

5. WHAT TRUTHS DO YOU NEED TO TURN TO?

Lee suffered from panic attacks. In time they became self-reinforcing. The fear of an attack would induce another one. He would phone me three or four times a week. Each time I would speak the truth to him. We developed some catchphrases: 'God is greater than your thoughts.' 'Not "what if?" but "what is", and what is, is that God is in control.' The truth set him free. The truth of God's sovereignty brought peace, and with it a new realization of the centrality of God and his glory. It wasn't instantaneous. Each day brought a fresh struggle to believe. Another of our catchphrases was: 'Yesterday was a victory, today is another battle.' But in time the panic attacks went away.

We find true freedom in embracing God's reign over our lives and trusting his reign to be wise and good. This is the interpretation of life that brings joy and peace. But in the garden of Eden the serpent persuaded Eve to doubt the goodness of God's rule. Satan offered a different worldview, one

that portrayed God as a tyrant whose rule should be rejected. Eve took the fruit because she believed this lie about God. Sin began with humanity disbelieving God's word.

Behind every sin and negative emotion is a lie

Sinful acts always have their origin in some form of unbelief. *Behind every sin is a lie.* The root of all our behaviour and emotions is the heart: what it trusts and what it treasures. People are given over to sinful desires because 'they exchanged the truth of God for a lie' (Romans 1:24–25).

So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.
(Ephesians 4:17–19)

Humanity's problem is futile thinking, darkened understanding and ignorant hearts. This is the cause of indulgence,

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impurity and lust. We sin because we believe the lie that we are better off without God, that his rule is oppressive, that we will be free without him, that sin offers more than God. This is true of every sin and every negative emotion.

Often we can identify specific lies behind specific sinful acts and emotions. I may envy, steal

or be anxious about money because I believe the lie that consumer goods give meaning to my life or because I believe that God doesn't care for me. I may commit adultery or get depressed about my singleness because I believe the lie that intimacy with another person will give me more than God can give me.

Not many people think of themselves as someone who believes lies! But every time we don't trust God's word we're believing something else, and that something is always a lie. If I get angry when I'm struck in traffic it's because I don't trust God. I believe the lie that God isn't in control or that his purposes for me are not good. If I overwork it's because I don't trust God, perhaps because I believe the lie that I need to prove or justify myself. This is a radical view of sin. It means many of our negative emotions are sinful because they're symptoms of unbelief – the greatest sin and the root sin. Whenever we're depressed or bitter, it's because we believe God isn't being good to us or that he's not in control. 'Everything that does not come from faith is sin' (Romans 14:23).

Not many Christians think of themselves as unbelievers. After all, we normally use the term to describe people who aren't Christians at all. Most of us can happily sign up to the creeds of our church. But our problems rarely arise from a lack of belief in a confessional or theoretical sense, though this may be the case. More often they arise from functional or practical disbelief. The problems lie in the gap between what we believe in theory and what we believe in practice.

On Sunday morning I sing of my belief in justification by faith (confessional faith), but on Monday morning I still feel the need to prove myself (functional disbelief). Or I may believe I'll be acquitted on the day of judgment, but still want to justify myself in an argument tomorrow. I may affirm that

God is sovereign (confessional faith), but still get anxious when I can't control my life (functional disbelief). Sanctification is the progressive narrowing of the gap between confessional faith and functional faith.

The truth shall set you free

Recognizing that behind every sin is a lie not only gives us a radical view of sin, it points us to the road out of sinful behaviour and emotions. That road is trust in God.

The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day. But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble. My son, pay attention to what I say; listen closely to my words. Do not let them out of your sight, keep them within your heart; for they are life to those who find them and health to a man's whole body. Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.

(Proverbs 4:18–23)

Proverbs describes the road of trust in God as 'like the first gleam of dawn'. Maybe you feel as if you're in darkness, trapped in your behaviour, with negative emotions weighing heavily upon you. Seeing them as symptoms of unbelief can be like the first gleam of dawn. Hopes dawn with the realization that the answer is found in looking to God. It's a long road that takes a lifetime to travel, but with every step the light of God's goodness shines 'ever brighter till the full light of day'. We follow this road by paying attention to the word of God (20–21). God's word is our road map. The gracious promises of God give true life and health (22). The truth will guard our hearts and therefore our lives (23).

This is what the LORD says: 'Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD. He will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes. He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no-one lives.

'But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.'

