Who am I?



Who am I?

by Brian Johnston

1. Wonderfully made

A craftsman in medieval times would work on a special item that displayed best his artistic skill. Finally, when the work was finished, he would present it to the craftsmen's guild, hoping to achieve the rank of master. If successful, that work would come to be known as his 'masterpiece': the piece of work for which he achieved the rank of a master.

In Psalm 139 we see God as the master craftsman, lovingly at work on his masterpiece, the crowning glory of his creation – and that's us! We're not the products of time and chance. Viewing ourselves as wonderfully made is the first of five ways in which we can learn to view ourselves biblically. In this booklet, we hope to look in turn at each of five self-portraits of a believer in Christ.

But let's begin with the one already mentioned. Let's take time to read Psalm 139 to read:

For the choir director.

A Psalm of David.

O LORD, You have searched me and known me.

You know when I sit down and when I rise up;

You understand my thought from afar.

You scrutinize my path and my lying down,

And are intimately acquainted with all my ways.

Even before there is a word on my tongue,

Behold, O LORD, You know it all.

You have enclosed me behind and before,

And laid Your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;

It is too high, I cannot attain to it.

Where can I go from Your Spirit?

Or where can I flee from Your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, You are there;

If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.

If I take the wings of the dawn,

If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,

Even there Your hand will lead me,

And Your right hand will lay hold of me.

If I say, "Surely the darkness will overwhelm me,

And the light around me will be night,"

Even the darkness is not dark to You,

And the night is as bright as the day.

Darkness and light are alike to You.

For You formed my inward parts;

You wove me in my mother's womb.

I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made;

Wonderful are Your works,

And my soul knows it very well.

My frame was not hidden from You,

When I was made in secret,

And skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth;

Your eyes have seen my unformed substance;

And in Your book were all written

The days that were ordained for me,

When as yet there was not one of them.

How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God!

How vast is the sum of them!

If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand.

When I awake, I am still with You.

O that You would slay the wicked, O God;

Depart from me, therefore, men of bloodshed.

For they speak against You wickedly,

And Your enemies take Your name in vain.

Do I not hate those who hate You, O LORD?

And do I not loathe those who rise up against You?

I hate them with the utmost hatred;

They have become my enemies.

Search me, O God, and know my heart;

Try me and know my anxious thoughts;

And see if there be any hurtful way in me,

And lead me in the everlasting way. (Psalm 139:1-24)

What can we immediately observe about this psalm? Perhaps the first thing is that it appears to come full circle. It ends the same way as it begins: with the idea of God examining, or searching, our hearts. As I read through this familiar psalm again recently, a question popped into my mind. Why does it end in a similar way, perhaps even the same way, to the way in which it began?

Search me, O God, and know my heart;

Try me and know my anxious thoughts;

And see if there be any hurtful way in me,

And lead me in the everlasting way. (v.23-24)

Would we be correct if we discerned a change in attitude at the close of the psalm from that expressed in verses 1 and 7? At first, it seems like David wants to hide from God's unwelcome scrutiny; but later at the close of the psalm in verses 23 & 24, does he not end up inviting it? Are we witnessing a maturing of attitude and mood through prayer and time spent in the presence of God? Could this change be in any way like the change that occurs in a child who starts off early in life being resentful of his or her parents' seemingly intrusive interest and suffocating care; but then comes to deeply appreciate the love it expresses? In a similar way, does the psalmist, David, turn from thinking of God's attentions as being somewhat patronising to begin to appreciate them for what they truly are?

On the other hand, it's not easy to always get the correct tense when translating from the Hebrew into English, and so it could be that the ending of the psalm is simply intended as a re-echoing of the opening. The Jerusalem Bible is one translation which follows this line by also phrasing the opening lines in the same present tense as its closing refrain. That tends to make the psalm much more of a unit and throws the spotlight on verses 19-22 which say:

O that You would slay the wicked, O God;

Depart from me, therefore, men of bloodshed.

For they speak against You wickedly,

And Your enemies take Your name in vain.

Do I not hate those who hate You, O LORD?

And do I not loathe those who rise up against You?

