holy. Indeed, even an evil spirit in a man acknowledged this when Jesus came near (Luke 4:34): "*Ha! What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – **the Holy One of God.***" When so many people stopped following Jesus in John 6, he turned to his disciples and asked if they were going to desert him also. Peter replied

in John 6:68-69, "*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that **you are the Holy One of God.***" And we have this wonderful summary of the character of the Lord Jesus Christ in Hebrews where he is described as the believer's high priest (Hebrews 7:26): "*Such a high priest meets our need – **one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.***"

iii. The Holy Spirit is holy.

This is self evident by his very name – Holy. This is also seen by the holy qualities he produces in the lives of Christian believers. All that is good and right and pure in us is the result of his sanctifying influence (Galatians 5:22-23): "*... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. Against such things there is no law.*" What holy characteristics these are! There is the complete absence of any impurity or uncleanness, as we would expect.

4) God's holiness produces humility in men.

Whenever the Lord displays his holiness to individuals, it always has an overwhelming effect on them. No one can remain arrogant or proud or self-righteous when confronted with the absolute purity of Almighty God. The reason for this powerful effect is that in the presence of God who is holy, man is made deeply conscious of his sin. It was true for Isaiah when he saw the Lord in the temple (Isaiah 6:5): "*'Woe is 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.'*" In a

similar way, when the holy power of the Lord Jesus Christ was displayed to his disciples in the miraculous catch of fish accomplished at Jesus' command, Peter was overwhelmed (Luke 5:8): *"When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, 'Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man.'"* It was the same for the tax-collector who entered the temple in Jerusalem to pray. As he drew near to God in prayer we read in Luke 18:13, *"... the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat upon his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner'."* So glorious is God's holiness that the angels who have never sinned have to cover their faces before him (Isaiah 6:2). God himself is most holy (Psalm 111:9): *"He (ie. God) provided redemption for his people; he ordained his covenant for ever – holy and awesome is his name."*

5) God's holiness brings him praise from men.

The Psalmist himself praises God and calls us to worship him, and the reason he gives is that God is holy (Psalm 71:22): *"I will praise you with the harp for your faithfulness, O my God; I will sing praise to you with the lyre, O Holy One of Israel."* (Psalm 99:9) *"Exalt the Lord our God and worship at his holy mountain, for the Lord our God is holy."* (See also verses 3 and 5 of the same Psalm.) (Psalm 22:3) *"You are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the praise of Israel."* God's holiness calls praise from those who worship him. (See also Psalm 30:4; Habakkuk 3:3; Isaiah 29:19 & 23.) Indeed, God's holiness causes his people to rejoice in him (Isaiah 41:16): *"... you*

will rejoice in the Lord and glory in the Holy One of Israel."

As the Holy One, God is our Redeemer (Isaiah 41:14): *"'Do not be afraid, O worm Jacob, O little Israel, for I myself will help you,' declares the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel."* (Isaiah 47:4) *"Our Redeemer – the Lord Almighty is his name – is the Holy One of Israel."* (Isaiah 54:5) *"For your Maker is your husband – the Lord Almighty is his name – the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth."* This is a further cause for believers to rejoice in God and praise him for holiness.

6) God's holiness becomes the pattern for his people.

Christian believers belong to the family of God, and therefore we would expect to see something of the likeness of our heavenly Father in us. We shall never attain perfection in this life, but God does expect us to seek to be holy (1 Peter 1:16): *"Be holy as I am holy."* (See also Leviticus 19:2, 11:44-45, 20:16.) We are to be separate from the sin and degradation of the world we live in. There is to be a difference between the Christian believer and the unbeliever. We are to flee all corruption and evil. Consider the teaching of Jesus recorded in John 3:19-21: *"This is the verdict: light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. **But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.**"* (John 8:12) *"When Jesus spoke*

again to the people, he said, ***'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'***

Just as the people of Israel of old were called holy because they were separate from the other nations (Exodus 19:4f), so Christian believers are to be separate from the world's sinfulness. Now this does not mean that we are to lock ourselves away in isolation and avoid contact with anyone who is not a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible never teaches us this. But it does teach us to be different from unbelievers in the way we live our lives (1 Peter 2:9): *"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."* And the implication of those words from Peter is that if we do not live a holy life we bring dishonour to the name of God in the minds of unbelievers, whereas holiness will result in his name being glorified. Paul puts this same teaching in another way, by highlighting the contrast there is between the Christian believer and the unbeliever, and also the tremendous privileges that belong to those who do live holy lives (2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1): *"Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and*

they will be my people. Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.' Since then we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God." Note how Paul lays before us the believer's responsibility at the end of those verses. He has a deep and loving concern that we live our lives in a way that pleases our heavenly Father. And when he wrote to the Christians living at Rome, after he had outlined the glorious salvation God has given us in Christ, he exhorted us to give our whole lives in the pursuit of holiness (Romans 12:1-2): *"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not be conformed any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."*

We need to remember that the Bible calls every Christian believer a saint (e.g. Acts 9:13; Romans 1:7; 15:25-26; Ephesians 1:1), and that term literally means 'holy one'. We are to be wholly dedicated to God, separate from the sinfulness which characterises our world, and God centred in our thinking and speaking and living. Indeed, the Church of Christ, the people of God, are intended by God to grow more and more holy (Ephesians 2:21): *"In him (ie. Christ) the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord."* This is also our Saviour's purpose for us (Ephesians 5:25-27): *"Husbands*

love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant Church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” Our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, died so that this might be true of us, therefore how shameful it is when believers do not live holy and pure lives for him. Indeed, having such holiness is essential (Hebrews 12:14): *“Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no-one will see the Lord.”* We can see from this verse that holiness is one of the marks of the genuine Christian believer. If anyone claims to be a true disciple of Christ, but is content to live in the same sinful way as they have always lived, then their claim is spurious. We can also add that God is so determined that his true children should be holy, that when we go astray he will intervene in our lives and chasten us. He does this because he loves us and desires the very best for us (Hebrews 12:10): *“Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.”* What greater good could there possibly be than that we should share in God’s holiness? Surely this shows us how important it is that all true Christian believers seek to be like God, our ‘*holy Father*’ in heaven.

7) God’s holiness is awesome.

a) Its depth.

The depth of God’s holiness is seen in his reaction towards and revulsion of sin. God’s holiness causes him to be disturbed greatly by man’s sinfulness (Psalm 78:40-41):

“How often they rebelled against him in the desert (ie. the people of Israel) and grieved him in the wasteland! Again and again they put God to the test; they vexed the Holy One of Israel.” (See also Isaiah 1:4.) Because God is holy, those who do not love and fear him are guilty of serious sin, and bring themselves into great danger, as did the people of Israel in Isaiah’s time (Isaiah 5:24-25): *“... for they have rejected the law of the Lord Almighty and spurned the word of the Holy One of Israel. Therefore the Lord’s anger burns against his people; his hand is raised and he strikes them down. The mountains shake, and the dead bodies are like refuse in the streets.”*

The depth of God’s holiness is seen supremely at the cross of Calvary. There we see God’s holy hatred of sin, for he punished his own Son in the sinner’s place as he became the sin-bearer for all who will believe in him. When Christ was disfigured most, the beauty of God’s holiness shone brightest. (See Isaiah 53; Psalm 22; Matthew 27:46; 2 Corinthians 5:21.) Because God is holy he hates all sin. (See Psalm 5:5; Proverbs 3:32; 15:26; Nahum 1:2; Genesis 9:21.) Hence sin has to be punished. This means that if any sinner is to be forgiven, then someone else must bear their punishment in their place (Hebrews 9:22). We cannot do this for ourselves because we are sinful and at our best we are unclean and like filthy rags in God’s sight (Isaiah 64:6). This shows us how much we need the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the only Saviour of sinners. The wonderful thing is that when we trust in Christ, God accepts us! (See Ephesians 1:3-14.)

b) The effect this should have on us.

Knowing that God is infinitely holy means we must approach God with great reverence and godly fear. We read in Psalm 89:7, *“In the counsel of the holy ones God is greatly feared; he is more awesome than all who surround him.”* In Psalm 99:5 we are instructed to *“Exalt the Lord our God and worship at his footstool; he is holy.”* It is therefore most important that we always remember to draw near to God with true regard for him. There is certainly no room for any man or woman ever to treat God lightly or flippantly. Those who do are guilty of great disrespect for the Lord, therefore this is not something that should characterise true believers.

As an example consider what God said to Moses when he appeared to him in the burning bush (Exodus 3:5): *“‘Do not come any closer,’ God said. ‘Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.’”* We can see from these words that to draw near to God is a very great privilege indeed, and although we do not see a burning bush, as Moses did, the same humility of spirit should be true of all who genuinely seek him. The Psalmist stated it like this in Psalm 2:11, *“Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling.”*

There is a very tragic and solemn incident in the Bible which shows how sinful it is to draw near to God without the high regard we should have for him. Nadab and Abihu, the two sons of Aaron, dared to approach God in a way other than he had prescribed. They had completely disregarded the Lord by not coming to him as he had directed. They had forgotten that God is holy, and the terrible consequence was that they were both consumed

with fire and died before the Lord. At that very time Moses responded to this event with some very important words (Leviticus 10:3): *“Moses said to Aaron, ‘This is what the Lord spoke of when he said: ‘Among those people who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honoured.’”*” Therefore we must always treat God with due reverence and awe whenever we come into his presence.

It has been said that we honour God most when we seek to be holy people. If we do love God then we will want to live every minute of our lives for him. This will mean we will strive to be like him, and to live as close to him as we can in loving obedience to all he commands us. Because God is the source of all holiness, we must prayerfully seek him for it. Consider Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonian believers (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24): *“May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.”*

Chapter 2 God is righteous.

1) God’s righteousness described.

As we consider God’s righteousness, or justice, as it is sometimes called, we need to note that this is very closely linked with the holiness of God that we considered in the previous chapter. When the Bible teaches us that God is righteous or just, it is telling us something very important, and something which is absolutely constant in all that God is and does. God’s justice or righteousness means that God

always acts in a way totally consistent with his holiness. God always does what is right and just and good and fair. Indeed, God is himself the final standard of what is right, and so he is righteous and just in all his dealings with us. God always does what is upright and straight, and never ever does anything sinful or crooked. One Christian teacher named Louis Berkhof has put it like this: *“The righteousness of God is that perfection by which God maintains himself as the Holy One over against every violation of his holiness.”*

2) God’s righteousness displayed.

The righteousness of God is revealed to us in the Bible in a number of ways.

a) It is seen in his righteous rule.

As a righteous God, he imposes just laws on man, rewarding obedience and punishing disobedience. Isaiah the prophet spoke of God like this (Isaiah 33:22): *“For the Lord is our judge, the **Lord is our lawgiver**, the Lord is our king...”* Psalm 99 has as its theme the fact that God reigns and is King over all things, and we read about God in verse 4: *“The King is mighty, **he loves justice** – you have established equity; in Jacob you have done what is just and right.”*

b) It is seen in statements from Abraham and Moses.