(Jeremiah 17:5–8)

Jeremiah uses a different picture. People who trust in their own strength are like barren trees in a desert. Maybe that's how you feel: as if you are running on empty, thirsty for something more. Life feels fruitless and pointless. God says that people who trust in him are like trees planted by water, which never fail to bear fruit. That doesn't mean they have an easy life. The scorching heat comes on them. But their roots go down into the refreshing waters of God's word. Faith in God sustains them and keeps them fruitful in the midst of adversity.

'Everyone who sins is a slave to sin,' says Jesus (John 8:34). People feel trapped in their negative behaviour or emotions. They feel that they can't change. And in one sense they can't. Trying to change behaviour alone doesn't work because the lies that create that behaviour are still there. But Jesus says: '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 8:31–32). Just as lies about God lead to the slavery of sin, so the truth about God leads to the freedom of service (Galatians 5:1, 13). The truth that sets us free is the gospel ('if you hold to my teaching'). Freedom is found in the truth that we were

made to worship God, to serve God, to trust God. Freedom is found in acknowledging that we are responsible for the mess we have made of our lives, that our problems are rooted in our hearts, that we deserve God's judgment, that we desperately need God. Freedom is found in accepting that God is in control of our lives, that he is gracious, that he forgives those who come to him in faith. Paul says: 'For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives' (Titus 2:11-12).

Often we can be specific about the truth that will set us free from the lies that enslave us. If I'm enslaved by my worries, then freedom is found in trusting the sovereign care of my heavenly Father. If I'm enslaved by the need to prove myself, then freedom is found in trusting that I'm fully justified in God's sight through the atoning work of Christ.

Seeing, knowing, embracing, desiring

Change takes place as we see the glory of God in Jesus; as we know the truth that sets us free. But 'seeing' and 'knowing' don't properly capture the force of understanding we need. When this chapter asks what truths you need to turn to, it doesn't mean simply acquiring information or agreeing with statements. It's possible to see without seeing (Jeremiah 5:21; Ezekiel 12:2; Matthew 13:13). Nineteenth-century theologian Charles Hodge says that true knowledge of Christ 'is not the apprehension of what he is, simply by the intellect, but also . . . involves . . . the corresponding feeling of adoration, delight, desire and [contentment]'.¹ Seeing and knowing Christ isn't just receiving information, but recognizing him as the Altogether Lovely One. It's embracing the truth about God and delighting in it.

Psalm 19:10 says the truth of God's word is 'sweeter than

honey’. Suppose you’ve never tasted honey. You know it’s sweet because you’ve heard of its sweetness from reliable sources. But that’s a very different kind of knowledge from the knowledge of honey’s sweetness you get when you take a big bite and fall in love with its taste.² We need to ‘taste and see that the LORD is good’ (Psalm 34:8, ESV). Paul prays that ‘the eyes of your hearts 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’ (Ephesians 1:17–18, NIV). Our prayer should be that we will not only comprehend truth with the eyes of our mind, but embrace truth with ‘the eyes of our hearts’. This is the key to change. The Puritan Walter Marshall says: ‘The more good and beneficial we apprehend God to us to all eternity, doubtless the more lovely God will be to us, and our affections will be the more inflamed towards him.’ Seeing God → delighting in God → desiring God → desiring God more than we desire sin.

Preaching to our hearts

We need to become preachers. We need to learn to preach to our own hearts. The Psalmist says: ‘Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.’ To whom is he speaking? The answer is to himself. The famous preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones said: ‘Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself?’³ We need to take every thought captive (2 Corinthians 10:3–5). Our problem, says Sinclair Ferguson, is that ‘we think with our feelings’.⁴ We don’t always *feel* joy in God, but by faith we can tell ourselves he *is* our joy. When we find ourselves tempted to sinful behaviour, or when we find our emotions are getting the better of us, we need to speak truth to our hearts. Say the truth to yourself repeatedly so that it sinks in: ‘God is all I

need.’ Say it slowly: ‘God . . . is . . . all . . . I . . . need.’ Say it out loud. Say it back to him: ‘You are all I need.’ C. S. Lewis says: ‘The moment you wake up each morning, all your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job of each morning consists in shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other, larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in.’⁵

It helps if you can identify the specific lies behind your sin and the corresponding truths that will set you free. But you don’t have to be able to analyse your heart in detail. It’s the truth of the gospel that brings change. This is how John Newton describes the liberating power of Jesus’ name:

How sweet the name of Jesus sounds
in a believer’s ear!
It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds,
and drives away his fear.