I hate them with the utmost hatred;

They have become my enemies. (Psalm 139:19-22)

If that's right, then the whole psalm becomes a plea for justice with the psalmist opening himself up for God to examine his integrity as a basis for vindicating him against his enemies. Seen in that light, this familiar psalm becomes an expanded version of the prayer of the prophet Jeremiah when he said:

Righteous are You, O LORD, that I would plead my case with You;

Indeed I would discuss matters of justice with You:

Why has the way of the wicked prospered?

Why are all those who deal in treachery at ease?

You have planted them, they have also taken root;

They grow, they have even produced fruit.

You are near to their lips But far from their mind.

But You know me, O LORD;

You see me;

And You examine my heart's attitude toward You.

Drag them off like sheep for the slaughter

And set them apart for a day of carnage! (Jeremiah 12:1-3)

And, similar to David in Psalm 139, he recalls God saying,

"Can a man hide himself in hiding places

So I do not see him?" (Jeremiah 23:24)

In other places throughout the book of psalms, David protests his integrity, even as he prays for divine protection. Take Psalm 7:9,

For the righteous God tries the hearts and minds

and

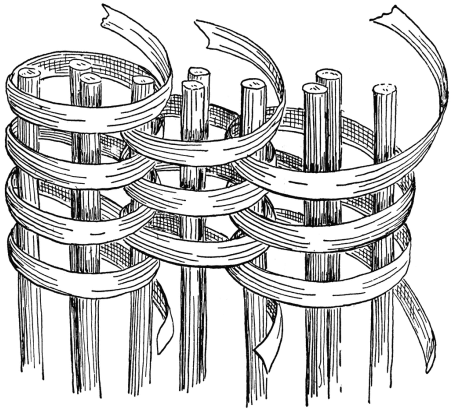
Examine me, O LORD, and try me;

Test my mind and my heart. (Psalm 26:2)

So the choice before us is either: the process of prayer helping David to mature his thoughts; or David pleading his integrity as a basis for demanding judgement on his enemies.

But, either way, having tried to put David's words in their original context, we really should now notice the words David uses here to describe God's activity and artistry in making us – words like 'formed' and 'wove' and 'skilfully wrought'. That last word is one that can be rendered 'embroidery' and it was also used to describe the exceptional artistic creations of the gate of the Israelite tabernacle court and the door of the tent of meeting as well as the sash of the priests – all made by people who were specially gifted by God with wisdom and ability for the exquisite task of twisting the multi-coloured strands.

However, we are more than the mechanical outworking of the



spiral of our DNA strands. There's more than chemistry involved, for there's information woven into this wonder molecule that's contained in every one of our 10 trillion or so cells – and all by supernatural design. Did you know that a scientist once compared the likelihood of a cell forming by chance to the same likelihood of a typhoon blowing through a scapular and all by itself assembling a jumbo jet?

But let me ask you: 'Do you tend to think of yourself as God's artwork – his masterpiece?' If not, perhaps it's because you allow yourself to be intimidated by the modern western celebrity culture where youth and beauty are excessively glamourized and then air-brushed to perfection. If we accept that as the norm and as a correct evaluation, we can often end up focusing on what we don't have, and it can breed dissatisfaction. This psalm offers encouragement to those who think of themselves as worthless. For example, in verses 17 and 18, God's thoughts about us are said to outnumber the sand grains of Sahara. Try spending some time absorbing the wonder of that fact!

And now, let's think about Ephesians 2:10. This is a further word to Christian believers: *For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship,* ***created in Christ Jesus*** *for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.* (Ephesians 2:8-10)

If you're a born-again believer in Christ, then what I'm about to say applies to you. You have been twice made! What we find here in Ephesians 2 updates the 139th psalm. The quality of God's work defies any comparison – rejoice that you've been made by a master craftsman who has also fashioned the opportunities in life for which he has uniquely equipped you!

2. Deeply fallen

Does the Bible teach us that we're 'dead in sin' or just injured by it? Are we taught biblically that salvation is a gift of God's free grace or something we must contribute towards in order to fully bring about our own salvation? Am I really without hope apart from God's sovereign mercy, or do I in some fundamental way select my own destiny? These are some of the most important issues of all – and yet very often nice, 'respectable' people hate the Bible's answer. For it tells us we're dead in sin (Ephesians 2:1); that salvation is a gracious gift from God alone (Ephesians 2:8) and that without God, we're completely – totally – and utterly - without hope.