Abraham appealed to God’s righteous character when he pleaded with God for the deliverance of the evil city of Sodom. He asked God to save the city if there were only fifty righteous people in it. As he prayed he put a series of

questions to the Lord, resting ultimately in the truth that God is just and will always act accordingly (Genesis 18:23-25): *“Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing – to kill the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! **Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?**”* Abraham was absolutely convinced that God would never ever act in a way that was inconsistent with his holiness, for God is righteous in all his ways.

Later on, Moses also declared this same fact about God (Deuteronomy 32:4): *“He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. **A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.**”* By using the term ‘Rock’ to describe God he was declaring that God is unchangeably just. As ‘the Rock’ God is abiding and stable.

c) It is seen in his instructions.

God always speaks and commands what is right, holy, good and just. Psalm 19 emphasises this again and again, and this is just one example (Psalm 19:8): *“**The precepts of the Lord are right**, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes.”* The prophet Isaiah records the words of God himself (Isaiah 45:19): *“I have not spoken in secret, from somewhere in a land of darkness; I have not said to Jacob’s descendants, ‘Seek me in vain.’ **I, the Lord, speak the truth; I declare what is right.**”* God is not like some men who utter things in secret and under cover of darkness

because their words are evil and deceitful. God is altogether different because he is righteous. Indeed, the Lord Jesus Christ himself declared the righteousness of God's Word when he was in prayer for his disciples to his Father (John 17:17): "*Sanctify them by the truth; **your word is truth.***" And this means of course that God's Word is absolutely dependable. It is something we can trust completely. And therefore, if our faith is fixed firmly in what God has spoken to us in the Bible, then we can rest in it with total assurance. This is very important because so many people trust in their feelings, and sometimes our feelings can be very misleading. Others look elsewhere for the answers to their spiritual questions instead of examining what God has said to us in the Bible. We must not do that. If we are trusting in the faithful Word of God we can be certain that we are right because God is always right.

d) It is seen in the fulfilment of all his promises.

God's righteousness also means that he will always fulfil his word. This was Solomon's testimony when he praised God at the dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8:56): "*Praise be to the Lord, who has given rest to his people Israel just as he promised. **Not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through his servant Moses.***" (See also Joshua 21:45 & 23:14.) And Nehemiah tells us why God faithfully fulfils his promises (Nehemiah 9:8): "*You have kept your promise **because you are righteous.***" And here we see the difference between God and the unrighteous, because they cannot be expected to keep their promises. This is seen supremely in the activity of the great enemy of

God and man, the wicked and unrighteous Satan, who is described in this way by Jesus when speaking to the unbelieving Jews (John 8:44): "*You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is the father of lies.*" How good it is to know God is altogether different from Satan. God always speaks the truth because he is righteous. This means all God's promises are true and will come to pass. For example, he will be with his people always (Hebrews 13:5). He will provide all our needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:19). He will keep us from falling and present us before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy (Jude 24). If God were not righteous we could never trust him or what he has said with any confidence at all, but because he is righteous we can do so.

e) It is seen in his righteous judgements.

Because God is righteous it is necessary that he treat people according to what they deserve. Failure to do so would violate his justice. But we need to remember that in doing this God is absolutely fair, never ever being unjust, whether he bestows his blessing or his condemnation and wrath. We must also add that God is utterly impartial in his judgements, unlike men who can often be bribed. They are corrupt, but God is a righteous ruler and just judge (Psalm 7:11): "*God is a righteous judge, a God who expresses his wrath every day.*" (Psalm 96:13) "*He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in truth.*"

(cf. also Psalm 97:2.) Because God is a righteous judge, then he must always punish sin. This is seen supremely in the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, which was a death for the sins of all his people. God could not overlook the sins of those who would trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, but in his great justice, and we must add his grace, he punished Jesus instead, so that all who trust him might be forgiven (Romans 3:25-26): “*God presented him (ie. the Lord Jesus Christ) 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 – 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.*” God had graciously not punished the believers who lived before Jesus came to the earth because he knew he would deal with their sins when Jesus died. But his righteousness demanded that he could not ignore those sins, any more than he could ignore the sins of those believers who would live after Jesus’ death on the cross. And so God’s righteousness was displayed in pouring out his wrath on the Lord Jesus Christ in the place of sinners. It is only because the punishment of our sins has been fully paid by Christ that believers can enjoy God’s forgiveness. And wonderfully, God will not require Christian believers to pay the price of that punishment themselves, because he is just, and Jesus has already paid that penalty. This is where the Christian’s security lies, because this is the basis for our peace with God. God has justly dealt with our sins through the sacrificial death of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross because he is a righteous God. This is very precious because no sinner could ever be

justified, that is, made right with God, on the grounds of our own good character, because we are all ruined and stained by the guilt of our sin. Therefore the willingness of the Lord Jesus Christ to endure such suffering for us fills us with wonder and amazement. How much he must love us! All Christian believers know they deserve to be punished by God because they have sinned against him, and this therefore makes God’s mercy and grace all the more remarkable. The great mercy of God’s righteousness is that he justifies those who believe in Christ (Romans 5:1) “*Therefore since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ...*” And God gives each believer a new heart that loves righteousness and God’s ways and that delights to conform to his will (2 Corinthians 5:17): “*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*” (cf. Psalm 1.) Those who love God and are declared righteous by him begin to live and act in a righteous way themselves. (See Psalm 37:21; Psalm 140:13; Proverbs 10:21; Proverbs 10:32; Proverbs 12:5; Proverbs 15:28; Proverbs 18:10.)

f) It is seen in the way he reacts to self-righteousness.

The Lord always exposes self-righteousness and rebukes it. For example, when Jesus called the tax-collector Matthew to be his disciple, the self-righteous Pharisees could only criticise Jesus for mixing with such a man. They should have been delighted that Jesus was at work in Matthew’s life, but they were not. In reply to them Jesus said (Matthew 9:12-13): “*It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I*

desire mercy not sacrifice. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” If only the Pharisees had realised their own righteousness was futile and then sought the Lord for mercy, but they failed to do so. Those opposed to true righteousness miss the mark and therefore make a dreadful mistake by thinking their own self-righteousness will please God in any way. Further, true righteousness is not merely external but in the heart, the seat of the affections and will. The Pharisees’ righteousness was only skin deep and insufficient (cf. Matthew 23:28). They had outward conformity to their rules and regulations, but hated the essence of the law which was to show mercy. Again and again Jesus had to rebuke them. (See also Luke 7:36-50; 10:25-37; 16:14-15; 18:9-14.) Therefore, how we need to beware that we do not become self-righteous, which is really the sin of pride, for God resists the proud (1 Peter 5:5-6).

3) God’s righteousness will be declared in the last judgement.

God’s righteousness will be revealed in the final judgement. His judgement also guarantees that justice will prevail ultimately, because God is also Almighty (Deuteronomy 32:4): *“He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.”* Therefore, the present prosperity of the wicked and the difficulties of Christian believers are both only temporary. This is seen in a small way even now before that final day of judgement. For example, consider the godly Asaph, who had been troubled by the way the wicked seem so often to be free from

burdens and also ignore God completely, but was helped by remembering their end (Psalm 73:17f): *“...I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny, Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly they are destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! As a dream when one awakes, so when you arise, O Lord, you will despise them as fantasies... Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.”* This is a solemn Bible passage, but it is a theme that is repeated throughout the Bible. David declared in Psalm 37:20, *“But the wicked will perish: The Lord’s enemies will be like the beauty of the fields, they will vanish – vanish like smoke.”*

Very often there are things about God’s present government of the world that we fail to understand. Jeremiah faced this in his own life as he saw the wicked of his day prospering, and it thoroughly perplexed him as is seen in the words he spoke to the Lord (Jeremiah 12:1): *“You are always righteous, O Lord, when I bring a case before you. Yet I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?”* To answer this we need only to consider the marvellous declaration about God in Psalm 145:17, *“The Lord is righteous in all his ways and loving towards all he has made.”* This is a fact that is true about God always, even though at times we might think it is not very evident. That Psalm goes on to say these words in verses 18-20, *“The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfils the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them. The Lord*

watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy.” We need to remember that because God is righteous we as his creatures never have the right to question what God does or criticise him in any way (see Romans 9:19-21; Job 40:2, 8-9; 38:12, 19, 34-35; 40:4).

All the instances of God’s judgement that have already taken place, such as the flood in Noah’s day (Genesis 6f), or the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19), or the destruction of Jerusalem by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 25; 2 Chronicles 36), and those that take place now, point towards the ultimate declaration of God’s righteous acts on the last day. The Bible teaches us that the final judgement will be executed by the Lord Jesus Christ himself. When Peter was preaching the good news of God’s forgiveness through the Lord Jesus Christ, he shared with Cornelius and his friends that Christ had specifically commanded them to do this, and he referred directly to the Lord’s involvement in the final judgement (Acts 10:42): *“He (ie. Christ) commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.”* Paul also referred to this while he wrote to Timothy to encourage him to be a faithful minister of the gospel (2 Timothy 4:1): *“In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge...”* (See also 1 Peter 4:5.) And one of the most graphic and solemn descriptions of this final judgement is found in Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonian Christians. These early believers had suffered a great deal at the hands of wicked

men: they had been persecuted and wronged simply for being disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, and yet they persevered through it. While Paul’s words were intended to be an encouragement to these faithful believers, they also contain a most awful and terrible description of what will happen to unbelievers on the last day (2 Thessalonians 1:5-10): *“All this is evidence that God’s judgement is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. God is just: he will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus Christ is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marvelled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.”* In the end, God, who is righteous, will vindicate his honour and display his justice in the just punishment of all who do not believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. You will notice this day is an inescapable day of judgement, and while it is a comfort to believers it should fill unbelievers with deep terror. They will have no comfort at all on that day, or for evermore. How this should stir believers to share the gospel with unbelievers while we still have time, and cause all unbelievers to seek the Lord’s mercy while they have time because afterwards there will be no more opportunities – this will be final! By contrast, the

sufferings of the faithful people of God will be turned into everlasting joy (2 Corinthians 4:17-18): *“For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”* (See also Psalm 58:10-11.) These two results of the final judgement are combined in Paul’s words to the Galatians (Galatians 6:7-8): *“Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.”* The day is coming when God will vindicate his people and destroy his enemies. Then all will see and confess that God is righteous and holy in all his ways. For the Redeemed this will be their endless delight in the presence of the Lord for ever. For the damned it will mean their endless misery. On that day these following verses will be fulfilled to their greatest degree (Proverbs 10:25): *“When the storm has swept by, the wicked are gone, but the righteous stand firm for ever.”* (Proverbs 11:23) *“The desire of the righteous ends only in good, but the hope of the wicked only in wrath.”* (Proverbs 10:16) *“The wages of the righteous bring them life, but the income of the wicked brings them punishment.”* One godly Christian of a former generation said that part of the added distress of those who will be in hell is that they will then believe the truth about God and his righteousness, but too late!

