

LAW AND GRACE: THE BASIC CHOICE IN LIFE

A Titanic Mistake?

We begin to draw this exploration of Godism to a close. Through this book we have looked at various ideas that underpin Godism, which itself reduces to the view that all the ‘higher’ religions lead to God, although we note that Godism does not clearly define what constitutes a *higher* religion. We noted early in our study that Godists, whether of the *determined* variety, or the *casual man in the street* sort, all share a ‘god’-focus, to the extent that they acknowledge that there exists a ‘god’ or ‘gods’ and that this ‘god’ is presumed to have an obligation to ‘save’ the majority of people in this world. Early in the book we asked whether the Godists’ ‘god’-focus or ‘god’-centric, ‘god’-positive but (selectively) religion-negative view of the deity is correct, and indeed whether this view honours God. We suggested that this is a question that must be faced by anyone with any real integrity in this debate. In chapter 8 we posited a pseudo formula to describe Godism (Godism is **G + R[N] + RI + AK – TS**) but throughout we have noted that Godism is a malleable philosophy that resists simple classification. Although not yet a religion, it seems entirely possible that

Godism will spawn either a new religion or religions in the future. Christian writers concerned with eschatology have well developed views on this latter thought, so interested readers will have no problem finding useful biblical material on the subject. The Holy Bible certainly indicates an end-time global religion emerging — one that is fundamentally anti-Christ. We repeat an earlier assertion: this world is not anti-God; it is anti-Christ.

Whenever there is a discussion about religions and the simple claim of the Lord Jesus, ***I am the way the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me*** (John 14:6), there is an explicit or implicit accusation that Christians are ‘damning’ those of other faiths. In polite company this is seen as the ‘ace card’ with which either to trump believing Christians and silence them or to ‘prove’ that their God is unfair, and therefore unworthy of worship. In impolite company this is seen as hectoring by Christians and bordering on the social sin of something called ‘religious hatred’ — although precisely why it might be hateful to suggest that there may truly be ONLY one way to peace with God, allowing that there must be (at the very least) a prospect that this view is actually correct, is never adequately explained. Others argue in contrast that it is, in fact, loving to warn people of the sedative effect of *the religions* that may well lead their unknowing adherents into error and into conflict with God. When the RMS Titanic ploughed at top speed through a mill pond North Atlantic ocean on an inky-black moonless night on 14 April 1912, on a direct heading to a large iceberg, would it have been ‘hatred’ to have warned its passengers who were so sure of their security? To have warned that, in spite of the age and ‘higher’ status of the White Star shipping line, in spite of the strength of the ship, in spite of the grandeur and experience

of captain Smith who saw no danger, in spite of the excellent crew and the ‘unsinkable’ nature of the ship — that it was a ship on a course that would lead it to utter disaster? ‘God Himself could not sink this ship’ was a reported comment of one of the deck hands to Mrs Albert Caldwell.¹ Even if the prospect that God has uniquely revealed Himself through Jesus, and made only one provision for salvation, through His blood, were considered to be only a remote possibility, then because of the nature of the issues at stake, it would surely be prudent to take a candid and calm look at the claim, no matter how uncomfortable it might at first seem.

The question about the eternal destiny of non-Christians is often sincere, so we must explore the issue *from a biblical perspective*. First, however, we need to set the scene to ensure we are asking the right question, and finding the right answer. Readers who really want to get to grips with this difficult issue will find a wealth of material available. Of course, Godists themselves say quite simply that all religions lead to God, and they proffer what they consider to be the similarities between them, carefully ignoring the glaring differences. In Appendix 1 we note that the underlying belief that ‘there are multiple paths to God’ ultimately reveals a dismissive attitude to the Almighty. We noted that ‘god’ is seen by some as being a sort of CEO (chief executive officer) of a global religious conglomerate, a CEO who is not too concerned about brand loyalty because He owns all the brands and has a monopoly on the supply of salvation. Elsewhere in this book we have challenged whether such a CEO type ‘god’ could be either good or holy — and in chapters 6 and 7 we looked at these matters exhaustively from the biblical perspective, where God is indeed revealed

¹ *A Night to Remember* by Walter Lord, chapter 3.

THE EMPTY PROMISE OF GODISM

as being both good and holy. Is it not unbelievable that a supposed ‘god’ of the Godists’ would present ‘himself’ in multiple guises, with no clear message except perhaps, a rather vague ‘Golden Rule’ (see chapter 1) which people are supposed to discern amongst all the ‘noise’ and ‘clutter’ of religious belief systems and sacred writings?