It's a myth to think that in our own natural state we genuinely seek after God for who he is. We might seek him so as to preserve ourselves from death or to enhance our worldly enjoyments – but not for God as he really is in himself. This is what we mean when we say that we're deeply fallen as a result of our first parents' act of defiant disobedience in Eden's Garden at the very dawning of human history.

Now, sometimes you'll hear the word 'depravity' being used as when someone accustomed to the Bible's teachings talks about 'man's total depravity before God.' But we have to stop and ask ourselves, 'Exactly what does that mean?' It certainly doesn't mean the same as when say a newspaper talks about someone's depraved behaviour. No, biblically, this is a term that also applies to those nice, respectable people we were mentioning a moment ago – it applies to them every bit as much. When we speak of man's depravity in the light of the Bible's teachings – and after the disaster in Eden's Garden – we're referring to the natural human condition as it now exists apart from any grace God may exert on it so as to restrain or transform us.

And so, in the biblical sense, depravity doesn't mean that we're as bad as bad can be, but rather total depravity means that our rebellion against God is total, and that our inability to submit to God or even to reform ourselves is total, and so we're totally deserving of eternal punishment.

It's hard to exaggerate the importance of admitting this – to

admit that our condition really and truly is this bad. Because, if we should think of ourselves as basically good, or even just a bit less than totally at odds with God, then our understanding, not to say our appreciation, of Christ's work for our salvation will be defective and wholly inadequate.

With this conclusion, both parts of the Bible agree. In the first part – the Old Testament – the prophet Jeremiah says: '*the (human) heart is … desperately sick*' (Jeremiah 17:9). This was expanded upon later by Jesus Christ when he famously said:

"That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man." (Mark 7:20-23)

Clearly, the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart.

People demand evidence – and that's fair enough. God hasn't left himself in any way without evidence – neither for his existence, nor for the truth of what the Bible says. And our topic that we're calling the human condition of total depravity – has to be the Bible teaching for which the most evidence is available to support its truth. Whenever we switch on the TV or click onto the internet news or pick up a newspaper, we are every single day of our lives confronted with appalling stories of the atrocities of war or senseless violence or utterly inexcusable aggression against defenceless women and children. Who can be left doubting that the human heart is desperately sick ever since that first moral transgression of God's command at the beginning of history?

But we need to remind ourselves once again that such crimes and extreme behaviours as we've just mentioned are simply the most obvious indicators of the Bible's accurate diagnosis of the human condition. Even heroic and celebrated lives are afflicted with the same condition. Although they haven't run to the same excesses, they are still guilty nevertheless of the Bible's charge of depravity. I realize that may seem unreasonable to you, or even incredible; but let me clarify that's what I am saying because that's plainly what the Bible teaches. Let me, however, try to explain it.

Once a preacher was being challenged by a man who was indignantly asking: "When is God going to do something about all the evil in this world?" Eventually, the preacher turned

the question back on him and enquired of him if he was equally anxious to deal with the evil that existed in his own heart? On this occasion that did seem to silence that particular would-be critic of God. But let me add two things. First, God's reasons, as shared in the Bible, for not intervening in the state of the world are totally different from any human reluctance to acknowledge and tackle personal issues. Second, some people do seem, for a while at least, to be oblivious to the state of their own heart – especially if they see themselves as helpful, decent-living people who try not to harm anyone.

This phenomenon is perhaps best illustrated. George Orwell describes a wasp that was sucking jam on his plate and so he cut the wasp in half. The wasp paid no attention, merely went on with its meal, while a tiny stream of jam trickled out of its severed oesophagus. Only when it tried to fly away did it grasp the dreadful thing that had happened to it. That wasp and people without Christ have a lot in common. Severed from their souls, but still greedy and unaware, people continue to consume life's sweetness. Only when it's time to fly away might they grasp their dreadful condition. For example, on the night the Titanic went down, Major Peuchen left $200,000 worth of stocks and bonds in his cabin and collected three oranges instead. He realized they would be more useful. But some even with their last breath are oblivious to their state: P.T. Barnum the circus magnate on his deathbed asked, "How are the circus receipts today?"