Conclusion.

God’s whole nature delights in righteousness (Psalm 11:7): *“For the Lord is righteous, he loves justice; upright men will see his face.”* God therefore takes great pleasure in those who are upright. The genuine Christian believer is one who also delights in righteousness, as Jesus declared in the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ (Matthew 5:6): *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”* The great question we must answer is, ‘Do we hunger for righteousness like that?’

Chapter 3 God is truthful.

Introduction.

The truthfulness of God is sometimes described as his veracity or reliability, and this simply means that God is true in his inner being, true in his revelation, and true in his relationship to his people. One Christian teacher has described it in this way: *“God’s truthfulness means that he is the true God, and that all his knowledge and words are both true and the final standard of truth.”* Another term that is used to describe God’s truthfulness is the word faithful.

God’s truthfulness can be seen in three main ways.

1) He is the true God, over against idols and any other false god.

Repeatedly the Bible tells us that God is the only true God, and it does so often because many have thought and believed and taught otherwise, but they are all wrong and misled.

a. The Bible’s clear statements.

Consider this short selection of Bible passages that teach God alone is the true God. The first is part of a prayer of King David recorded in the Old Testament (1 Chronicles 17:20): *“There is no-one like you, O Lord, and there is no God but you.”* Then in a Psalm written by David when the Lord had delivered him from all his enemies and the hand of Saul. We read in Psalm 18:31, *“For who is God besides the Lord? And who is the Rock except our God.”* Then the Lord spoke to his people through Isaiah the prophet and this is what Isaiah wrote (Isaiah 43:10-11): *“Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no saviour.”* And we find similar words in Isaiah 44:6, *“This is what the Lord says – Israel’s King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.”* When Paul wrote to the Christian believers at Thessalonica, he gratefully looked back on their conversion experience when they came to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Previously they had been a very idolatrous people, but now he was able to write this about them (1 Thessalonians 1:9): *“... you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.”*

b. The futility of idols.

To help us understand that God is the only true God he tells us on several occasions in the Bible that idols and their worshippers are deceived. Other gods or idols are both false and useless and will all be done away with. Jeremiah gives us a devastating critique of idols in Jeremiah 10, and

by contrast he tells us how great God is (Jeremiah 10:6-11): *“No-one is like you, O Lord; you are great, and your name is mighty in power. Who should not revere you, O King of the nations? This is your due. Among all the wise men of the nations and in all their kingdoms, there is no-one like you. They are all senseless and foolish; they are taught by worthless wooden idols. Hammered silver is brought from Tarshish and gold from Uphaz. What the craftsman and goldsmith have made is then dressed in blue and purple – all made by skilled workers. But the Lord is the true God; he is the living God, the eternal King. When he is angry, the earth trembles; the nations cannot endure his wrath. Tell them this: ‘These gods, who did not make the heavens and the earth, will perish from the earth and from under the heavens.’”* And as that passage continues we read about the goldsmith who makes idols in verses 14-15, *“... every goldsmith is shamed by his idols. His images are a fraud; they have no breath in them. They are worthless, the objects of mockery; when their judgement comes, they will perish.”* (See also Isaiah 44:9-20.)

While many literally worship idols that have been carved out of wood or stone or precious metals, others who would never think of doing that are still idolatrous and worship false gods. Their gods are money or power or reputation or prominence. Others have made idols of other people, such as a famous singer or film star or footballer or cricketer or someone similar, and they give their devotion to them rather than to God. Tragically idols of wood or stone or metal fail and disappoint their devotees, for they are dead and lifeless and cannot hear or see or speak or walk. They

cannot answer prayer because they are both deaf and powerless. They cannot deliver anyone from danger, from death, from sin, or from judgement. And those who make men or women their idols will find they are just as weak and frail as they know themselves to be. But that is not so with God. He is not imaginary or fictitious, but true, and he never fails those who trust him.

c. Jesus taught that God is the only true God.

The Lord Jesus Christ described eternal life in terms of knowing the only true God. These words come from the prayer he made to his Father just before he was crucified. It is often called Jesus' high-priestly prayer, because he prays specifically for all who followed him then, and those who would do so in the future (John 17:3): *"Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."* And the apostle John wrote about Jesus' teaching and recorded this in 1 John 5:20: *"We know also that the Son of God has come and given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true – even his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life."*

d. As the true God he alone is to be worshipped.

Consider this. As the only true God, the Lord is perfect in all his being - in power, and wisdom, and goodness, and love, and sovereignty, and every other aspect of his character. Now his perfection is not only difficult for us to comprehend, but really quite impossible for us to understand fully. For while we can and do have a measure of understanding about God, we are only his creatures, and

therefore are incapable of grasping everything about him. He is after all the infinite God. When we grasp that, we are really compelled simply to bow before him in adoration, love and praise that he has made himself known to us in the world around us, in the Bible, and supremely in his Son the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, if God had not revealed himself to us we would be completely in the dark about him, completely ignorant of the grandeur and glory of his Person. Therefore how much he is worthy of all our praise, and indeed much more. The first three of the ten commandments in Exodus 20:2-7 instruct us to do just that.

e. As the true God we can trust him completely.

If God were not the true God then we could never trust him or trust in him with any assurance or certainty. If he were not the true God we could never say that he might help us sometimes, for in fact he would be as useless as the idols we have mentioned. It would mean any claims made about him would be false, and trusting him would be like relying on quicksand to hold us up - we would in fact sink in ruin and despair. But because he is the true God then we can trust him with absolute confidence, because he is exactly as he has told us about himself in the Bible. Those who rely on God will not be disappointed, as we read in Romans 10:11, *"As the Scripture says, 'Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.'"*

2) God knows the truth about everything, and can never deceive nor be deceived.

a. God can never deceive anyone.

This has a number of very practical benefits.

i. God does not lie.

This of course is closely linked with God's holiness, because sinfulness can never be part of his character and therefore he will not and cannot lie or deceive anyone. We find in Numbers 23:19 that, "*God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfil?*" When Samuel told Saul that God had rejected him as the king of Israel he said (1 Samuel 15:29): "*He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind.*" God is always truthful and never ever untruthful, and that is why we can rely on him completely. We must also add that God will never act contrary to his character, and therefore there are some things God cannot do, one of which is described in Hebrews 6:18: "... *it is impossible for God to lie...*" This means:-

ii. God's Word, the Bible is absolutely true.

Because God is truthful and can never deceive anyone, then all he has made known to us in the Bible is absolutely true, and therefore utterly dependent. We can completely depend on its statements and teaching in every way – it is all the truth. An example of this is the opening statement of Paul's letter to Titus. We read in Titus 1:1-2, "*Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ for the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness – a faith and knowledge resting on the hope of eternal life, **which God, who does not lie**, promised before the beginning of time, and at his appointed season he brought his word to light through the preaching entrusted*

to me by the command of God our Saviour." Note again the assurance that God does not lie because he is the God of truth, and note also that word 'hope'. Today, the English word 'hope' has in it a measure of uncertainty. For example, we might say, 'I hope to go to the town tomorrow', but we cannot be absolutely certain because when tomorrow comes we might be ill, or something else may arise to prevent us. But the original Greek word translated 'hope' that Paul used means something future that is guaranteed: something that is absolutely secure and over which there is no doubt at all. And therefore Paul could write with certainty about eternal life because the God of truth never ever lies or deceives, and all who, like Paul and Titus, trust in the Lord Jesus Christ also have this assured hope of eternal life.

iii. The Bible is to be our standard of truth.

Because God only ever speaks the truth, his Word the Bible is, therefore, the ultimate standard of truth for us. All that conforms to his Word is true, and all that does not is false. This is very useful because it means we can tell if religious teachers are from God by asking the question, 'Are they being faithful to the teaching of the Bible?' Indeed, John tells us we are to specifically test the spirits to see if they are from God (1 John 4:1). The reason is that there are sadly many false prophets in the world. We read of some in Isaiah 9:15: "... *the prophets who teach lies...*" And Isaiah tells us we can test the genuineness or otherwise of all spiritual teachers by comparing what they teach with the teaching of the Bible (Isaiah 8:20): "*To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to*

this word, they have no light of dawn.” How good it is to know that the Bible is given to us by God as *“a lamp to our feet and a light to our path...”* (Psalm 119:105), which in turn is a great encouragement to us to study the Bible. Indeed, we can say that our thoughts about God are only true when they conform to his Word, and therefore we need to pursue this true knowledge. (See Colossians 3:10.)

iv. The Bible is an honest book.

Because God is truthful, his Word the Bible is true, and we can see its amazing honesty in that it never hides the sins and failings even of its heroes. For example, Abraham, Moses, Peter and Thomas all failed the Lord at times, and these are truthfully recorded. This fact enables us to see the folly of trusting in men, and directs us to trust in Christ who never sinned or failed. Then of particular importance we must note that God does not try to deceive us about the day of judgement and the reality of hell in order to make its message more palatable to us. No! God is honest. Indeed, there are numerous judgements of God that have already taken place that are recorded for us to know about and learn from, so that we can prepare for the final day of judgement. For example, there was the flood in the days of Noah (Genesis 6ff). There was also the judgement on Lot’s wife who disobeyed God and became a pillar of salt (Genesis 19:26). We can think of the judgement on the Pharaoh alive during the days of Moses and the Exodus from Egypt, who was destroyed in the Red Sea (Exodus 14:10ff). Then we have persistent disobedience of the people of Israel whom God judged by the attacks on them of both the Assyrians (2 Kings 17ff), and the Babylonians

(2 Kings 24-25). These are given to help us realise the importance of being ready for the day of judgement by repenting of our sins and trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ to save us.

b. God can never be deceived by anyone.

i. God knows the whole truth about everything.

This, of course, is very closely linked with his knowledge, because if God knows all things then he must know what is true, but it is very important for us to appreciate that. For example, in Job 37:16 God is described as being *“... perfect in knowledge...”* This statement in Job tells us that God’s understanding about absolutely everything is perfect. God is never mistaken in his understanding of the world. Therefore, if we think the same as God thinks about the universe, then our thinking is truthful, whereas if we think differently from God we are thinking falsely and are in error. The standard of truth for all men is what God has said in the Bible, because, as Jesus taught us in John 17:17, God’s Word is truth.

ii. God will therefore always be just.