It makes the wounded spirit whole,
and calms the troubled breast;
it satisfies the hungry soul,
and gives the weary rest.

Dear name, the rock on which we build,
our shield and hiding place,
our never-failing treasury, filled
with boundless stores of grace.

I want to identify four life-changing truths about God. Psalm 62:11–12 says: ‘Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God, and that to you, O LORD, belongs steadfast love’ (ESV). The key truths that God declares about himself are his *greatness and glory* (‘that power belongs to

God') and his *goodness and grace* ('that to you, O LORD, belongs steadfast love').

1. God is great – so we don't have to be in control.
2. God is glorious – so we don't have to fear others.
3. God is good – so we don't have to look elsewhere.
4. God is gracious – so we don't have to prove ourselves.

There's much more to be said about God than is covered by these four truths, but they offer a powerful diagnostic tool for addressing most of the sins and emotions with which we struggle.⁶

1. *God is great – so we do not have to be in control*

Travelling at the speed of light (186,000 miles a second), you would encircle the earth seven times in one second and pass the moon in two seconds. At this speed it would take you 4.3 years to reach our nearest star and 100,000 years to cross our galaxy. There are thought to be at least 100,000,000,000 galaxies in the universe. It would take 2,000,000 light years to reach the next closest galaxy and 20,000,000 to reach the next cluster of galaxies. And you have still only just begun to explore the universe.

All this was created when our God simply spoke a word. In fact, Isaiah tells us that he marked off the heavens with the breadth of his hand (Isaiah 40:12). It's a spatial metaphor for a God who exists outside space, but it gives us a sense of the scale of God: the whole universe fits into his hand. Hold your hand up: the universe is that big to God! Hebrews 1:3 says Jesus sustains it all by the power of his word. He 'works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will' (Ephesians 1:11). In a mysterious way that involves human freedom, God orders every event and determines every

action: 'The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases' (Proverbs 21:1). Even evil actions are part of his plan. The conspiracy that sent Jesus to the cross was the result of evil choices by human beings. Yet 'they did what [God's] power and will had decided beforehand should happen' (Acts 4:28). From the movement of atoms to the complexities of human history, God sustains and rules all.

I wonder if you've ever lost work on a computer because it crashed. It happened to me the other day. I let out a loud 'Nnooooo!' as my head hit my desk. To whom was I speaking? The reality is, though I might not have admitted it, I was crying out a 'no' to God and his sovereignty. I was rejecting his sovereign rule over my life. 'No, God, you don't know best. Your rule is not good.'

Alan's sitting on the train. Inexplicably it's stopped just outside the station. He's getting angry because it looks as if he'll miss his hospital appointment.

Beth's worried. Replacing the family car has wiped out their savings. Now she's worried that they won't have enough money at the end of the month. When her husband comes home with an expensive-looking bunch of flowers to cheer her up, she just bursts into tears.

Colin's getting very frustrated. He's trying to get a new community project going, but everything seems to be going wrong. As a result, he's getting irritable with his children.

Dorothy's lying awake at night thinking about her friend Eileen. Eileen seems to be slipping into post-natal depression. Dorothy's looked after Eileen's baby a couple of times, but she has her own responsibilities. She wishes there was more she could do.

In Mark 4:35-5:43 Jesus displays his control over the natural world, over the spirit world, over sickness and even over

death. The stories are told to highlight Jesus' complete authority. He brings a girl back from death as easily as you or I might rouse someone from sleep. All the time Mark presents the alternatives of fear and faith. The disciples are afraid in the storm. Among them are experienced fishermen so this is no irrational phobia. Yet Jesus rebukes them: 'Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?' (4:40). The people see the demon-possessed man in his right mind and fear the power that tamed him. The sick woman comes before Jesus 'trembling with fear'. But Jesus speaks a word of peace to her. Because of her faith, she has no need to fear God. Jesus' word to Jairus is the punchline of the section: 'Don't be afraid; just believe' (5:36). God is greater than all the things we fear. These stories don't teach that we'll never face sickness or death. Instead, they teach us that we needn't fear the circumstances of life because God is in control. He works good for us in every circumstance. He'll bring us safely home to glory. Death is not the last word: the last word is 'Talitha koum!' – 'rise up' (5:41).

What happens when you don't truly trust God's sovereign control? You might try to take control yourself in harmful ways, through manipulation or domination. You might wear yourself out with busyness or frustration. You might make your security and wealth a bigger priority than God's kingdom (Luke 12:22–31). Or you might worry (Philippians 4:6–7). We become preoccupied with the bills, and money becomes our main obsession. All because we don't believe our Father knows what we need. Jesus goes straight to the heart of the problem – our little faith:

'Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? . . . O you of little faith! And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all

such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.'