In Ephesians 4 the Apostle Paul describes people like that as being of a 'futile mind' – in other words, their lives are devoid of God's purpose. He next writes about their 'darkened understanding' – in the sense that they are without God's revelation to guide them. He then continues to paint his picture of the human condition – of human depravity – by saying that they have 'hardened hearts' – meaning they're insensitive to God and his ways. Finally, he mentions 'impure greed' and 'deceitful lusts' – to indicate how people without God live for self-gratification in some form or other.

But this condition is so serious that it's not only in Ephesians chapter 4 that he sketches it for us, but also in Titus 3:3. There he writes: *For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another.* Together, these phrases or fragments plumb the depths of our fallen nature, and of our depravity before God.

Let's just focus on the hateful and hating. How we react to one another is a reflection of our attitude to God himself which may not be so clearly expressed. Maybe you think that's going a bit too far. Not that many people would describe themselves as militant atheists, and yet, according to the Bible, even the most ardent unconverted church-goer and pillar of society is basically at enmity with God. We are spoken of as being 'enemies in our minds' by Paul in Colossians chapter 1. You can do all the right things and say all the right things and yet, without knowing Jesus Christ as your personal Saviour, your heart is hostile towards God, whether you suspect it or not. That's why the Gospel appeal can be summed up in these words from the end of 2 Corinthians 5: *Be reconciled to God*. We are so deeply fallen, that only a total re-creation by God will do.

The story is told of Joe and Bill. Once they had been good friends. But some offence had caused a bitter feud between them. It had been allowed to go on for years. Now Joe was on his death-bed. He sent for Bill and told him he'd forgive all the insults he'd received if Bill would do the same. So things were settled. Eventually Bill stood up to go. He got to the door before Joe called, "But remember the deal's off if I should recover!"

I want to say to you that God is not like that. God's offer to us is not 'yes' and 'no'. How can we be sure of that? Because a death has taken place to bring about reconciliation: that of Jesus Christ, God's Son. Note again the words of Romans 5:10: *when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son*. God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.

3. Fully forgiven

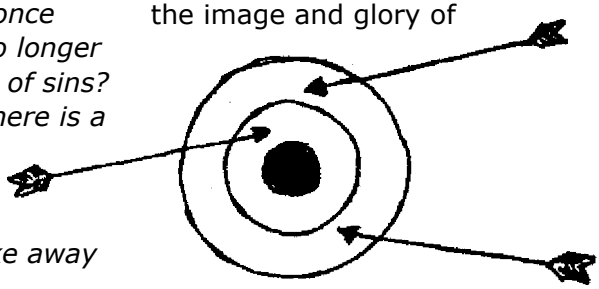
Memories can be painful things. Especially when they cause us to reflect on personal failures. But that's not necessarily a bad thing. Once a year, God used to ask his people to remember and confess their sins over the head of a living goat before sending it away. He wanted them to savour forgiveness.

In the second part of the Bible, the New Testament, in the letter to the Hebrews, the writer comments on that now obsolete annual procedure once carried out by Israelites under the Law of Moses. He says:

For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins? But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. (Hebrews 10:1-4)

We might ask: "So what then was the point of these annual offerings? – if it was impossible for them to take away sins." All those animals were sacrificed, but still sins were not taken away! In fact, by reminding the people of their sins, those very same sacrifices in a way served to add to their guilt. There was a remembrance of sins year by year – in that they brought their faults to mind. Negative feelings would surely be stirred up by the memories of their inadequacies as this goat was paraded before them.

We're wanting to think about the forgiveness of sins here, but let's first of all define what the Bible means by sins. Within biblical Christianity, the word sin means missing the mark. An archer misses the bulls-eye, the very central part of the target. A high jumper fails to clear the bar. And a sinner fails to achieve God's standard. We were created to be the image and glory of



God. But we rebelled and as a result now we all fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23; 1 Corinthians 11:7). Not only do we no longer fulfil our design requirements as part of God's creation, but our sin, the Bible teaches us, is offensive to God. It's an affront to his holy character. His anger burns against sin. But, graciously, God has made provision for it.