Because God can never be deceived by anyone we can say that with him there will never ever be any miscarriages of justice because he did not know the whole picture. Sadly that sometimes happens amongst men, and some are falsely imprisoned because the whole truth was not known at the time, but years later when it was discovered, they had to be set free. God will never make a mistake like that because he is the God of truthfulness. He is always accurate. He knows the real truth about everything in minute detail. No

one can deceive him, although many attempt to do so. There have been those who claimed to be Christians but were not true believers at all. For example, Simon Magus in Acts 8:9-24, and Judas Iscariot, the one doomed to destruction (John 6:70-71, 17:12). See also the parable of the sower and the people likened to the rocky and thorny ground in Mark 4:16-19 who looked so promising by their initial response to the Word of God, but who proved to be false believers who fell away under testing.

Further, there have been those who tried to hide the wrong they had done from God, but it was futile. We have the case of Sarah when she lied about laughing at God's promise to give her a child (Genesis 18:10-15). But God knew and exposed her sin. Then when David sinned with Bathsheba, his attempt to hide it from God was useless, and again God exposed it (2 Samuel 11-12). See also Achan (Joshua 7) and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5). Therefore we must remember God knows the truth about us, all that we have ever done or said or thought! We cannot hide anything from him, our lives are all exposed to his penetrating gaze. And this again emphasises the urgency for all openly to confess our sin to God and seek his forgiveness through the Lord Jesus Christ while we still have time. Failure to do this will end in everlasting disaster, for on the day of judgment no one will be able to make any excuses or deny the wrong in their lives because God knows the truth about each one of us. His judgement will be just because he is the God of truth.

iii. God knows those who genuinely trust him.

A most encouraging part of this is recorded by Paul when he wrote to Timothy (2 Timothy 2:19): "...*God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: 'The Lord knows those who are his,' and, 'Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.'*" God even knows the believers with the weakest faith in Christ, and those believers are assured they belong to him because it is not so much the strength of their faith that is important but its object. Even those with weak and faltering faith trust the perfect, holy, righteous Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who shed his precious blood for the forgiveness of their sins. Others may also mock believers because we turn away from wrong and evil and are different from others in the world who engage in wickedness without any concern at all. But what matters most of all is that God sees the believer trusting in God and seeking to live for him, albeit imperfectly. In the final judgement each Christian believer will be delivered from the wrath to come and will enter into the joy of the Lord. (See Matthew 25:21; 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10.)

c. A practical application to the believer.

If God's Word is reliable, every Christian believer's word should be reliable. God loves truth and therefore so should we. If God does not lie, neither should we.

Paul gives clear instruction to us about being truthful in Colossians 3:9-10: "***Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.***" He puts it in a similar way in Ephesians 4:25: "***Therefore each of you must put off***

falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbour for we are all members of one body.” Added to this, Paul gives us his own testimony about the importance for him of being truthful in his ministry (2 Corinthians 4:2): “...we have renounced secret and shameful ways; **we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God.**”

The Old Testament is just as direct in its insistence that the people of God should be honest and reliable in all they say. For example, Solomon gave advice on this very issue to his son (Proverbs 4:24): “**Put away perversity from your mouth; keep corrupt talk from your lips.**” David answered the question, “*Lord, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill?*”, by writing in Psalm 15:2, “*He ... who speaks the truth from his heart...*” Indeed, this is a mark of those who truly belong to God according to Proverbs 13:5, “*The righteous hate what is false...*” The prophet Zechariah gave this important instruction from God to the people of his time (Zechariah 8:17): “‘... do not plot evil against your neighbour, and **do not love to swear falsely. I hate all this,**’ declares the Lord.” Indeed so strong is God’s love for truthfulness that we read in Proverbs 12:22, “*The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in men who are truthful.*” Added to all this is God’s accusation against the people through Isaiah the prophet that they were untruthful (Isaiah 59:3-4): “**Your lips have spoken lies, and your tongue utters wicked things. No one calls for justice; no one pleads his case with integrity. They rely on empty**

arguments and speak lies; they conceive trouble and give birth to evil.”

Just in case we have failed to grasp the importance of being truthful ourselves, we are told that all liars will be excluded from heaven itself and be punished for ever (Revelation 21:8): “... *the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practise magic arts, the idolaters and all liars – their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulphur. This is the second death.*” When we lie we dishonour God and diminish his glory, for we are created in God’s image to reflect his glory in our lives – this is especially true for believers. All these passages show us not only the need for us to be truthful, but also our need of the forgiveness of the Lord Jesus Christ, for no one on earth has always told the truth on every occasion, and therefore all need the Lord’s mercy. How good to know the God of truth is also merciful to sinners who call on his name.

3) God is faithful in the fulfilment of all his promises.

a. God is faithful.

Because God is truthful, he always does what he promises to do, and therefore we can depend on him completely. He will always remain faithful and never be unfaithful. Here are some Bible verses which tell us this important fact about God (Deuteronomy 7:9): “*Know therefore that the Lord your God is God: he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands.*” (Deuteronomy 32:4) “*He is a Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are*

just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.” (1 Corinthians 1:9) *“God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.”* (2 Timothy 2:13) *“If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.”* (Hebrews 10:23) *“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.”* And therefore God can be safely relied on. The testimony of Solomon at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem bears this out (1 Kings 8:56): *“Praise be to the Lord, who has given rest to his people Israel just as he promised. Not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through his servant Moses.”* What a contrast this is to so much that we find in the world we live in where there is so much unfaithfulness. For example, sadly many are breaking their marriage promises. In the realm of business, lying and cheating and corruption are widespread. And we must add that the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ even break promises at times. How easy it is for us to promise to pray for that missionary, but then completely forget to do so. And sometimes we genuinely make promises, but because of unavoidable and unexpected circumstances we find we are unable to keep our word. How good to know that none of these things ever happens with God because he is faithful. The Christian writer A. W. Pink has put it like this: *“Everything about God is great, vast, incomparable. He never forgets, never fails, never falters, never forfeits his word.”*

b. Some examples of God fulfilling his promises.

There are so many examples of these in the Bible that we can select only a few.

i. A promise given to Noah.

One such promise that has been fulfilled all around the world every year since it was first made was given to Noah after the flood (Genesis 8:22): *“As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.”* Although God made that promise thousands of years ago it has never once failed to be fulfilled. Indeed, this very moment is a part of that fulfilment.

ii. A promise given to Abraham.

The promise made to Abraham is found in Genesis 15:13-16: *“Then the Lord said to him, ‘Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and ill-treated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterwards they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.’”* Every part of that promise was carried out by God in detail. Abraham did die at a great age (Genesis 25:7-8): *“Altogether, Abraham lived a hundred and seventy five years. Then Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years; and he was gathered to his people.”* His descendants, the people of Israel were slaves in Egypt (Exodus 1). They were there for the 400 year

period God had declared and were delivered from Egypt. Pharaoh and his army were destroyed by God (Exodus 12–14). And they were brought into the land of Canaan, the very land where God gave Abraham the promise, the details of which are outlined in the book of Joshua in the Old Testament.

iii. A promise given to Isaiah.

Over 700 years before the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, God gave a promise to Isaiah that he would be born in a unique way (Isaiah 7:14): *“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”* When the time came for this to be fulfilled the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would become the mother of Jesus, and Mary asked this question (Luke 1:34-35): *“How will this be ... since I am a virgin?”* The angel answered, *“The holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.”* Mary was engaged to be married to Joseph at this time and, discovering that she was pregnant, he mistakenly thought she had been unfaithful to him, and so the Lord sent an angel to speak to him about it (Matthew 1:20-23): *“But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: The*

virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel – which means, ‘God with us.’” (See also Galatians 4:4.)

(NB. There were other promises made about the birth of Jesus which were also fulfilled in detail, even naming the very place where he would be born. See Micah 5:2 about Bethlehem, and its fulfilment in Matthew 2:5-6.)

iv. Promises that Jesus would die to save sinners.

Probably the best known chapter about this is Isaiah 53 which is quoted so often in the New Testament as being fulfilled in detail when Jesus died. We read in Isaiah 53:4-6, *“Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”* It is quite amazing that this was fulfilled in great detail when Jesus died. He was afflicted by God and forsaken by him (see Matthew 27:46). He had no sin of his own and therefore suffered for his people’s sins (see 2 Corinthians 5:21). He was pierced by nails and a spear (see John 19:34 and 20:24ff). Even Isaiah’s description of us as straying sheep is accurately explained in 1 Peter 2:25.

Another passage that was fulfilled in detail when Jesus died is Psalm 22, where the words Jesus spoke on the cross, the sufferings he would endure and even the hostility

of the crowd who mocked him, are all foretold in great detail. And so we can see from this small selection, that God always keeps his word faithfully, because he is truthful. We read in Proverbs 30:5, “*Every word of God is flawless...*”, and therefore every word is true.

c. Important applications.

i. The Lord will keep all his children safe for ever.

Very often Christian believers can be troubled with the thought, ‘Will I remain faithful to the Lord to the end of my life?’, or, ‘Knowing how weak and frail I am, will I really reach heaven in the end?’ Again and again throughout the Bible God assures all his true people that they will endure and will reach heaven because he has promised to keep them safe, and God’s promises are always fulfilled. Paul encouraged the Corinthian believers by assuring them God would keep them secure for ever (1 Corinthians 1:8-9): “*He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.*” Paul also encouraged the Philippian Christians by reminding them it was God who would work in their lives until they were safely brought to heaven (Philippians 1:3-6): “*I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, **being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.***” The Lord Jesus himself gave this assurance to believers (John 10:27-30): “*My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they*

follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” Because God is truthful we know that he is faithful, and he has promised he will bring his people to glory, so this is something every believer can be certain about. Consider Romans 8:30: “*... those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.*” Paul was so certain that all true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ will be glorified that he wrote as if it had already happened! That’s how sure and certain it is. (See also Hebrews 2:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24.)

These statements and promises from the Bible are the perfect antidote to worry, fear and trepidation. But honesty demands that we acknowledge we are not always free from such worries and fears, and so we need to keep coming back to these and other promises of God in the Bible and remind ourselves of them and rest upon them. And if these are not enough to comfort and strengthen our faith, God also tells us in the Bible that the Lord Jesus Christ is praying for each one of his disciples to ensure that we will endure to the end and be saved. Sometimes we can be fearful that we might be at last condemned, and God’s answer to that is found in Romans 8:34: “*Who is he who condemns? Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.*” Sometimes we may be tempted to think, ‘Will we really be saved?’ God’s answer is found in

Hebrews 7:24-25: “... because Jesus lives for ever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.” And sometimes our own consciences disturb us because although we know that as Christian believers we should not sin, we still do on occasions. There is no excuse for us to sin like this, but the plain fact is we still do, and often we are filled with shame and fear that we might be lost in the end. Even that eventuality is wonderfully covered for us by the grace of God in Christ (1 John 2:1-2): “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”

ii. God will be with his children when we face trials.