(Luke 12:25–31)

We often associate the sovereignty of God with theological debates. But for all of us it's a daily practical choice. For me, the issue is escapism. I have to choose between a fantasy in which I'm sovereign and the real world in which God is sovereign, between my false sovereignty and God's real sovereignty. When I feel like running away, I have to choose to find refuge in God.

2. God is glorious – so we do not have to fear others

One common reason why we sin is that we crave the approval of people or we fear their rejection. We 'need' the acceptance of others and so we're controlled by them. The Bible's term for this is 'fear of man'. 'Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe' (Proverbs 29:25). Ed Welch, in his book *When People are Big and God is Small*,⁷ says fear of man has many symptoms: susceptibility to peer pressure; 'needing' something from a spouse; a concern with self-esteem; being overcommitted because we can't say no; fear of being exposed; small lies to make ourselves look good; people making us jealous, angry, depressed or anxious; avoiding people; comparing ourselves with others; and fear of evangelism.⁸

Our culture tries to overcome this problem by finding ways to bolster self-esteem. But this actually compounds the problem. We become dependent on whatever or whomever will boost our self-esteem. In reality, low self-esteem is thwarted pride: we don't have the status we think we deserve. We elevate desires that are often good in themselves (for love, affirmation or respect) to the level of needs without which we

think we cannot be whole. We talk of 'needing' the approval or acceptance of others, but our true need is to glorify God and love people.

The answer to the fear of man is fear of God. We need a big view of God. To fear God is to respect, worship, trust and submit to him. It's the proper response to his glory, holiness, power, love, goodness and wrath. The appearances of God are often described in the Bible in terms of brightness, fire and brilliance. Think of the heat of the sun, with nuclear reactions within it creating a blinding brilliance even millions of miles away. Yet there's an intensity and substance to God's glory far beyond that of our sun. God wraps majesty and splendour around him like a cloak (Psalm 93:1). "To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One' (Isaiah 40:25). For the Christian, the fear of God no longer involves terror. He's our Father and we come before him with confidence through Christ (Hebrews 4:14-16). But we can never get chummy with him. He remains a consuming fire. 'My flesh trembles in fear of you,' says the Psalmist. 'I stand in awe of your laws' (Psalm 119:120).

So, if you are controlled by people's expectations, then you need to learn the fear of the LORD. For the fear of God can be taught and learnt (Deuteronomy 4:10; 17:18-19; 31:12; Psalm 34:9-11). Meditate on God's glory, greatness, holiness, power, splendour, beauty, grace, mercy and love. Often, in Psalms 18 and 34 for example, this is what the Psalmist is doing. In the face of some threat, he's speaking the truth about God to himself. He's reminding himself of God's glory so that fear of others is replaced by trust in God. Whenever you see someone whom you fear or whose approval you crave, imagine God next to them. Who is the more glorious, majestic, holy, beautiful, threatening, and loving? Whose approval really matters to you? 'Do not be afraid of those who kill the

body but cannot kill the soul,' says Jesus. 'Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell' (Matthew 10:28). Fear in the face of threat is natural. But natural fear needs to be regulated by faith in God. Your boss may be a bully, but he or she isn't bigger than God. David had good cause to fear others at various points in his life, but he could say:

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?

(Psalm 27:1-3; see also Psalm 56:3-4)

The fear of God is liberating. We take people's expectations seriously because we want to love them as God commanded. But we're not enslaved by them. We don't serve them for what they can give us in return – approval, affection, security or whatever. By submitting to Christ's lordship, we're free to serve others in love (Galatians 5:13).

3. God is good – so we do not have to look elsewhere

I recently heard the story of an elderly widow in Russia who has taken a job cleaning the stairwells of a grim apartment block. Her state pension covers her own needs, but she wants to earn extra money for missionaries working in Mongolia. What makes someone do that for people and churches she'll never see in this life? The answer is joy. She is like the man who found treasure in a field and 'then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field' (Matthew 13:44). The invitation of the Bible is not to dreary abstinence. It's a call to find in God that which truly satisfies. It's believing that we find lasting fulfilment, satisfaction, joy and identity in knowing God, and

nowhere else. Whatever sin offers, God offers more, for God offers us himself. God isn't just good; he's better – better than everything else, and the true source of all joy.