In the preceding paragraph we spoke of a wealth of material available to help readers to get a grip on the underlying issues. The author has in mind two key biblical concepts: *law* and *grace* — massive subjects that have spawned myriad volumes, but which we must now refer to in summary form. If readers feel that the author has not explained himself adequately, or possibly has misrepresented the case, then they are urged to review these two concepts exhaustively as their own separate study.

By ‘law’ here we mean primarily the law of Moses (*torah*) which observant Jews have endeavoured to follow, though there is a second important usage, which focuses on God’s basic laws for all mankind. That all men, including Gentiles, should know the latter is made clear by Paul in Romans. Under the Mosaic covenant, ‘righteousness’ was conditional on obedience to the law, accompanied by faith. Under the law, man failed, because people tried to obtain righteousness by fulfilling the legal requirements only, but so often without faith. (Further study will be helped by looking at: John 7:19; Galatians 3:11–12, 22, 24; Exodus 20:1–26; 24:12 and 31:18; Deuteronomy 6:6–9; Psalm 1:2; 19:7–8 and 37:31; Psalm 40:8 and 119:1.)

Under law, men failed. Christ came to bring a better hope (see Hebrews 7:19) which was a new way of grace in a new covenant. (Cf. Isaiah 1:13–18; 5:24; Jeremiah 9:13–16; Ezekiel 22:26; Daniel 9:8–13; Matthew 5:17 and 22:36, 37, 40; Luke 1:6; John 1:17; Acts 13:39 and 15:5, 10–11,

28. Romans 2:12–14; 3:20; 4:15; 5:13–14; 8:3–4 and 13:8–10; Galatians 3:21; Philippians 3:4,6; James 2:10.)

The freedom of grace (God's gift) has been bought with the blood of Christ. Therefore any Christian who relies on outward observance of the regulations of the Mosaic law comes again under the judgement of God² (see Acts 15:1, 2, 5, 19; Galatians 3:10, Galatians 5:3–4). The early church background to this was twofold: 'Judaisers' were commending circumcision as a legal requirement for Gentile converts; and Jewish messianic believers might be tempted to go back to the synagogue and renounce Christ in order to come under the protection afforded to Jews against persecution by the Roman authorities, who began at a certain point to require emperor worship by non-Jews. It has been observed that requiring 'tithing' today is not dissimilar to the early efforts of the Judaisers.

'Grace' is God's gift: He has exercised unmerited favour toward us by providing the way of salvation through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, not by any 'works' or righteousness of our own. The messianic covenant of grace began in this world with the death and resurrection of Christ. See Titus 3:4–5; John 1:17; 1:12–13 and 3:36; Romans 3:24–27; 5:2, 15–21 and 6:14; 2 Corinthians 6:1–3 and 8:9; Galatians 1:3–15; 2:21 and 5:4.

Law demands, grace gives (see Deuteronomy 5:17–20; cf 1 John 4:19; John 1:12 and 3:16; Romans 3:21–24; Romans 8:3 and 10:4–10; Philippians 3:9 and 4:13; Hebrews 7:19; cf Psalm 51:11; Ephesians 5:18.) Grace saves sinners as they repent and believe (see Ephesians 2:1–9). The law of God

² Readers may want to check 1 Timothy 1:6–11. Here we are reminded that some had come into the church as false teachers, had wandered away from the command to love and instead wanted to teach the law which, Timothy tersely notes, they did not understand.

was revealed to men; they failed to repent and believe, and they ended up by crucifying Christ. At the end there will be much apostasy, and the judgements that the Bible foretells will take place. But it is vital to note that it is mankind that fails, not God's plan of grace. (See 2 Corinthians 4:3–4; 2 Timothy 3:1–8; 1 John 4:1–3; 2 Peter 2:1; Jude 4:8, 11–13, 16; 2 Thessalonians 2:11–12; Revelation 3:14–16. The freedom and simplicity of the gospel is God's final plan of salvation. Any other gospel is anathema. (See Galatians 1:8–9; cf John 10:1.)

Life's Basic Choice

Mankind has made his so-called 'case' against God in many and diverse ways, some of which we have explored in this book. It may be a discomfiting surprise for many to learn that, in a very real sense, God has His own case against mankind. Everyone has a basic choice: to attempt to satisfy God with one's own attempts at righteousness or to live under the new covenant, having responded with repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. No other way has been provided by God for relationship with Him. It is useless to trust in our own righteousness, only in the righteousness of Christ and His sacrifice for our sins. We have contrasted law and grace, but we must qualify that at once by noting that God's purpose in revealing His will is of course always wholly good. The law showed man how to live, but man did not reach its perfect standard. The new (messianic) covenant, under which a righteousness from God is made available, is all too often rejected. We humans are found wanting unless we repent (turn away from sin and turn back to God in sincerity), believe (and go on believing) in Jesus Christ, and live in the power of the Holy Spirit.