We have seen that true faith really takes God at his word and relies on him to do what he has promised. And this is expressed simply but powerfully in this children’s song:

*“Faith is just believing what God said he will do,
he will never fail you, his promises are true.
If you but believe him, his child you will become,
faith is just believing what God said he will do.”*

This is very important because sometimes even the Christian’s faith in God’s faithfulness can be sorely tested as we go through trials. We can suffer from heartache, ill health, pain, bereavement and the approach of our own death itself. Sometimes our cherished plans and hopes are

dashed and come to nothing and we are greatly disappointed. Sometimes friends fail us when we were relying on them. At such times all can seem darkness to us and we can be tempted to think God has been unfaithful to us. Isaiah helps us for God will not fail us even at such times (Isaiah 50:10): “Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the word of his servant? Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.” At such times we are to wait patiently (Isaiah 30:18): “Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him.” We need to remember every temptation to doubt God’s faithfulness is an attack from Satan and therefore we must resist him because he is the father of lies (John 8:44). An early Christian writer named Chrysostom wrote this very helpful advice: “We are not to believe our senses so much as we are to believe the promises.” So often our senses and feelings fail us and deceive us, but God’s word and promises will never fail. And though at times it seems to us that God is delaying the fulfilling of a promise, he always has some good purpose for us, and we can be sure that eventually his word will be fulfilled. William Cowper, the Christian hymn writer, composed a hymn on this very difficulty that Christians face. It came very much from his own experience because he suffered from a prolonged period of depression which sapped his spiritual resources. He was greatly helped at that time by his friend John Newton who wrote the famous hymn ‘Amazing Grace’. Cowper’s hymn is called ‘God moves in a mysterious way’ and here’s part of it.

*“You fearful saints, fresh courage take;
the clouds you so much dread
are big with mercy, and shall break
in blessings on your head.*

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
but trust him for his grace;
behind a frowning providence
he hides a smiling face.*

*His purposes will ripen fast,
unfolding every hour;
the bud may have a bitter taste,
but sweet will be the flower.*

*Blind unbelief is sure to err,
and scan his work in vain;
God is his own interpreter,
and he will make it plain.”*

When we are going through trial we can be tempted to think God has perhaps forgotten us, but he has promised us that will never happen (Isaiah 49:15-16): *“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me.”* God will never forget us nor ever allow trials to separate us from him. He has promised that, and his promises are true for all who trust him, because God is truthful.

Chapter 4 God is sovereign.

Introduction.

When we ask the great question, ‘Who is in control of everything?’, the Bible answers emphatically that God is! Again and again we are taught that God is Lord of all, that he is the Great King, that he is enthroned over all the universe, and that he governs things visible and invisible. There are many Bible passages that present this truth before us, and it has been a truth that has thrilled and strengthened the people of God in every century.

The great apostle, Paul, had a very clear grasp of the sovereignty of God, and this comes out in many of his letters. When he was writing to the Ephesian believers, Paul wrote some very deep truths in his first chapter that emphasise this amazing fact that God is absolutely sovereign. In a way we cannot fully understand, God is at work in everything, and is overruling everything so that his own purposes of love and mercy for his people will be irresistibly carried out, and glory brought to his name (Ephesians 1:11): *“In him (ie. the Lord Jesus Christ) we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him **who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will...**”* Notice the words ‘**who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will**’ because that quite literally includes ‘**everything**’ and excludes nothing – God is sovereign over all. (NB. Paul frequently uses ‘*everything*’ or ‘*all things*’ to refer to everything in creation, as can be seen in these Bible passages: Ephesians 1:10,23; 3:9; 4:10; Colossians 1:16 & 17; Romans 11:36; 1 Corinthians 8:6, 15:27-28.) And the tense of the words ‘**works out**’ means God is continually doing this all of the time. In the verses just before this one

Paul shows us how one day God is going to bring all things under Christ (Ephesians 1:9-10): *“And he (ie. God) made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.”* We can see from these verses that it is very clear God is working out his purposes and eventually all things will come to **his desired end**. Nothing and no one will frustrate his sovereign will being accomplished. And at the end of Ephesians 1 Paul directs our attention to our risen and exalted Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is now seated on the throne of heaven, ruling and overruling all things for his people’s good (Ephesians 1:22-23): *“And God placed all things under his (ie. the Lord Jesus Christ) feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the Church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”* (See also Colossians 2:10.) Again notice the emphasis that **‘all things’** are under Christ’s control, nothing is excluded. In his letter to the church at Rome, Paul assured them of God’s sovereignty in one of the best loved verses in the Bible (Romans 8:28): *“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”* Again we find that phrase **‘all things’** are under God’s sovereignty. It is very clear that Paul could not have made these great statements if God was not in absolute control of all things. There could never be any certainty that God’s purposes would be fulfilled if he was not sovereign and was not in control of all things, and this is therefore a tremendous truth for us to get into our minds.

It needs to be said right at the very beginning of this study that this subject is really beyond our full understanding. It is a very deep truth, and our minds are totally inadequate to comprehend fully the sovereign purposes of God and the means whereby he attains those purposes. But he has graciously revealed sufficient for us in the Bible to leave us without any doubts whatsoever that, however it might appear to our senses at times, God is still on the throne of the universe. He always has been and always will be. He is the *‘King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God’*, to quote 1 Timothy 1:17. We must also add that this is a vast subject because it touches on everything that happens in your life and mine, and that of every living creature, whether visible or invisible, and stretches to the very limits of the universe and covers all things in time and eternity, and therefore we can only hope at best just to scratch the surface of this great Biblical doctrine. Everything that exists does so because God willed it (Revelation 4:11): *“You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.”*

This leads us to the need to define precisely what the Bible means when it teaches us that God is sovereign. It really involves two things, the will of God and the power of God, because God has to have the power to put his will into practice, otherwise his plans might be frustrated and he would then not be sovereign. But we will emphasise the will of God as we think of his sovereignty, and in the next chapter deal with his power in more detail, although, as I say, both these things are really inseparable.

1) God's sovereignty described.

a. A helpful definition.

A.W. Pink has helpfully written about God in this way, using a number of the Biblical terms we have already looked at in this series: *“Being infinitely elevated above the highest creature, He is the Most High, Lord of heaven and earth. Subject to none, influenced by none, absolutely independent: **God does as He pleases, only as He pleases, always as He pleases. None can thwart Him, none can hinder Him. So His own Word expressly declares: Isaiah 46:10 ‘My purpose will stand, and I will do as I please.’”***

This is a very far reaching description of God's sovereignty, but it is firmly based upon the teaching of God's Word, the Bible. (See also Psalm 24:7-10, 82:1 & 8, 93:1-2, 95:3-4, 97:1-2, 104:1ff, 115:3, 146:10, Isaiah 44:6, 45:5-6; Revelation 1:8; Isaiah 45:7; Daniel 2:47, 4:3 & 34-35; Habakkuk 2:20; Romans 9:18 & 21; 1 Timothy 1:17, 6:15.)

b. Some Biblical examples.

Proud king Nebuchadnezzar was the most powerful man in the world of his day. He was the ancient world's super power, and with such power always comes the temptation to think men are in control of all things. God therefore told Nebuchadnezzar in a voice from heaven that he needed to learn that God alone is the Most High, and that he alone is sovereign over the kingdoms of the earth (Daniel 4:31-32). God humbled Nebuchadnezzar. He became insane and lived like an animal, even eating grass (Daniel 4:33). When he came out of that terrifying and humbling

experience he praised God and expressed that he had come to realise that God is in sovereign control of all things (Daniel 4:34-35): *“At the end of that time, I Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes towards heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honoured and glorified him who lives for ever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. All peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: ‘What have you done?’”* And his words tells us nothing is outside of God's sovereign control.

It covers all of time and eternity – *His dominion is an eternal dominion*

It covers all the powers of heaven – *He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven*

It covers all people in all the earth – *and the peoples of the earth*

It is an irresistible control – *No one can hold back his hand*

It is an unquestionable control – *No one...can say to him, ‘What have you done?’*

God's sovereignty means simply that he is King over all his works, and the Bible teaches this covers all events in all of time.

i. God is sovereign over the world around us.

This led the Psalmist to write in Psalm 135:6-7, *“The Lord does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on earth, in the seas and all their depths. He makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth; he sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from his store houses.”* Even the very elements and weather are under his control (Psalm 148:7-8): *“Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths, lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds **that do his bidding**...”* (See also Job 37:6-13, 38:22-30; Psalm 104:4&14; Matthew 5:45.) The very wind that blows does so because he commands it and controls it. And when you consider how powerful the elements can be, we realise that God is infinitely more so. We must remember at this point that although we can explain the weather and similar things in the natural world around by saying it is due to the temperature and the humidity and other such things, this does not mean that God did not cause the weather. What the Bible means is that he does so by using these means. Therefore when we have sufficient water to drink and for the crops to grow for our food, we should thank God for them, and when they are withdrawn we should pray to God for them.

ii. God is sovereign over the animal world.

The Bible makes special note of the fact that God feeds even the wild animals and birds around us, and that the length of their life is sovereignly determined by God (Psalm 104:27-29): *“These look to you to give them their food at the proper time. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things. When you hide your face they are*

terrified; when you take away their breath they die and return to the ground.” The Lord Jesus described it like this in Matthew 6:26: *“Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.”* In Matthew 10:29 Jesus taught, *“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father.”*

iii. God is sovereign over what men call ‘chance events’.

So often people are heard to say they were lucky, but this is really quite wrong. There is no such thing as blind or random chance or luck. The Bible teaches us that it is God who controls even events which to our way of thinking appear to be chance events (Proverbs 16:33): *“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.”* Nothing happens by blind chance because there is the overruling hand of God at work in all events, so that even those things that are unexpected to us, are not unexpected to him.

iv. God is sovereign over the nations.

The Bible teaches us that God rules over all the nations (Psalm 22:28): *“... for dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations.”* The Bible teaches us that kingdoms rise and fall at God’s bidding (Job 12:23): *“He makes nations great, and destroys them; he enlarges nations, and disperses them.”* This is why it is so foolish for men in their pride to resist God or deny God, for their efforts are doomed to failure. We have the Biblical example of the Pharaoh who lived at the time of the exodus from Egypt, whom God destroyed in the Red Sea. The

Bible solemnly tells us God raised him up that he might demonstrate his sovereign power over him (Romans 9:17). It also declares that rulers are in their positions of authority because he has decreed it, and this even includes ungodly and wicked rulers! (Romans 13:1) *“Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.”* God has determined where each nation should live and how large their territory should be (Acts 17:26): *“From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.”* And that leads us on to consider how God’s sovereignty influences our lives, because if God rules over all things and over all nations and over all places, that must include every individual.

2) God’s sovereignty in our lives.

The Bible teaches us that God’s sovereignty covers the personal events of our own lives. For example, all our days were numbered in God’s book before one of them came into being (see Psalm 139:16; Job 14:5; Jeremiah 1:5; Galatians 1:15). All our actions are under God’s providential care (Acts 17:28; Jeremiah 10:23; Proverbs 20:24, 16:1&9). Every success and failure we experience comes from God (Psalm 75:6-7; Luke 1:52; Psalm 127:1). All our talents and abilities come to us from him (1 Corinthians 4:7; Psalm 18:34).