In John 4, Jesus turns a request for water from a Samaritan woman into an offer of living water. 'Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life' (14). This living water is God himself communicated to his people through the Holy Spirit (John 7:37–39). Every longing in us is a version of our longing for God. That longing may be a distorted version of our longing for God, but it's still a longing for the God we were made to know.

One of our problems is that we think only of moments. In the moment, we think the pleasures of sin are real and the joy of God is insubstantial or distant. But in truth it's the other way round: every joy we experience is but a shadow of the source of all joy, which is God. Marriage, for example, is a reflection of the joy of union with God; adultery a distorted reflection. If you idolize marriage or commit adultery then you've settled for less than living water. Sin is like the distorted reflection of a beautiful sunset that shifts with every movement of the breeze across the water. God is the sun itself in all its beauty and glory and energy. C. S. Lewis says: 'There have been times when I think we do not desire heaven; but more often I find myself wondering whether, in our hearts of hearts, we have ever desired anything else . . . It is the secret signature of each soul, the incommunicable and unappeasable want.'⁹

This is why nothing but God satisfies – not in a true and lasting way. If you look for satisfaction or fulfilment, meaning or identity, anywhere other than in Jesus, you'll be left empty. There may be a moment of refreshment or pleasure. But

you'll soon be thirsty again. Jesus asks the woman to fetch her husband. This looks like a tangent, but in fact it leads straight to her heart. The truth is that she's had five husbands and the man she's now with is not her husband. She's been looking for meaning, satisfaction and fulfilment in marriage, sex and intimacy. But they're like water that leaves her thirsty again. No doubt there *was* real pleasure. But it didn't last. It wasn't the real thing. It left her thirsty.

There was a clear pattern in her life. The maths tells the story: five husbands plus another man.

What are the patterns in *your* life? Are the words 'If only . . .' a refrain? What comes after the 'If only . . .'? Do you really believe God is good?

When the woman tries to draw Jesus into worship controversies, Jesus redefines worship (19–24). Worship is not about location. It's an attitude of the heart: you worship in spirit and truth. Worship is about what you desire most, what you think has most worth. Every time you look to God to satisfy your longings, you worship him in spirit and truth. Every time you look elsewhere, you commit idolatry. Even our good works can be idolatrous acts. If we don't delight in God for his own sake, finding him beautiful and glorious in our eyes, then we'll serve him for what we get in return: reputation, security, escape from hell. In so doing, we reveal that our greatest love is our reputation, our security, our self-preservation, ourselves.¹⁰

It's easy for us to think of obedience as the price we pay for entry into heaven. It would be better for us, we suppose, to be living for pleasure, but as Christians we have to live for God. But the life of obedience is not the bad or sad life. It's the good life. Life with God and for God is the best life you could live. Change is about *enjoying the freedom from sin and delight in God that God gives to us through Jesus*.

God is not only better than anything sin offers; *God is forever*. The Bible talks about ‘the pleasures of sin’, and there’s no doubt many sins do bring pleasure. There’s no point pretending otherwise. But the Bible also tells us that the pleasures of sin are only for ‘a short time’.

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. He chose to be ill-treated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.

(Hebrews 11:24–26)

We’re called to look beyond the present moment to eternity. ‘The wages of sin’, says Paul, ‘is death’ (Romans 6:23). There is always a price to pay. Often those consequences are in this life: broken relationships, damaged bodies, a shamed conscience, addictive habits. Always there are consequences for the life to come. ‘Sin, when it is full-grown,’ says James, ‘gives birth to death’ (James 1:15). We often focus on the temptation. It starts to fill our minds and we lose sight of the bigger picture. One person I know broke the cycle of sin they were caught up in after visiting a Christian friend who was dying in a hospice. Suddenly they were confronted with the bigger picture and forced to look beyond their sin.

Think about Moses. We know from the pyramids and sphinxes that Egyptian rulers were extremely wealthy. This was as good as it got anywhere on earth at that time – the equivalent of today’s multi-millionaire lifestyles. As a child of the royal court, Moses had it all. But he gave it all up, choosing to be ill-treated with the Hebrew slaves. This was because he recognized that Christ was better than all the treasures of

Egypt. The Egyptians locked up their treasures in pyramids in an attempt to take them with them into the afterlife. But they couldn't do it. In fact, many of their treasures ended up in the British Museum. Moses, however, 'was looking ahead to his reward'. He realized that what God offered for all eternity was better by far than anything sin could offer in this life (Mark 8:34–36).