God's case against mankind is explicit, as we have seen,

but He has also gone to extraordinary lengths to redeem mankind. So He sent prophets to teach and to warn, as well as to give the promise of a permanent Saviour. Jesus lived a life of perfect holiness. He, the innocent, died in place of the guilty. His death was substitutionary (He died in your place and mine).³ His death was fully effective *and was final*. As our resurrected Saviour, He has defeated death, which is our ultimate enemy. All humans, then, have a basic choice, *to live* (in Him) or *not to live* (in Him): to accept His sacrifice on the cross as the penalty for our sins, and to turn to Him and follow Him as His disciples. This is the concept of new birth, about which the Lord Jesus was quite plain in his conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus (John 3:1–21; text is generally from the NKJV, except that a rendering of the correct continuous present tense as regards ‘belief’ has been added by the author):

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”

Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is

³ A Greek Orthodox friend who read this in draft form reminded the author that although Christ has died in our place, we too are to die – but we are to die to sin. See Romans chapter 6.

flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Nicodemus answered and said to Him, “How can these things be?”

Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever [*continues to believe*] in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever [*continues to believe*] in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

“He who [*continues to believe*] in Him is not condemned; but he who does not [*continue to*] believe is condemned already, because he has not [*continued to*] believe in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen,

that they have been done in God.”

Key verses for our present study are probably vv.14–15. These foretell what would happen to the Lord Jesus at Golgotha, and follows with the promise that those who believe in Him will have eternal life. As the correct tense of the original Greek passage (where indicated above) is the *present continuous tense* (and modern English translations seem to miss this⁴) we have included in the passage above the idea of *going on believing* in Jesus, which suggests that there are circumstances in which a believer can cease to believe and so lose their relationship with Him. This should be a wake-up call to Godists where they are found within church settings and consider themselves to be orthodox believers. Note, too, that God ‘loved’ the world and the tense in this case is singular, not continuous, and it refers to the unique event when the Son of God was given, providing the way of salvation like that event recorded in the Old Testament when sick Hebrews could look at a bronze snake on a stake, and live (see John 3:14, cp. Numbers 21:4–9). It does not mean that God loves the world (continuously); His ‘agape’ love here is in providing (once) for our greatest need: a Saviour, who alone can save from sin and give life.

Whilst some churches are called ‘broad’,⁵ there must come a point at which it becomes clear that Godism ceases to be in any meaningful way Christian, as we suggested in the Foreword to this book, when we used the analogy of a politician of one political party constantly sitting and voting with a rival party. In that secular analogy we have

⁴ The interlinear transliteration of the New Testament published by Zondervan (ISBN 0-310-40160-7) renders this more correctly as ‘everyone believing in him’ and ‘the one believing in him’ – thus correctly capturing the present continuous tense in the original Scripture.

⁵ This is perhaps more a statement of fact than a statement of God’s intention!

no difficulty in seeing that at some point, in spite of any protestations to the contrary, such a politician would cease in any meaningful sense to be a true member of their party. This lesson is quite easy to comprehend in the case of secular politics and it is difficult to see why the same point cannot be made with regard to Christianity.

The straightforward choice for all people can be summarised in this way: to live, or not to live? To be forgiven, to be made new, to be born again, to be saved from the power, the grip, the guilt and the consequences of sin? To be saved from an eternity without God? Or to live without God here, and to be conscious of that loss through all eternity? These are serious matters, indeed. The Godist mentality is all too often one of surrender to the philosophy of the day in which it lives. We heard in chapter 1 of a religious *Council of Sages* meeting at the time this book was being written, with the objective of discerning a so-called ‘Golden Rule’ among *the religions*. Well meaning men and women will, with the active support and funding of agencies like the UN, tell us that religions are in fact all one, and that religious differences are merely illusory. This, of course, may be the counsel of a spiritual Captain Smith and risks a religious catastrophe of Titanic proportions. We can only observe once again that the view that all religions are essentially one (a) ignores the inconvenient and self-evident truth that they are not, and (b) runs the very real gauntlet of the wrath of God to Whom we will all one day have to give an account (e.g. 2 Corinthians 5:10 and Revelation 20:11 – 15). It must surely be of some significance that the very first reference in the Holy Bible to heterodox religious beliefs is quite early on, in Genesis chapter 31:19, where Rachel (the wife of Jacob) steals her father’s *household gods*. In chapter 35:2 Jacob commands his household to get rid of

the foreign ‘gods’ and to purify themselves for true worship of Almighty God. It must be of real symbolic importance that the first reference to belief in other ‘gods’ is met with Almighty God’s uncompromising demand for purity.