At this point we need to be very careful not to fall into error because God’s sovereignty does not make us into

puppets. This is difficult for us to grasp, but we need to remember none of these things denies our own freedom and responsibility and accountability for our actions, because these are also clearly taught in the Bible. In a way we cannot fully understand, God is still sovereign in all the events that occur in our lives. Let us consider this in two general areas.

a. This applies to our times of joy and blessing.

When everything in our lives is going well, we must attribute this to the Lord’s goodness. James put it in a simple but profound way, covering all material and spiritual blessings, including our salvation (James 1:16-18): *“Don’t be deceived, my brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.”* There are three things for us to take special note from this statement from James.

i. Do not be deceived.

It is interesting to note James begins by telling us not to be deceived, and this is very important. This is because we live in a world that is not God centred in its thinking. Our world is very man centred, and much is made about man’s achievements. Great claims are made about us, and most would want to attribute all the good things we receive to our development and advancement, at the exclusion of God entirely. There are others who are given over to idolatry of various kinds, and the worship of false gods and evil

spirits, and they would want to attribute any good we receive to these things. Therefore James tells us not to be deceived by that kind of thinking. Neither man nor idols nor false gods nor evil spirits control either the universe or our lives. The truth is that God is the one who is in absolute control.

ii. All good gifts come from God who sovereignly chooses to give them to us.

James tells us every good gift we receive - and that covers an enormous number of things - every one of them comes down from our heavenly Father. It includes every material blessing. For example, things such as good health, food and clothing, family and friends, homes, jobs, education, beautiful flowers and plants, the lovely birds we see flying, rain to give us liquid to drink and water for our crops, sunshine to brighten our days and give us light and warmth, and a multitude of other good things. God has chosen to give them to us, God has willed that we should enjoy these things. Indeed, our very existence we owe to God who made us (see Psalm 139). And therefore how thankful we should be to him for all his benefits to us (Psalm 103:2). It includes every spiritual blessing. Because this is of particular importance we shall consider it next.

iii. If we are Christian believers, God was the one who chose to save us.

James emphasises for the Christian believer that the reason why we have become Christians is that God ‘... *chose to give us birth through the word of truth...*’ This is a very

important emphasis that is so often ignored today, and sometimes even opposed by Christian believers, and that is very sad and very unbiblical, because what James is teaching us is something very wonderful indeed. Our salvation has come to us entirely by the sovereign goodness and kindness of God. “*He chose to give us birth through the word of truth...*” You will remember that this was something the Lord Jesus taught his disciples (John 15:16): “*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last.*” It was the Saviour who singled out those disciples to belong to him. He could have chosen others, and if it had been left up to us we would certainly have selected different men because the ones Jesus chose were all very weak and slow to learn and unbelieving. Peter denied he ever knew Jesus; when he was arrested all the disciples forsook him; and Thomas doubted him. Humanly speaking these would have been the last men we would have chosen to turn the world upside down, but Jesus acted so differently. He picked these men sovereignly to belong to him. And what is so astonishing is that this included his choice of Judas Iscariot, even though Jesus knew he would eventually betray him! God’s ways are certainly higher than ours and his thoughts higher than our thoughts (Isaiah 55:9).

Paul also had much to teach us about God’s sovereignty in our salvation. In Ephesians 1 he wrote this glorious description of the sovereign grace of God to sinners who have come to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:3-6): “*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with*

every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.” It is a lovely and glorious Bible passage, and has depths to it that we cannot fully understand, but knowing that such things are true about our God, surely makes us want to praise him, just as Paul did. Paul of course was so aware of his own unworthiness to receive God’s salvation because of his opposition to the Lord Jesus Christ and hatred of Christian believers. He was aware that if God had not sovereignly broken into his life he would never have come to follow Christ at all, and would have perished. But he knew that God had chosen him, as he has chosen every Christian believer who has ever lived. And you will note how Paul emphasised that salvation in Christ has come to us because it was God’s ‘*pleasure and will*’ that it should be so. How infinitely kind and merciful God has been to us!

This is not something we find only in the New Testament, but it is in the Old Testament as well. Right back in the book of Genesis God came to Abraham and not only chose him to be the father of all who will believe, but also that from him God would have a chosen people for himself, the people of Israel (Genesis 12:1-3): *“The Lord had said to Abraham, ‘Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I*

will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” Now note that it was God who came to Abraham, not the other way around. It was God who took the initiative. It was God who was making the promises. It was God who was going to bless Abraham. It was God who was going to bring the nation of Israel into being. It was God who, through Abraham, would bring blessing to all peoples on earth – that being a promise about the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ many centuries later. Very clearly it was God who was utterly in control as he came to Abraham and chose him to be his friend. In a similar way centuries later when Moses was leading the people of Israel, (that very nation God had promised would come from the family of Abraham), he also taught the people that it was God who had sovereignly and freely chosen to love them, and it was not their doing nor because they were more attractive than other people (Deuteronomy 7:7-8): *“The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. **But it was because the Lord loved you...**”* Note again, it was the Lord’s doing – *“...because the Lord loved you...”* Even the rebellious prophet Jonah declared this great truth when he was inside the great fish at the bottom of the sea (Jonah 2:9): *“Salvation comes from the Lord.”* And so every Christian believer today can say, ‘I am a child of God because God chose me to be adopted into his family through the Lord Jesus Christ. God saved me. God loved me. God forgave me. And it was all his doing from

beginning to end, and therefore the praise is entirely God's.'

So we can see that all our blessings, material and spiritual, come under the sovereign control of God.

b. This applies to times of testing and trial.

God's sovereign control includes even those experiences which are painful and hard, filled with distress and sorrow. I think this is one of the most difficult things for us to understand and really believe, but God has so graciously declared this to be the truth in the Bible that it is something that not only must we believe, but can believe is true, and that is a tremendous comfort. To help us, the Lord has included some very notable examples for us in the Bible itself.

i. Joseph

A good case to examine is the life of Joseph who was hated by his brothers, sold as a slave in Egypt, falsely accused of immorality and wrongly imprisoned, and forgotten in that prison for over two years by a man who promised to help him. That list of things meant Joseph had to endure some very severe and unjust treatment at the hands of his brothers and the authorities in Egypt. They were dark and difficult days for him. Eventually in God's sovereignty Joseph was released from prison and became the most powerful man in the land of Egypt next to Pharaoh. Then after quite a long time he was reconciled to his brothers, and this is what Joseph said to them in Genesis 45:5: "*And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here because it was to save lives*

that God sent me ahead of you." Then some time later when their father Jacob died, Joseph's brothers were fearful that he might take his revenge on them. And it is Joseph's words to them at that time which are most significant (Genesis 50:19-20): "*But Joseph said to them, 'Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.'*"

Joseph knew God was sovereign over everything in his life, even the many years of hardship and injustice he had to endure, and was able to rest in that fact knowing that God had some good purpose in it all, which eventually came to fruition years later. This did not excuse his brothers from their sinful behaviour in selling him into slavery, neither did it excuse the man who forgot about Joseph in prison for those two years. They were indeed guilty, but Joseph knew that over and above all that, Almighty God was at work fulfilling his glorious plans and purposes, and even using the wicked schemes of men in the process! It really is quite amazing to think about. How God's ways are indeed past finding out!

ii. Jesus.

What Joseph experienced in his life is seen even more wonderfully in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ, and especially his death on the cross. If ever there was anyone who faced trial of the severest kind, it was the Lord Jesus Christ himself. Isaiah described Jesus in Isaiah 53:3 like this: "*He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering.*" And this came to its greatest expression at his crucifixion. Jesus was wrongly

arrested, falsely accused, terribly flogged, wickedly abused, and ultimately executed on the cross in the most despicable way. And from our human perspective we could easily understand if someone said about these events, 'Surely God was not in control here, was he? This was such a miscarriage of justice?' We would have to reply to such questions, not from the human perspective but from God's perspective, and when we do that we have to say, 'Yes, God was very much in control!' Indeed, we must go further and say that God planned it this way. This did not mean that those who murdered the Lord Jesus were not guilty or responsible for their actions, because they very clearly were, but that is only part of the story. The apostle Peter comes to our aid as we wrestle with these profound statements. On the day of Pentecost when he preached the good news about Jesus to the crowds in Jerusalem, he spoke in this very profound yet glorious way (Acts 2:22-24): *"Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. **This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge;** and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him."* Peter's emphasis is quite remarkable. He tells us Jesus was handed over to be crucified in this terrible way '... by God's set purpose and foreknowledge...' In other words, God planned it all, and it happened exactly as he planned! (See also Acts 4:27-28.) God was completely in control, sovereignly working out

his own purposes, in what was the worst crime ever committed since the beginning of time! We have to confess this is a mystery to us, but God has told us this is what he did. He planned that Jesus should die in this way, yet the people who killed Jesus were totally responsible for their wicked actions. And yet, when we consider the outcome of Jesus' death and resurrection, we have to conclude that from the most wicked of actions of sinful men God has brought the greatest of good to millions who have come to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as their Saviour. Through Jesus' death the sins of all who believe have been forgiven, they have been cleansed in his precious blood, justified before God, adopted into his family, sanctified by his Spirit, and will ultimately be glorified with Christ in heaven! God's ways are breathtaking, and yet how marvellous and wonderful for us, that he uses even the darkest of circumstances to fulfil his purposes to bless his people and bring glory to his name.

iii. Application to believers today.

In the same way today, in a manner beyond our full understanding, God is at work in everything in the believer's life for our good (Romans 8:28). So often it is through times of trial that we are brought closer to the Lord. So often God uses these to chasten us when we have failed him, and to sanctify us. So often days of heartache become days of deep communion with God in prayer. So often days of weakness help us to depend on God even more and thus strengthen our faith. We may not know why any particular trial may have come to us, as Job was never told why he was tried, but we can rest assured that our

gracious and loving heavenly Father is in control of everything, and he will bring good to us his children and glory to his own name from it.

May I use a personal testimony at this point to illustrate what I have been saying? When I had just started school, my mother lost twin girls during the last week of her pregnancy. As you can imagine, it was a devastating experience, and one which even now, many years later, my parents do not fully understand. But through this harrowing ordeal, they were drawn so much closer to the Lord. Their dependence on him was strengthened. They experienced God's sustaining grace in a way they had never known before. They knew his presence with them in a much deeper way, and they have grown spiritually by an enormous amount. To use Paul's words in Romans 8:28, all things have worked together in their lives, even though they had to endure a most painful trial. And that is true for every Christian believer. And this is where we can gain great comfort, being able to rest in the hands of our sovereign Lord who does all things well, and has a good purpose in all that happens to us. Indeed, Peter instructs us to do that, reminding believers that it is sometimes God's will that we should suffer (1 Peter 4:19): *"So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good."* It is not that God loves the evil that may happen to us or which we may be responsible for (Ezekiel 33:11), but rather that he uses it for his good purposes.