G. K. Chesterton suggests that at present we pursue variety because we're so easily wearied. But what if a man's 'life and joy were so gigantic that he never tired' of routine?

A child kicks his legs rhythmically through excess, not absence, of life. Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, 'Do it again' . . . Perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, 'Do it again' to the sun; and every evening, 'Do it again' to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but he has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we. The repetition in Nature may not be a mere recurrence; it may be a theatrical encore.¹¹

We grow so easily bored with life. We are weary with sin-induced futility. But God is never bored by life. He *is* life. His joy and life are so gigantic that he never tires of sunrises and daisies; of beauty and life and joy. In Proverbs 8:30–31, Jesus, personified as Wisdom, speaks of his delight and joy in creation. Jesus says, in effect: 'I was filled with fresh delight day after day, always laughing in his presence, playing in every corner of his world and delighting in humanity.'¹² We worry that eternity will be boring. But that is because we are dead

and tired. We look for joy in sin and we are quickly bored and always moving on in search of more. We grow weary in our futile pursuit of ever-greater excitement. But in eternity there will be a 'rush to life' running through our veins. Our 'life and joy will be gigantic' so that each moment will bring fresh ecstasy; each daisy will be a fresh delight; each sunrise a fresh wonder. We will cry to God: 'Again, again, do it again.' Now we are old and tired and cynical. But then we will be young again; for ever young; for ever delighting in God.

4. God is gracious – so we do not have to prove ourselves

I lay awake long into the night, replaying the conversation in my mind. The next morning the brooding continued. Our team meeting had developed into what my daughter later described as 'war'. Same place, same time, but the night before that a woman in our church had come to me with a profound pastoral crisis. That night I'd slept soundly.

How crazy! I could forget a genuine crisis, happy to leave it in God's hands. But an argument about nothing had totally preoccupied me. My desire to be vindicated had consumed me. That's why I'd played a role in creating the conflict in the first place. I wanted to be proved right, so I fought on. What set me free from my self-centred brooding was the truth that God is gracious. I didn't need to justify myself. I *couldn't* justify myself. But God graciously justifies me through the finished work of Christ. God is 'a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love' (Nehemiah 9:17).

The parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15 reveals the remarkable grace of God. Asking for his inheritance was tantamount to the younger brother saying: 'I wish you were dead.' Selling off that inheritance was shameful because it meant losing the family's land. Moving to another city was a

rejection of his family. And we haven't even got to the wild living yet! Feeding pigs was as low as you could go for a good Jew, because pigs were unclean. And then wanting to eat their food! This son is a picture of you and me. We've wished God dead, rejected his love, moved as far from God as we can. We've tried to break free from love and ended up in the pigsty, longing to be satisfied with rubbish.

But the gracious behaviour of the father is even more shocking. This would have left Jesus' hearers gasping. If a son asked his father for his inheritance while the father was still alive, he would be disinherited. If a son tried to break free of his father's rule, he'd be beaten. If a son left home to indulge in wild living, he'd be disowned. But this father runs to meet his returning son. He doesn't wait for his son to honour him. He honours the son with a robe, a ring and a party. This is our God: embracing, welcoming and honouring us.

I used to think that when I let God down I would probably have a bad day or my prayers would go unanswered. I assumed God would act in the way I act when people let me down, giving them the cold shoulder. Or I thought I could atone by having a miserable day or sweating it out in prayer, as if the death of Jesus didn't quite do the job. And so we stand at a distance from God. And all the time he's looking for us, ready to embrace us, ready to welcome us home. Indeed, as the other parables of Luke 15 remind us, he takes the initiative to bring us home.

If the story of the younger brother reveals God's grace, in the older son we see many characteristics of *not* truly believing God is gracious.

Restless anger

'The older brother became angry and refused to go in' (Luke 15:28). He's angry because the younger brother is being

honoured, as if he's in the right. All the older brother's hard work seems to count for nothing. That's the scandal of God's grace. Without grace, we view life as a contract between us and God: we do good works and in return he blesses us. When things go well, we're filled with pride. But, when things go badly, either we blame ourselves (and feel guilty) or we blame God (and feel bitter). Because we often leave God out of our explanations, this anger against God often feels ill-defined: we're not even sure why we're angry. But the contract or covenant between us and God already reads 'Paid in full by the blood of Jesus'. Only when we grasp God's grace are we free to serve him for his own sake, not for reward.