In the time of the Old Testament, God gave instruction to his people that, if anyone sinned, he or she was to take a lamb or goat, and approach God's altar; there the animal was to be offered up in his or her place as a substitute. Its life was surrendered in place of theirs – which was forfeit through sin. Or, in the case of one special day each year when all the people gathered, a goat was then taken for them all, and had their sins confessed upon its head, and it was then taken away and released into a solitary desert place from which it never returned. Symbolically, it bore away their sins. It was this goat that was originally known as the scapegoat. The chapter of Hebrews that we were previously reading from continues …

… when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.'" When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), then he added, "Behold, I have come to do your will." He does away with the first in order to establish the second. And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (Hebrews 10:5-10)

It was God who had specified the Old Testament offerings, but this shows they were never meant to be more than an interim or temporary measure. God found no ultimate satisfaction in them. So how effective were such Old Testament sacrifices as the goats we were thinking about? We've noted that the Bible itself says that they could not put away sins, so what was the point of them? They were like signposts which all pointed forward to the coming of Christ, the ultimate sacrifice. I also like to picture them as being like bankers' cheques. If you think about it, a cheque, by which we might pay for some goods, is only a piece of paper. In itself it's worthless. In effect, it's a promise that the person who receives it will soon have in his bank account the same sum of money that's



written on the cheque. The goods we buy with a cheque are really only paid for when the cheque is finally presented to the bank by the seller who received it from us. At the bank, it's cleared, meaning the money is then finally transferred out of our bank account and into the seller's bank account.

All the sacrifices for sins long ago in the Old Testament were like cheques, in that they held out the promise that one day sin would be properly paid for. They pointed forward to the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. When he died on the cross for our sins, according to the Bible, it was then that sins were actually and finally put away. Previously, in the time of the Old Testament, and by means of the animal sacrifices, sins were only ever passed over. The cross is the one and only place where sins could be – and were – put away. Christ's death there finally paid for all the promises of the Old Testament sacrifices. Jesus' death wasn't a promise for the believer, it's the reality. The cross is like the bank where all the cheques were cleared – where all our guilt was cleared – in God's sight. And so every believer's sins were fully paid for, settled in full, fully forgiven, totally cleared. And this applies to those future sins which we've yet to commit. They cannot affect our 'in Christ' status. But when we're conscious of having sinned, we should confess it and clear it with him according to the instruction found in chapter one of John's first letter. This will enable God to continue to be able to use us in his service until the Lord returns and we go to be with him where sin will never be any more of a problem.

That's so wonderful. But some Christians seem to find it too good to be true. They still struggle with feelings of guilt. It's as though they feel they still need to try to use additional methods to remove guilt. But it's no longer necessary that they try to make themselves worthy in God's sight. If only they could realize that God's view of the true believer in Christ is so different from their view of themselves.

Think of the cross. God does that! Before him, every believer in Christ is holy, guilt-free, and just as worthy as Christ himself, completely and totally forgiven!

God sees us through the cross of Christ, and in that way we appear perfect and without any remaining guilt. By reading God's Word and praying, we need to view ourselves through the cross of Christ. We are not the same old person we once were – and that's the main point – but our flawed sin nature can still impact negatively on our life for as long as we're down here.

That being so – because God's promise is to decisively and deliberately refuse to recall our sins to his mind – we should follow his example, by not dwelling on our past failings.

Our methods of coping with residual guilt feelings are inherently flawed – we're only tasked with living such that we're 'counted' worthy of our calling (we CANNOT and NEED NOT try to actually make ourselves worthy – see 2 Thessalonians 1:11). Christ has already made us worthy, but we should aim to live worthily; just as Christ has already made us holy, but we should also aim to live a holy life.