At this point we must note something of great importance. We must be very careful never to blame God for sin, rather

than taking the blame ourselves. This is a great danger that some have fallen into and said they were not responsible for their sinful actions. Remember Peter's words in Acts 2:23 about Jesus' death, that although God planned it, the people who crucified him were responsible. God, although absolutely sovereign, is not the author of sin. We shall consider this next.

3) A problem examined.

a. An important question.

If God is sovereign over all things, does that mean God is responsible for sin? This is a very real problem, because we have seen that the Bible teaches us God is sovereign over everything and we also know there is evil and sin in the world. So what is the relationship between God and the sinfulness of our world?

b. An important fact.

We must say right away that the Bible emphatically teaches us that God is absolutely holy and pure (1 John 1:5): *"God is light; and in him there is no darkness at all."* And we must remember the Bible never contradicts itself because it is the Word of God. We have seen other qualities about God in this series of studies. For example, he is good and kind and gracious and just and he is love, and all of these qualities are incompatible with any suggestion that God is responsible and guilty and the source of sin. The Bible nowhere ever suggests that at all. It is important for us to restate this because it is from the clear statements of the Bible that we should begin, and then approach the more difficult parts from that starting point.

And we can go further and say the Bible never blames God for evil, and never indicates that he takes pleasure in it either. Indeed, the opposite is the case, for God detests evil of any kind (see Hab 1:13), and the responsibility for the evil committed is specifically stated as man's fault, from the first sin of our parents Adam and Eve onwards. And yet we are still left with the problem of what is God's relationship to evil and sin.

c. An important distinction.

The Bible does something very important which we need to grasp. It nowhere shows God directly doing something sinful himself, but it does show us God using the wickedness of man to accomplish his own purposes, and this is a very important distinction. There are many examples in the Bible that illustrate this, as we have mentioned already, and one we have not yet considered is something that happened in the life of David. Towards the end of his life we read that God was greatly displeased with the people of Israel. We are not told the exact reason, but clearly they must have been guilty of serious sin. The result was that God was going to punish them, and it is how this was brought about that is of significance for us (2 Samuel 24:1): *“Again the anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, ‘Go and take a census of Israel and Judah.’”* David proceeded to take this census, even though his army commanders urged him not to. It would appear David himself was really motivated by pride and reliance on the size of his army, because no sooner had he completed the census than he was convicted of his sin (2 Samuel 24:10): *“David was*

conscience-stricken after he had counted the fighting men, and he said to the Lord, ‘I have sinned greatly in what I have done. Now, O Lord, I beg you, take away the guilt of your servant. I have done a very foolish thing.’” Now note carefully in the first verse we just quoted that we were told it was God himself who incited David against the Israelites, yet in the second verse after David had taken the census he realised he was the guilty one, he had committed the sin, the fault was his. The result of this was that God did indeed punish Israel, as he had initially declared, because the anger of the Lord was kindled against them. So here is God sovereignly overruling these events to bring about his desired end - the punishment of Israel – yet he did so through the sinful actions of David. Interestingly, we are also told in 1 Chronicles 21:1 that Satan was also involved in all of this: *“Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel.”* So the total picture is that God fulfilled his purposes of judgement on Israel, and he did so through Satan inciting David to sin, and the Bible regards David as the guilty one, as he did himself. This is just one of many instances in the Bible where God brought evil and destruction on people in judgement for their sins, and the Lord used evil human beings, or demonic forces, and sometimes even natural disasters, to bring judgement upon them. And so this judgement of God on sin at least in part helps us to see how God can bring about evil events without actually ever committing anything sinful himself. In a sense this is as far as we are able to go, because these things are beyond our understanding. The Bible does not give us a full answer, and to us it will remain a mystery, and we must be content

to leave it there. A Christian teacher of a former generation wrote this: *“God is able to draw a straight line while using a crooked stick.”* In other words, God is able to produce his wise and good purposes even though the instruments he may use to accomplish these are themselves corrupt and sinful, or crooked. In another context one thinks of sinful Jonah who disobeyed God’s instruction to preach to Nineveh and ran away, and even when he eventually went to that great city he did so reluctantly, and yet through him God caused the whole city to repent of their sins. God used a most unworthy servant to accomplish his own purposes.

4) Some important applications.

a. God’s sovereignty should cause us to worship and adore our great God.

The Lord is so great, that the Psalmist tells us he is greatly to be praised (Psalm 145:3). Therefore we should adore him, our God and King.

b. The fact that God is in control of all events is a tremendous comfort for the believer.

Consider these suggestions.

God’s sovereignty means that the whole of our lives are in his all wise and good hands, and none of his great purposes for us will fail. God has assured us he will bring us to heaven and present us faultless before his presence (Jude 24).

It also means that nothing will be able to separate us from the love he has shown us in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:35-39).

It also means the Lord will use everything that happens to us for our ultimate spiritual good, conforming us to the image of his dear Son our Saviour (Romans 8:28-30).

It also means when we go out with the gospel to our desperately needy world, that though we will meet opposition and the hardness of men’s hearts, our sovereign God will still save the people he has chosen, and so we know this work will succeed in the end.

The sovereignty of God is a tremendous antidote to worry when we go through difficulty, for it means God has his hand on us at such times, and we are absolutely safe in his keeping.

c. It is important for unbelievers to take note of God’s sovereignty.

Many at this present time do not want the Lord Jesus Christ to reign over them, and they foolishly rebel against him, but they will fail. A day is coming when all who have not willingly bowed the knee to him in humble submission, repentance and faith, will be compelled to bow before him as they hear his pronouncement of everlasting judgement upon them. (See Matthew 25:41, and compare Philippians 2:9-11 with Romans 2:16.) Therefore there is great urgency for unbelievers to seek the Lord’s mercy before it is too late, and for Christian believers to tell them of this great need.

Chapter 5 God is almighty.

Introduction.

In this chapter, we are going to consider God's power. We noted in the previous chapter that God's power is something that is very closely linked with his sovereign will. The Bible teaches us that God possesses absolute power, and this is sometimes described as God's omnipotence.

1) A selection of Bible passages about god's power.

The Bible brings teaching about God's power to our attention again and again. We will see that this attribute of God is used very widely indeed in the Bible and amongst all kinds of people and situations. Here are a selection of those passages showing how this truth is not only stated, but also used to encourage true believers.

(Genesis 17:1) *"When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless.'" (See also Exodus 6:2-3.)* When David encouraged the Lord's people to worship God as they entered Jerusalem, he asked and answered this great question in Psalm 24:8: *"Who is the King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle."* Then, after Jeremiah had bought a field at God's instruction and with the Lord's promise that after his people had been taken into exile by Nebuchadnezzar he would eventually bring them back, Jeremiah prayed. And he opened his prayer to God with these words in Jeremiah 32:17: *"Ah, Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you."* When Jacob blessed his sons

he reminded them of God in this way when he blessed Joseph (Genesis 49:25): *"...the Almighty who blesses you..."* When Naomi returned to Bethlehem after losing her husband and two sons, she said to the people (Ruth 1:20-21): *"Don't call me Naomi,' she told them. 'Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.'" Paul, in encouraging the Christian believers at Corinth to remain holy and separate from the sinfulness of the world, reminded them of God's promise (2 Corinthians 6:18): "I will be a Father to you and you will be my sons and daughters,' says the Lord Almighty."* When John received his revelation God described himself to him like this (Revelation 1:8): *"I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, 'who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.'" The living creatures who are before the throne of God in heaven repeatedly honour him with these words (Revelation 4:8): "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come."* The elders before the throne of God declare in Revelation 11:17, *"We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign."* When Paul wrote about the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, he stressed the certainty of this event in this way (1 Timothy 6:15): *"... which God will bring about in his own time – God, the blessed and only Ruler (literally 'Potentate'), the King of kings and Lord of lords..."* As David encouraged us to be faithful to God and trust in him alone, he wrote in Psalm 62:11-12,

*“One thing God has spoken, two things I have heard: that you, O God, **are strong**, and that you, O Lord, are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done.”* We are frequently made aware of the tremendous power of storms, and the psalmist David tells us it is Almighty God who controls and uses these (Psalm 18:13-15): *“The Lord thundered from heaven; the voice of the Most High resounded. He shot his arrows and scattered the enemies, great bolts of lightning routed them. The valleys of the sea were exposed and the foundations of the earth laid bare at your rebuke, O Lord, at the blast of breath from your nostrils.”* Another psalmist declared in Psalm 89:8, *“**O Lord God Almighty**, who is like you? **You are mighty, O Lord**, and your faithfulness surrounds you.”* And even wicked king Nebuchadnezzar was compelled to state (Daniel 4:35): *“All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No-one can hold back his hand or say to him: ‘What have you done?’”*

From these Bible verses we can see that God’s power is immense. (See also Job 26:7-14.)

2) God’s power defined.

a. A definition.

It is possible for us to glean from the few Bible passages we have just considered a clear definition of God’s power. **God’s power means he is able to do whatever his will decides, and he does do whatever he decides.** It is important for us to stress those two points: God has the ability and God does do whatever he wants. He is both

powerful and sovereign, and both of these are summarised for us in Psalm 115:3: *“Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.”* Nothing can hinder or prevent him doing whatever he chooses to do, because his power is irresistible.

b. A difference.

Immediately we see a huge contrast between God and ourselves. At our strongest we are still very weak. How often we wish we could do something but are powerless to accomplish it. So often our ambitions are thwarted because we lack the power necessary to bring them about. From time to time the weakness of man’s strength is highlighted for us very forcefully. For example, strong winds, hurricanes and cyclones just overpower man’s strength and the strongest things man has made are destroyed as if they were made of paper. We see bridges washed away in floods, homes deluged, landscapes obliterated, and often lives perish. In drought conditions when rain is desperately needed, man is powerless to bring this about. In addition, we have to remember that throughout our lives our strength changes. Our strength increases from infancy to its peak in early adulthood, and then it diminishes as advancing years pass by. But that never happens with God’s power, it is constantly the same. The Psalmist described this in terms we can readily identify with, by referring to our need of rest and sleep to revitalise our strength after doing hard and exhausting work, and showing God never needs such rest (Psalm 121:1-4): *“I will lift up my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot*

slip – he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.”

c. A demonstration.

God’s power is seen most clearly in the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. He had the power instantly to heal the man with leprosy (Matthew 8:1ff). He was able to raise Lazarus from the dead just by commanding him to come forth from his tomb (John 11). He was able to control the elements as was seen in the calming of the storm which he accomplished by simply commanding the wind to be still (Matthew 8:26). He was able to release Legion from the dreadful power of evil spirits that had possessed him (Mark 5:1ff esp. v15). Indeed, John tells us Jesus came into the world to destroy Satan’s power and works (1 John 3:8): *“The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.”* And we are told how he did this in Hebrews 2:14-15: *“Since the children have flesh and blood, he (ie. Jesus) too shared their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”* And so we can see how great God’s power really is.