Joyless duty

'All these years I've been slaving for you' (29). The older son doesn't say he's been serving, partnering or working with his father, but 'slaving'. Imagine a woman who cooks for an ungrateful and unkind family. For her, work is drudgery. Now imagine a young bride whose husband is attentive, kind and loving. Whatever she serves up, he thinks it is wonderful. Does she find her work drudgery? Joyless duty will characterize our attitude if we think of God as an uncaring boss. But, when we see him as a gracious Father, our attitude will be one of joyful service.

Anxious performance

'I never disobeyed your orders' (29). The older brother wants people to know about his good works because he's trying to prove himself. There are people trying to perform day after day: Christian leaders trying to preach a wonderful sermon every week, parents trying to produce lovely children, workers putting in long hours at work, all in a desperate attempt to prove themselves. And some weeks they may feel

as if they've pulled it off. And other weeks it all seems so fragile, as if it might shatter. And so they live in a constant state of stress and busyness, always striving to put in another great performance, always worried that the charade might crumble. We can't justify ourselves, and *we don't have to!* God is gracious: he throws his arms around us.

Proud comparisons

'This son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes' (30). This is the first mention of prostitutes. But the older brother assumes the worst in order to paint his brother in the worst possible light. Or we disguise pride as kindness, and patronize people. We highlight other people's faults so that we can look better. We think of righteousness as a ladder and our position on the ladder is what matters.

But God's grace turns our assessments on their head. We stand together at the foot of the cross: equally ashamed, equally accepted. Jesus tells the parable of the prodigal because the Pharisees are muttering about the way he welcomes sinners and eats with them (1-2). It turns out that God isn't interested in respectability or self-righteousness. He's interested in returning sinners. Jesus is right to party with notorious sinners because heaven is a party for sinners (7, 10, 23-24).

Many of us are confident we'll be justified on the last day: acquitted before God through the death of Jesus. But what about justification today and tomorrow? Are you still trying to prove yourself?

- Do you ever get angry or brood because you want to prove you're in the right?
- Does your Christian service feel like joyless duty?
- Do you ever feel the pressure to perform?

- Do you serve others so that you can feel good about yourself or impress people?
- Do you look down on others or exaggerate their failings?
- Do you worry that you won't make the grade in life?
- Do you enjoy conversations about the shortcomings of others?

The older son doesn't see himself as a son at all, but as a servant. The father has his obedience, but not his love. Does God the Father have your obedience, but not your love?

Here's the shocking truth: without justifying faith people 'never do anything out of love to God, but only out of self-love or fear of damnation'.¹³ There are acts that look like good works, but in fact they reflect a belief that the best way to get into God's good books or prove myself to others is through what I do. I declare myself to be a better saviour than Jesus.¹⁴ We think we must finish off what Christ left undone. That's why Jesus says: 'The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent' (John 6:29). There's only one thing God wants us to do: have faith in his Son. Everything else will flow from that.

Let me repeat the words of William Romaine: 'No sin can be crucified either in heart or life unless it first be pardoned in conscience . . . If it be not mortified in its guilt, it cannot be subdued in its power.'¹⁵ Richard Lovelace claims the main reason Christians do not change is a failure really to grasp God's grace:

Christians who are no longer sure that God loves and accepts them in Jesus, apart from their present spiritual achievements, are subconsciously radically insecure persons . . . Their insecurity shows itself in pride, a fierce defensive assertion of their own righteousness and defensive criticism of others . . . They cling

desperately to legal, pharisaical righteousness, but envy, jealousy and other branches of the tree of sin grow out of their fundamental insecurity.¹⁶

All is not lost. The father goes out to plead with the older brother (Luke 15:28). He welcomes his dissolute son and he welcomes his self-righteous son. At the end of the story the older brother is still on the outside of the party. We're left wondering what he'll do. It forces us to wonder what we would do – what we *will* do. Will we live believing that God is gracious?

In the temple the work of atonement was never done. The priests were at it day after day (Hebrews 10:11–12). But Jesus has sat down. He's done all that's required. And so we can sit down too. We don't have to be up and busy making atonement, proving ourselves, earning God's blessing, performing.

View him prostrate in the garden;
on the ground your Maker lies;
then on Calvary's tree behold him,
hear him cry before he dies:
'It is finished! It is finished!'
Sinner, will not this suffice?¹⁷

Conclusion

We can sin only if we suffer from a radical loss of perspective. Only if we forget that God is great and good can we sin. But that is what we do time after time. We forget our God and the identity he gives. Change takes place through faith in our great and good God. It takes place as we preach truth to our hearts. This doesn't mean it's easy. We just have to believe, but that's a big 'just'! Faith is a daily struggle. Lies about God are all around us: the world, the flesh and the devil whisper

them constantly to our hearts. It's a struggle. But it's also possible. 'This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith' (1 John 5:4).