Although we may assume that there were other ‘gods’ being worshipped at the time, the Bible is silent about them. On the Godist’s argument, in the interests of ‘diversity’, and of giving people more than one chance to get right with Him, surely God would have made at least some comment upon the positive value of other belief systems and of a need for respect and understanding of other peoples’ ‘gods’? He does not. The call remains one of purity. Has God changed His mind and decided that purity is no longer necessary? Irrespective of the gravitas of today’s politicians or religious leaders who say otherwise, the Holy Bible is quite clear that purity remains the central requirement of Christianity. As regards Godism, then, the choice seems to be: full steam ahead, to the iceberg of religious syncretism, or chart a safe course by keeping our eyes fixed upon Jesus? (See Hebrews 12:2).

What is Christianity?

Christianity has become such a broad term that its meaning is today blurred. Most people, however, will understand that it truly means to be a sincere and faithful follower of the Lord Jesus, and to worship God Who sent His Son into this world. Appendix 4 seeks to answer the question of what Christianity is from a biblical perspective, and especially the idea of the Gospel, the *good news* of Jesus. There are today ‘Christian Democrat’ political parties in Western Europe. The media’s news reporters occasionally cite terrorists, or dubious celebrities, or modern cults, as ‘Christian’. People will talk about having a *Christian attitude* when they mean

to behave in a kindly manner towards other people. Extreme right wing parties in Western countries will sometimes style themselves as 'Christian', not in a religious but in a cultural and racial sense. We can see, then, that the term is just too wide and too open to misinterpretation to be really adequate. So some Christians prefer to call themselves quite simply *believers* as they feel today's church is becoming just too broad. Endeavouring not to be overly prescriptive and divisive, the author offers a description of Christianity in Appendix 4, but recognises that there will be some Christians who have difficulties with some aspects of it. It is unlikely, however, that any serious Christian would quibble too much with the summary in the Appendix. Similarly, such Christians would probably recognise and agree the central thrust of this book, and its message about the emptiness of the Godist 'promise' of 'salvation' through religions.

True Christianity represents freedom from the dominion of the law (signifying here detailed requirements of the Mosaic regulations). The law had to be satisfied, but has been satisfied once and for all in and through Jesus. We are reminded in the epistle to the Hebrews that the law demanded sacrifice by priests year after year, but that Jesus had fulfilled the law by offering Himself as the perfect sacrifice (see Hebrews chapter 10), so His disciples are purified from sin through His body (10:10). The message of the first apostles, and indeed the believing church through the ages, is simply this: repent, believe in Jesus, be baptised, and follow Him. God the Father loved us with a love we did not deserve (or earn) when He gave Jesus for us. He loved us in and through Jesus, His Son. It is not God's will that any people should be lost, but rather that all should be saved (2 Peter 3:9). But God does not force Himself upon us. (And Christians cannot 'force' anyone who is unwilling to know

Him to accept His gift.) God desires a relationship of love and trust with us, where our love of Him is real.

A human being's love for God does not always manifest itself in strong 'feelings', but most Christians will affirm that as the years go by they do indeed love God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, more and more. 'Love' here is not just about feelings, anyway: at the heart of it is our obedience. We must do what Jesus commands, and we must go on believing in Him.

Before we consider how God views the genuine followers of *the religions*, as opposed to followers of *The Way* (Jesus), we need finally to get to grips with this idea of the law. The apostle Paul's letter to the Roman church contains clear teaching about the law, from the perspective both of God's promises to Israel in the Old Testament and in the messianic Covenant (God's promises to those who are in Christ, believers in Jesus). After initial greetings, Paul writes of the gospel that it is: **the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith** (Romans 1:16–17, NRSV). Both the Jewish and the Gentile believers in Rome had needed to be put right with God because all had been under the power of sin. People are put right with God through faith in Jesus. Paul goes on to describe the new life in union with Jesus, where the believer has peace with God and is set free from the power of sin and death. In chapters 5 to 8 Paul focuses on the law and the power of the Spirit in the believer's life. God is not indifferent to the sin of the world and He will in the end deal with it. So what, precisely, does Romans teach us?