So much of the New Testament's teaching for the Christian believer is aimed at us becoming what we already are. At the end of 2 Corinthians 4, Paul talks about the realm of the temporal and contrasts it with the realm of the eternal. Temporal things – things belonging to time, to the here and now – are visible; but eternal things are heavenly and invisible. In connection with these things, we're told in the New Testament that we are already viewed as alive to God, justified, glorified, raised and seated with Christ. Our aim now is to live by faith in this temporal realm in a way that's consistent with these unseen realities. Let's appreciate, for God's Word says it, that God has so dealt with our sin at the cross that we already appear before him as worthy and fully forgiven. We are 'in Christ', one with him, by God's amazing grace we are seen as being as worthy as he is!

Note how this section of the letter to the Hebrews concludes:

And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds," then he adds, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more."

Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin. (Hebrews 10:11-18)

Notice how the Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this ... adding: *"Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more."* Sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary. The believer in Christ is eternally free from any guilt! This is a wonderfully liberating truth! It doesn't give us any licence to sin; but it's meant to free us from any guilt feelings. Satan may accuse – and he will – but no-one can lay anything to the charge of God's elect (Romans 8:33-39).

4. Greatly blessed

Waylon Prendergast, aged 37, of Tampa, Florida, committed a spur-of-the-moment robbery while on his way home from a late-night drinking session. A very drunk Mr. Prendergast forced his way into a house through an upstairs window which had been left open. Once inside, he filled a suitcase with cash and valuables before setting the living-room on fire in order to cover his tracks. He then escaped through the back door and made his way home, laughing all the way. Only when he turned the corner of his own street, and discovered three fire engines outside his house, did he realize that in his drunkenness he had, in fact, broken into and set fire to his own property. His later comment was: "I had no idea I had so many valuable possessions."

While we may not do anything quite that stupid (at least nothing that makes the national newspapers), there are times when all of us as Christians need to stop and reflect, before coming to the same conclusion as Mr. Prendergast when he said: "I had no idea I had so many valuable possessions."

Beyond the physical blessings we enjoy, there's so much more that God has given us through Jesus Christ. As the Apostle Paul wrote in his Bible letter to the Ephesians …

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace …
(Ephesians 1:3-6)

We'll pause there, for a moment, and reflect on what Paul by the Spirit was saying. In a sense we should read on, for the whole section we're reading – from Ephesians 1:3 down until verse 14 – is one continuous sentence in Paul's original letter. It's almost as though, when Paul started to list all these blessings, he just couldn't stop!

There's an old hymn which encourages us to 'count your many blessings' and 'name them one by one.' We can start to do that – and it's good that we do –

but we'll surely never get to the end, for we've been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms in Christ – and do you think we could ever fathom that depth and sheer wealth of blessing?

Let's think about which specific blessings have already been listed by Paul.

We've split our reading into three parts by using the repeated expression 'to the praise of the glory of his grace.' It's worth reflecting for a moment on these words which Paul uses time and time again here. God has blessed us with this ultimate goal in view – which is that it should all be to the praise of his glorious grace. But just what does that mean? Praise, of course, is a recognition: when we praise someone, we're recognizing their achievement. And the biblical word for glory seems to be associated with heaviness as reflected in when Paul talks about the 'weight of God's glory' (2 Corinthians 4). The fact that we're so blessed seems designed to result in a recognition by us of God's profundity.

Interestingly, we'll find that part one of this list of blessings contains blessings which are attributed to God the Father. Do you remember any of the specific ones? Basically, they centre around the fact that he chose us in the timeless, dateless past and lovingly predestined us to be his adopted sons. No wonder they're placed first: these must be among our most fundamental blessings! But we move on now with further thoughts of God's grace *… which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory.* (Ephesians 1:6-12)

Well, if the first part of this long sentence of Paul's was about blessings we could attribute to the Father, this next part we've just read relates the blessings directly to Christ, the Son. Such things as redemption, forgiveness and a wonderful inheritance feature prominently. Of course, all the blessings in all three parts as we've termed

them are all 'in Christ'. That goes to show us how strongly our new Christian identity should affect the way we view ourselves all the time.

Just like a preacher in concluding his message may repeat his main point as being the summation of all he's said (Hebrews 8:1), so God will finally bring everything (that's in view here) into a state of being united under and gathered around Christ (Ephesians 1:9-10). This has always been God's master-plan – to sum up all things in Christ: so that Christ should be central and supreme – to achieve it now is our remit; to achieve it ultimately is our destiny.