3) A problem to consider.

God’s power does not mean he can do everything. This is something that has puzzled many, because we read in Matthew 19:26 that, *“with God all things are possible,”* and then we read in other passages of the Bible that it is impossible for God to do certain things. And so they

conclude that these statements contradict each other, which surely cannot be right if the Bible is the Word of God to us, so the problem is a very real one.

The way to approach this difficulty is to remember two important lessons. The first is that we must always read each Bible statement in its own context, and the other is that the Bible teaches us God will and can only act in accordance with his own character. So let’s consider the context of those words first.

i. The context.

The words *“with God all things are possible”*, which are in Matthew 19:26 and Mark 10:27, are found in the context of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus and asked what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus told him that the one thing that was stopping him was his love of his wealth and possessions. He was guilty of the sin of covetousness (see Exod 20:17). The man was unwilling to give these things up and went away sad, which led Jesus to say how hard it was for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. In reply the disciples of Jesus asked (Matthew 19:25), *“Who then can be saved?”* For them it seemed that if a rich man found it difficult to be saved it must be impossible for anyone to be saved. And it was then that Jesus replied, *“With man it is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”* In other words, this statement *“with God all things are possible”* refers specifically to his work of saving men and women from their sin. God can save anyone he wants to, and no one nor any thing is able to prevent him, and that is the context and meaning of those words.

ii. The consistency of God.

By this we mean that God always acts in accord with his character, and therefore there are some things he will not and cannot do. Consider these examples:

God is unchanging (Malachi 3:6; James 1:17), and therefore cannot alter or deny himself (2 Timothy 2:13).

God is holy (Isaiah 6:3), and therefore cannot sin nor be tempted by evil nor tempt anyone else to do wrong and sin (James 1:13).

God is faithful and truthful (Deuteronomy 32:4; John 17:17), and therefore he cannot lie (Hebrews 6:18, Numbers 23:19; 1 Samuel 15:29).

So there are some things God cannot do. This does not mean there is any deficiency in God's power, instead the very opposite is the case. God has the power to remain God, exactly as he has revealed himself to us in the Bible. Neither does this mean anything is too hard for God. No difficulty is insurmountable to him. A good example of this was God's promise to Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son in their old age. Sarah laughed in unbelief when she heard this, thinking this was utterly impossible now she had gone well past the age of child bearing. But God said this in Genesis 18:14: *"Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son."* This was fulfilled exactly, and Isaac was born. (See also Job 42:2; Jeremiah 32:17; Luke 1:37, 18:27; Romans 4:21.)

A more solemn example is the fact that God is well able to judge people even when they think that would be impossible for him, because he has the power to do it. For example, this was the situation in the days of Jeremiah the prophet when God warned the people he would destroy Jerusalem and the temple, which the people thought could never happen. But all of this took place when the armies of Nebuchadnezzar attacked the city and destroyed it, carrying many of the people to exile in Babylon. (Read Jeremiah 32:26-35; Ezekiel 22 especially vv13-16; cf. Deuteronomy 32:39.) And this is a solemn warning to those who think the last judgement will never come. God has said it will, and he has the power to bring it about. (See 2 Peter 3:3-10 and Peter's application in v11ff.)

It is also within God's power to restore what he has destroyed, and this was the case with the city of Jerusalem that Nebuchadnezzar destroyed (Zechariah 8:3-8). And this is a great comfort for the believer because after the final judgement when the very elements of this world will be destroyed by fire, God will bring about a new heavens and a new earth, the home of righteousness (2 Peter 3:13; Isaiah 65:17, 66:22; Revelation 21:1). Therefore the power of God is a considerable encouragement for the believer. No one can pluck us out of his all powerful, omnipotent hands, and so we are secure in God's loving care for ever (John 10:27-30).

4) God's Power Is Seen In Creation, Providence, And Redemption.

a. Creation.

Perhaps this is the most obvious area where we see God's power at work. We are told in Genesis 1 that when God created the heavens and the earth, all he had to do was to speak the word and everything came into existence. This is summarised for us in Psalm 33:6-9: *"By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth. He gathers the waters of the sea in jars; he puts the deep in storehouses. Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the people of the world revere him. For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm."* In Psalm 89:11-13, written by Ethan the Ezrahite, we read these words: *"The heavens are yours, and yours also the earth; you founded the world and all that is in it. You created the north and the south; Tabor and Hermon sing for joy at your name. Your arm is endued with power; your hand is strong, your right hand exalted."*

Paul refers to this revelation of God's power in creation in his letter to the church at Rome. It is important just to mention the context of his words in Romans 1 because Paul was writing about the wrath of God that is being revealed against the wickedness of men in the world. And he emphasises that unbelievers are guilty of refusing to believe in God even though he has given evidence of his existence all around them. These are the words Paul then wrote in Romans 1:20: *"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."* So God's power is seen in the world around us, and those who

refuse to acknowledge that are sadly without excuse and will have to bear the tragic consequences of their unbelief.

God's power is also seen in the fact that he controls creation. This is helpfully brought out for us by Jeremiah when he was exposing the folly of worshipping lifeless idols, and he teaches us that even the weather comes under the powerful control of God (Jeremiah 10:10-13): *"...the Lord is the true God; he is the living God, the eternal King. When he is angry, the earth trembles; the nations cannot endure his wrath. Tell them this: 'These gods, who did not make the heavens and the earth, will perish from the earth and from under the heavens.' But God made the earth by his power; he founded the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding. When he thunders, the waters in the heavens roar; he makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth. He sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from his storehouses."* A further demonstration of his power in creation is seen in that God upholds and preserves the creation by that power (Hebrews 1:3): *"The Son (ie. the Lord Jesus Christ) is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word."* (Psalm 36:5-6) *"Your love, O Lord, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your justice like the great deep. O Lord, You preserve both man and beast."* (Psalm 66:8-9) *"Praise our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard; he has preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping."* (Isaiah 40:26): *"Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the*

*starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. **Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.***” And so we must say that even our own continued existence is due to God’s power.

b. Providence.

We have already hinted at this as we have looked at creation, but we highlight it a bit more. By providence, we mean God’s sovereign control of all events, and that nothing is outside of his providence. For example, it is God who controls the elements and stops them destroying everything (Psalm 93:3-4): *“The seas have lifted up, O Lord, the seas have lifted up their voice; the seas have lifted up their pounding waves. Mightier than the thunder of great waters, mightier than the breakers of the sea – the Lord on high is mighty.”* And how good it is that God is mightier than the sea and storms because their ferocity could quite easily destroy all of us.

God also restrains wicked men, and even uses their wicked schemes to accomplish his purposes (Job 5:12-16): *“He thwarts the plans of the crafty, so that their hands achieve no success. He catches the wise in their craftiness, and the schemes of the wily are swept away. Darkness comes upon them in the daytime; at noon they grope as in the night. He saves the needy from the sword in their mouth; he saves them from the clutches of the powerful. So the poor have hope, and injustice shuts its mouth.”*

The supreme instance of God’s power at work in providence, using and overruling the schemes of wicked and crafty men, is at the cross of Calvary, as Peter pointed

out on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:22-24): *“Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. **This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.** But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.”*

c. Redemption.

The last verses from Acts 2 have already shown us that God was powerfully at work through the death of Christ to accomplish the salvation of his people. Jesus was raised to life by the very power of God, defeating death through his own death. And it is God who then applies what Christ accomplished through the shedding of his blood to the lives of those who believe, and this is a work of both his grace and his power. We see this emphasised by Paul in his letter to the Ephesian Christians, and he longed that God would help them to realise the powerful way he had worked in their lives (Ephesians 1:17-21): *“I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, **and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when***

he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.” Paul went on to teach that it is the power of God that brings new spiritual life to those who have now become Christian believers, because previously we were spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1-4): *“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of the world and the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.”* This is also stressed in Romans where Paul was writing about Abraham (Romans 4:17): *“... He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed – **the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.**”* In addition, the Bible teaches us that it is the power of the Lord which sets men free from their sin, its guilt and its power, and one day in heaven free even from its presence (John 8:31-32): *“To the Jews who had believed on him, Jesus said, ‘If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’”* (John 8:36) *“So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”*

Conclusion.

What we have learned about God’s almighty power should help us in a number of ways.

i. It should stimulate us to praise God.

God’s power is one of the great themes of the praise given to God by those already in heaven with him (Revelation 4:11): *“You are worthy, our Lord God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.”* (Revelation 19:6-7) *“Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: ‘Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!’”* Stephen Charnock, a Christian scholar of a former generation, wrote these lovely words about God’s power:

“As holiness is the beauty of all God’s attributes, so power is that which gives life and action to all the perfections of the Divine nature. How vain would be the eternal counsels, if power did not step in to execute them. Without power His mercy would be feeble pity, His promises an empty sound, His threatenings a mere scarecrow. God’s power is like Himself: infinite, eternal, incomprehensible; it can neither be checked, restrained, nor frustrated by the creature.”

And so God’s power should compel us humbly to worship and praise him (see Exodus 15:11).

ii. It should strengthen our trust in God.

(Psalm 27:1) *“The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid?”* This was David’s approach when he was confronted by great difficulties and sometimes hostile opponents: he trusted in the Lord whom he knew was stronger than all. And this means that no prayer is too difficult for God to answer, no problem too great for him to overcome, no passion too strong for him to subdue, no temptation too powerful for him to deliver us from, no misery too severe for him to relieve, and no trial too heavy for him to sustain us in (2 Corinthians 12:9): *“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’”* (Ephesians 3:20-21) *“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”* (Deuteronomy 33:27) *“The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.”*

iii. It should reinforce our assurance of salvation.

Paul was able to write with great confidence about the salvation that comes to all who trust in Christ (Romans 1:16): *“I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.”* And writing about the Lord Jesus Christ the writer of Hebrews penned these words in Hebrews 7:25: *“Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.”* And therefore, because it is the almighty power of God that has rescued us from our sins, we can rest

absolutely secure that he will never ever let that salvation fail us.

iv. It should produce godly fear in men’s hearts.

Knowing that God is the Almighty, and that his power is irresistible, none can overcome him, and none can resist him and succeed. Just as God is able to create by his mighty power, so he can also destroy. And this should fill our hearts with godly fear and reverence for God. All men should walk humbly before him (1 Peter 5:5-6): *“All of you should clothe yourselves with humility towards one another, because, ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’ Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that he might lift you up in due season.”* And if we have realised we have sinned against the Lord then this should fill us with humble and godly sorrow which leads to repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins (2 Corinthians 7:10): *“Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.”*

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