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who

suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 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.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. (Romans 1:18–23).

These six verses are key to an argument we will consider later, so readers may want to note them. God is not mocked and will eventually judge all rebels against Himself. What may be known about God is plain to 'men'. It has been plain from the beginning of time and will be plain until the end of time. When we see the beauty of creation (this world in which we live) and all the good things that it has to offer, and when we see the beauty of love between human beings — and by this we mean true love, not the erotic kind so favoured by the world at large, but love as exemplified in the self-giving love of a mother to her newborn child — then we know in our heart of hearts that in practice there really *is* a good 'design' behind the whole. Despite any theories about evolution, mankind will be absolutely without excuse when one day we all kneel before the judgement seat of Christ. In spite of what we know, all too many of us neither thank nor glorify God. Instead we live in opposition to Him, demanding for ourselves the 'right' to be 'god' of our own lives. All too often this stiff necked rebellion manifests itself in the worship of idols. Readers

should not be mistaken, however. Modern idol worship is not restricted simply to the Dharmic and similar religions. As has been wisely observed: *an idol can be anything that you allow your thoughts and ambitions to focus on in your idle moments*. For some ambition and success, for others money, for yet others land and conquests and warfare, and inevitably in the modern world – sex – can be idols. Anything that displaces God can become a very real idol in our lives, so we should be under no illusions about this. Idolatry can also be worship of the created order itself, or any part of it. We note the resurgence of forms of paganism in which created objects in the universe — including, but not limited, to sun, moon and angels — are worshipped, and ‘new age’ thinking in which the earth itself is accorded worship. Moreover, whilst we recognize that exercising wise stewardship of this God-given earth is right, and indeed goes along with love of neighbour (I am scarcely exercising love toward neighbour if I pollute my neighbour’s food and water supplies), Christians involved in environmentalist movements must avoid any tendency to allow earth itself to take the place of our Creator God. Christian believers worship only the Creator, not His creation, and this is a crucial distinction.

Idolatry takes many forms, and we must not forget the original meaning: idol worship. Many Christians believe that it extends to according ‘worth’ to deities, for example by removing shoes at temples and other *places of worship*, or accepting marks or symbols of various kinds. Many, too, on being filled with the Holy Spirit, have been led to remove from their homes and destroy ‘graven images’ and objects which could carry particular symbolism in *the religions*, such as statues they may have picked up whilst travelling overseas or purchased as supposedly harmless

‘ornaments’, masks, and other things they used to consider were merely works of art without spiritual significance. The Spirit gives a sensitivity and discernment about what is going on spiritually, and of course this accords perfectly with what is revealed in the Word of God. Word and Spirit work together!

Paul concludes (in v.28): **Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.** The eternal power of God the Creator, and His nature, have been revealed to all mankind from the very beginning. When man turns away in rebellion from God’s general laws, He reluctantly allows us to go our own way, permitting us to exercise the free will He has given to us.

The apostle begins to develop his theme of law: **All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) This will take place on the day when God will judge men’s secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.** (Romans 2:12–16)

We should note the above carefully. Those who live under the law will be judged under that law. All who sin apart from law (here Paul means those who are Gentiles), will be still be judged because, as Paul has already explained in v. 14, *when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things*

required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. Again, any excuse people may have that they were unacquainted with God's general law simply disappears, because God has revealed enough to all mankind, endowing man with conscience. The key aspects of God's law, summarized in the ten commandments (see chapter 3) are known 'naturally' to all humans. We know it is wrong to steal, to lie, to murder, to be adulterous, to be jealous of others, and so on.

The apostle reminds us in Romans 3:11–12 that all alike are rebels against God. He quotes from Psalm 14 as he declares: . . . **there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.** Paul emphasizes the same thing in v.23, as we shall see shortly. So what is the answer? The law in itself does not provide righteousness before God. So Paul says in vv. 19–20: **Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.** The existence of the law, then, makes us aware of sin. People sometimes act as if by ignoring God's law they can forget about sin, but their consciences tell them otherwise, and this all too often leads to genuine spiritual distress. So what is the answer to the dilemma? Paul provides the answer at 3:21, **But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are**

justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished – 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.