What does this mean in practice? First, we need to nurture our trust in God's greatness, fear of God's glory, delight in God's goodness, longing for God's future, rest in God's grace. We need to do this day by day through the word, prayer and the Christian community (more of this in chapter 8).

Second, when we face temptation we need to say not only 'I should not do this', but also '*I need not do this.*' When tempted to envy another's possession, we say not only 'I must not envy', but also 'I need not envy because I have Christ.' When tempted to worry, we say not only 'I must not worry', but 'I need not worry because God is in control.' Whatever sin offers, God is bigger and better.

To say to temptation 'I must not do this' is legalism. To say 'I need not do this because God is bigger and better' is good news.

Reflection

I.

What might be the lies behind the following behaviour or emotions? There may well be several possible answers. What truths do each of these people need to turn to in faith?

- a. Abdul often complains. He's been ill for years and the doctors aren't really sure what's wrong. It gets him down and it's all he can ever talk about.
- b. Colin's tired. So tired he often loses patience with the children, and last night, when his wife wanted to talk to him, he fell asleep on the sofa. He's working all the overtime he can get. He wants to be a good provider for his family, but it's a struggle meeting the mortgage repayments.

- c. Cathy is thinking of moving in with her boyfriend. Her Christian friends tell her it's wrong. But they don't appreciate the way Paul makes her feel loved. She felt so empty before Paul came into her life, and now she feels kind of complete. Besides, it's easy for them, as they're mostly married.
- d. Jamal spends hours on computer games. It's damaging his relationships with his family. He's not really living up to his responsibilities. Real life is a bit boring, for he's just an ordinary guy. But in the virtual world he's a hero.
- e. Every morning Elsa feels the tension in her stomach as she sets off for school. Her classmates bad-mouth their teachers and gossip about others. They obsess about the latest fashions and the boys they're going out with. Every now and then they make fun of Elsa for not really joining in. Sometimes she does things she knows are wrong. Most of the time she just feels on the edge.
- f. Carla often gossips about people. She loves to put them down and point out their faults. It makes her feel good about herself.

2.

Write a version of Psalm 27 in which you make it say the *opposite* of what it says. For example:

The LORD is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear?	My spouse lights up my life – I crave her approval.
The LORD is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid?	My boss guarantees my security – I'm afraid of upsetting him.

<p>When evil men advance against me to devour my flesh, when my enemies and my foes attack me, they will stumble and fall.</p>	<p>When my peers turn against me, when they mock me, I stumble and fall.</p>
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How much of your opposite version reflects the way you actually think at times? What are the corresponding truths from the real version of the Psalm that counter this wrong thinking about God?

Repeat the exercise with Psalms 31, 84 and 103.

Change project

5. What truths do you need to turn to?

What thoughts are behind your behaviour or emotions?

Think about the issue you've identified in your change project.

- Why do you do or feel what you do or feel?
- What do you hope to achieve?
- What do you think will make you happy in that situation?
- What beliefs or thoughts shape your behaviour or emotions?

What's the lie?

Behind every sin and every negative emotion is a lie. What's the lie behind the issue you've chosen in your change project?

What do your thoughts show about your trust in God?

It's important to express your beliefs or thoughts as beliefs or thoughts about God. We don't often do this. We leave God out of the picture. As a result, we don't see our thoughts as

lies about God. Restate your thinking, with God included. The following questions may help:

- If you want something, do you think it offers more than God offers?
- If you fear something, do you think it is more important than God?
- If you're angry about something, do you feel that God has let you down?

What truths do you need to turn to?

Turn the answer to your previous question the opposite way round. If this is the lie, what is the truth? Which of the following truths particularly apply to the lies behind the area you have chosen in your change project?

- God is great – so we do not have to be in control.
- God is glorious – so we do not have to fear others.
- God is good – so we do not have to look elsewhere.
- God is gracious – so we do not have to prove ourselves.

The following passages of Scripture talk about these truths. Meditate on them. Turn them into prayer. Ask God to help you remember them and believe them in moments of temptation.

- God is great – Psalm 27.
- God is glorious – Psalm 31.
- God is good – Psalm 84.
- God is gracious – Psalm 103.

Write a summary of the truths you need to turn to in faith.