It is in Jesus that righteousness may be obtained. Readers are encouraged to read all of Romans chapters 4 through 6 to get the full sense of God's amazing life-giving gift through Christ. If they have not read this before then a simple prayer to God to quicken these chapters to your own spirit would be both wise and honouring to God. We follow a few key verses from Romans chapters 4 and 5. Hopefully these will be largely self-explanatory. Paul has already asserted in chapter 3:28 that a human is justified ⁶ by faith and apart from observing the law. God, Paul points out, is not the God of the Jews only but of Gentiles as well. And both Jew and Gentile will be saved through faith in Jesus.

For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression. (Romans 4:14–15)

If we could live by the standards of God's Law, then faith would indeed be unnecessary. The trouble is that humans just cannot live free of sin. Where there is no Law there is

⁶ The terms 'justification' and 'justified' are usually understood to mean the process whereby a sinner is presented before God spotless and free of sin. It is therefore 'just as if I'd' never sinned in the first place. Note however there is a difference in emphasis with for example, the Eastern Orthodox tradition which understands this as a more dynamic rather than legalistic accomplishment of God.

no transgression (sin) as Paul rightly points out. The trouble remains that even where mankind has never heard the name of Jesus, nor even heard of the Ten Commandments, they have still become a law for themselves (Romans 2:14). Where there is no law, plainly there can be no ‘transgression’ against it. The awkward fact however is that nowhere, absolutely nowhere, is Man free of Law. And the answer? . . . **just at the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.** (Romans 5:6–8)

This is the awesome truth. God sent His sinless Son to die for sinners (see again John 3:14–18). We observed in chapter 6 of this book that God is good, at a deep level that we cannot totally comprehend. We noted that the word ‘good’ is over-used and cheapened in this world, where we so easily talk about a ‘good day at the office’ or a ‘good meal’! In v. 7, Paul states that we would rarely consider giving our lives for a righteous, upright person, but we might possibly dare to do it for a ‘good’ man. But Jesus surrendered His life *for us* – wicked sinners.

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Romans 5:9 – 11)

So we have been justified by the blood of Jesus, as and when we put our faith in Him and truly determine to follow

Him⁷. We will be saved from God's righteous wrath through Jesus and, even more, will become completely reconciled to God. For the sake of clarity we should note that this does not mean that Christians will not sin (see Appendix 4) and nor, sadly, that we will always be obviously Christ-like people. But God does graciously and perceptibly make us more Christ-like as we become His disciples and as we walk humbly in His ways.

. . . for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law.
(Romans 5:13)

This is another important verse and one that is sometimes mis-interpreted. Even before the Ten Commandments were given, sin was abroad in the world. Mankind is an incorrigible sinner; he has been from the beginning of time and will be until the end. Where there is no Law sin is not taken into account – at least not in the same way that it is measured by God today. The earliest humans may (and we would emphasize *may*) be judged by a somewhat different yardstick than people who have lived since the time of Moses (to whom the Law was first given – see Exodus chapter 20). This verse does not imply, as some have disingenuously said (taking it completely out of its context) that if we fail to preach Jesus then people are free of sin and will not be punished. Paul has already stated quite plainly that all who sin apart from Law will perish apart from Law (Romans 2:12) but that even Gentiles

⁷ Again it is worth noting a slight difference in emphasis with the Eastern tradition which notes that being justified refers to an on-going state of righteousness and not 'merely' a one time event. The Eastern tradition makes the useful point that faith in Christ makes us justified as an ongoing state of communion with Jesus. Because of this ongoing communion we have peace with God which is also on-going. The Greek word *pistis*, they point out, which in Western tradition is translated as 'faith' can also be rendered as 'faithfulness' –leading to the pertinent idea of ongoing faithfulness.

have become a Law for themselves, and so will also face judgment (2:14). We are not entitled, therefore, to assume that people are better off not hearing the good news of Jesus as some Godists are wont to say. One Godist wrote to this author that he does not suggest to those of *the religions* that they should follow Jesus. These religionists, he said, would be judged against their law in the same way that Christians will be judged against our law, and that Jesus will save us all! This, however, is both woolly and wishful thinking. God will judge mankind against His perfect Law as summarized in the Ten Commandments, not against a whole raft of strange, conflicting and mutually exclusive religious rules and regulations. The slur against God (and it must be added against the Lord Jesus) is plain to see: we should not ‘trouble’ religionists with salvation through Christ. Ignorance of Christ, to at least some Godists, is bliss.

We opened this section by asking *what is Christianity?* We have, it is hoped, gone some way to answer as we have begun to look at the Law of God. The apostle Paul has already stated that, **we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in [God’s] sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.** (Romans 3:19) The Law, besides judging us, helps us to understand what sin is. To avoid judgement under the Law we must be found to be righteous – and righteousness comes through faith in Jesus. We will consider how God loves those who have never even heard the name of Jesus in the next chapter but will conclude this section with further thoughts from the apostle Paul. The Law ultimately could not save us, but Jesus can: . . . **what the law was powerless to do in that it was**

weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. (Romans 8:3–8)

The sinless Jesus was sent to be an offering on our behalf – the only offering that can meet the righteous demands of the Law. When we reject God, either as religious people who will not yield, or as irreligious people who will not yield, we remain in both cases people living under Law. The one under God's righteous Law; the other under the 'Law' that we have made for ourselves. Readers are encouraged to read the whole of the sublime Romans chapter 8 which reveals so much about life in the Spirit of God. The apostle Paul tells us in 8:15 that *we have received a spirit that does not leave us as a slave to fear, because we have the spirit of sonship*. Once again this must be a challenge to the Godist position, where so many of *the religions* leave their adherents with no clear sense of the future, no clear sense of being a 'son' of God. In this politically correct age we must straightway deal with this issue of 'sonship' as opposed to 'daughtership' – it is quite deliberate on the part of Paul! A son had full inheritance rights within his family. Females did not. A true follower of Jesus has full inheritance rights

before God, whether they are male or female – their full inheritance being eternal life and a place with God here on earth and there in heaven, a place that is assured. *The religions* demand that their adherents lead certain types of life which, if they fail, will leave them cut off from their reward – and possibly punished forever, into the bargain. And it is in this position of fear that (some) Godists want people of *the religions* to remain. Some Godists certainly believe that people should *not* be invited to follow Jesus, but instead should remain in their religions. And in this they connive with those religions, which are jealous of the continuance of their co-religionists within their way, often in outright defiance of Article 18 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

We proclaim Christ crucified, said Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:23, **a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles**. (NRSV) Jews thought that, as inheritors and guardians of the Law, they could ‘earn’ their way to a right relationship with God. A crucified Christ was seen as an absolute scandal to a Jew. Indeed to a pious Jew today it still is. To the world at large, a crucified God is utter foolishness. It was seen this way when Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, and still is today – utter folly. The New Testament Greek word that is translated above as *stumbling block* is better translated as an ‘offence’ or even, more literally, a ‘scandal’. The Greek word in the New Testament is *skandalon*, and is the root from which we derive our modern word. It is scandalous that a human can be brought to a right relationship with God simply by believing in Jesus, not by being religious, or by an amazing prayer life, not by church attendance or zealous Bible reading. This is, it might be added, a scandalous thought to some orthodox Christians as well! Before however, readers say ‘well, I believe, then!’ and

put down this book, we need to add something important: as is suggested in Appendix 4, the life of faith is rather more than mere belief. The position that God demands of a Christian is a complete regeneration – or a re-birth. After all, the devil believes in Jesus but that does not make him a Christian! In practice the life that a Christian leads will take on a new character after trusting in Jesus and as they go on trusting in Jesus, and although works are not demanded (as though we can earn any rights before God) yet *they will inevitably follow* in a life dedicated to Jesus. This is one of the paradoxes of Christianity.

Although in Romans Paul is writing to believers in first century Rome, his words are applicable to Christians today. Referring to the need for righteousness before God, Paul comments that, **when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness** (4:4–5). When a man ‘works’, his wage is an obligation. But the man or woman who has (true) faith will find that, on account of that faith, they will be considered by God as righteous. Paul cites the patriarch Abraham as a man who had faith (in God’s promise) and that his faith was not only credited to him alone but also to us: **The words ‘it was credited to him’ were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness — for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.** Later (in 5:6) he writes, **You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God**

demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Without over-simplifying what is a complex subject, we can claim with certainty that God credits true faith in Jesus to us as righteousness. Becoming a disciple of Jesus in the sense that Jesus Himself demanded (our repenting, believing, being born again) leads to a radical new life because: . . . **by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.** (Romans 7: 6)

. . . for what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. (Romans 8: 3)

There are some who think that all they have to do is to believe, albeit sincerely, and that this will satisfy God forever. The normative Protestant position of justification through faith (and it must be readily acknowledged that this view is not entirely agreed with by, for example, the Eastern Orthodox tradition) is that the evidence of true faith is true works. Whilst acknowledging the primacy of faith (the Protestant position) it is impossible to ignore the apostle James' comment that **a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone** (James 2:24). That seems to

deal with any idea that all we have to do is to ‘believe’ once, with no real change to the way we lead our lives.⁸ We are to *go on believing*; *abide* in Jesus; go on being filled with the Spirit; go on allowing him to produce fruit in our lives.

God’s Grace

The concept of grace, more than any other theme, distinguishes Christianity from *the religions*. It is unsurprising, perhaps, that grace should be ignored or sidelined by Godists of whatever persuasion. The apostle John wrote **God gave the law through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.** (John 1:17, GNB). Again it should be stated for clarity that the law of God and the grace of Christ are not contradictory. At the event we call the transfiguration, Jesus was seen conversing with Moses and Elijah: the presence of Moses shows Christ as the fulfilment of the law; the presence of Elijah shows Christ as the fulfilment of the prophets.

When the Lord gave to Moses and Israel the law, He spoke as *the Lord*, their God. Moses spoke to Israel in the name of the Lord their God, and not in his own name (Exodus 20:22). When Jesus was born into this world as a human, as the incarnate Son of God, He continued to speak to Israel — now directly, and not through any prophet. In spite of His works of great power and self-authenticity, and speaking in words of wisdom and grace never before (or since) matched as He spoke to Israel, the chosen nation, as their Messiah, Israel in large part refused Him. To those Jews who did believe, Jesus gave the right to become children of God (John 1:11–12). Christ extended this right to believing

⁸ The author recalls visiting a website where a grinning ‘evangelical’ preacher on podcast invited people to say a prayer to God inviting Jesus into their lives, and told them that this would guarantee their salvation for all eternity. He mentioned not one word on sin or repentance from sin!

Gentiles as well. Note that the Lord had already made it plain through Moses and the prophets that the Gentiles would also be included in the promises made to Israel (e.g. Genesis 12:1–3; Isaiah 49:5–6). The good news is for all mankind.

As the Lord is the lawgiver, it is no surprise that He is also the One who fulfilled the law and so made it obsolete (see Matthew 5:17 and Hebrews 8:13). As Christ said He came not to destroy the law, should we still observe those Old Testament laws? We have seen that Christ fulfilled (*completed*) the requirements of the Mosaic law. When we review all of Scripture, in context, it is clear that Jesus spoke of his death as ensuring that the law has no more condemnation over us. So, in Matthew 5:17–18 Jesus said **“Do not think that I have come to do away with the Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets. I have not come to do away with them, but to make their teachings come true. Remember that as long as heaven and earth last, not the least point nor the smallest detail of the Law will be done away with — not until the end of all things”** (Matthew 5:17–18, GNB). By fulfilling the law, Jesus satisfied its requirements on our behalf. So the apostle Paul could exclaim: **Death gets its power to hurt from sin, and sin gets its power from the Law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!** (1 Corinthians 15:56, GNB). And he emphasises this elsewhere: **There is no condemnation now for those who live in union with Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit, which brings us life in union with Christ Jesus, has set me free from the law of sin and death** (Romans 8:1–2, GNB). The (*torah*) law cannot condemn a true disciple of Jesus (whether Jewish or Gentile) because they are made free in Christ, in Whose righteousness they stand.

None of this licenses impurity or disobedience to God's will, of course, and such antinomianism (denial that any rules apply to believers) was a problem as serious in its way as the legalism of the Judaisers who wanted the Gentiles circumcised and back under the old regulations of the observant Jews. Christianity stands in the revelation that the Messiah came to fulfil the law, or to make complete, or to accomplish what was required, so that those laws will not condemn us. The Lord Jesus brought the law to completion, having stood in for us a substitute, so that the strength of sin (which comes through the Law) will not condemn us.

If readers have stayed with the debate up to this point (and they should not be unduly worried if a great deal of this is difficult to understand, especially if the concepts are new to them), then it is hoped that two points should by now be understood at least at a basic level. Firstly, before we can answer the genuine question of many about the eternal destiny of those who have never even heard the name of Jesus, we need to understand that *all* humans in their natural state, are alienated from God and stand condemned under the general law of God for all mankind (see again Romans 1). Huge numbers of people do not acknowledge or thank God, and do not obey His laws — and not one of us matches up to His holiness, goodness and perfection so that we could stand in His presence depending on the strength of our own supposed righteousness. No-one! We may feel comforted that He is just, but this means that in our natural state we would die in our sins and at the judgement seat of Christ we would be condemned. So, secondly, the really vital question is: how can people be rescued from their ways of rebellion and disobedience, and saved through the great atonement achieved by the Lord Jesus? It is this subject we will begin to address in the next chapter.