Sometimes, the loss of harmony in our relationships or the decisions of others to leave the church or the struggle against illness and loss can become our total preoccupation. At times like that, thinking about the bigger picture which is so loaded with blessing, can help us to restore our perspective.

When life seems tough, and following Christ isn't easy, it's good to get a broader perspective by taking an inventory on our blessings - through using a Bible passage like this one, or Psalm 103, where David says,

A Psalm of David.

Bless the LORD, O my soul,

And all that is within me, bless His holy name.

Bless the LORD, O my soul,

And forget none of His benefits;

Who pardons all your iniquities,

Who heals all your diseases;

Who redeems your life from the pit,

Who crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion;

Who satisfies your years with good things,

So that your youth is renewed like the eagle …

He has not dealt with us according to our sins,

Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.

For as high as the heavens are above the earth,

So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him.

As far as the east is from the west,

So far has He removed our transgressions from us.

Just as a father has compassion on his children,

So the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him.
(Psalm 103:1-5, 10-13)

If David had been feeling down beforehand, I'm sure his spirit was soon praising God as he reflected on all that God had

done for him. But we had better complete our look at Ephesians chapter one – at least its listing of blessings from vv.3-14. Paul concludes his list like this:

In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation - having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory. (Ephesians 1:13-14)

Finally, in this third instalment, the blessings are related to the actions of God the Spirit as we're reminded of the Spirit's work inasmuch as we've been sealed in him. The fact that the Holy Spirit is in us is presented here in terms of viewing him as being the guaranteeing deposit of all that's to come – a kind of absolutely wonderful down payment in advance of everything that's yet to come. What a blessing it is to know that we're eternally secure in Christ: we can never lose these great blessings.

Someone has said, 'Praise is like a fire that needs fuel.' If we're wondering what that means, I think a little glimpse at the next two verses Paul wrote should explain it. After recounting all these blessings in Ephesians 1:3-14, he then writes:

For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you and your love for all the saints, do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers. (Ephesians 1:15-16)

'For this reason,' Paul says – in other words, because of his review of all that wealth of blessing, Paul now has brought to mind so much to be thankful to God for. May we do the same and thank and praise God now for his blessings to us which are all secured in Christ.

5. Eternally loved

A man had been driving all day and night in his car and had become very tired. He was sensible. He decided to stop at the side of the road, park up his car, and go to sleep in it. As he fell asleep an early morning jogger came by and knocked on his window. So he rolled it down. The jogger asked him. "Could you tell me the time?" Bleary-eyed the driver looked at his watch and said, "Yes, it's 5:00 in the morning."

He'd just closed his eyes again and started sleeping once more when another jogger came by, knocked on the window, and asked, "Could you tell me the time?" Bleary-eyed, the man looked at his watch again and said, "Yes, it's 5:30." At this rate, it seemed pretty obvious he wasn't going to get much rest, so he came up with an idea. He wrote a short note and stuck it on the side of his car so that anybody running by could see it. It said, "I do not know what time it is."



Just a few minutes later another jogger came along, and would you believe it, he knocked on his window! For the third time, the driver rolled it down, only to hear the jogger say, "Mister, I saw your sign and I just wanted to let you know that it's 6:00 o'clock!"

You can write across the window of your life, "I do not have time for trouble," but of this you can be sure, trouble is going to come knocking just the same!

In which case, it really is time for a verse from the Apostle Paul. A few verses in fact, they're found in Paul's Bible letter to the Romans, that is, to first century Christian believers who were located at Rome, in a local Church of God there. This is for many a favourite chapter of the Bible. Let's enjoy a section of it: from verse 28 until the end:

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those

who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, "For your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered." But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:28-39)

Bible teacher, John Stott, once pointed out, helpfully I think, that there are really five unshakeable convictions in the first verse we read which was verse 28. Let's hear it again – just that one verse:

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28)

True enough, the very first thing we can observe is that it starts by Paul saying 'we know …'. I'd like us now to explore the five things, according to Paul, which we can know about troubles and difficulties when they intrude into our lives. But, first of all, let's be clear that we're thinking about knowing, not understanding. On the basis of what the Bible shares with us in this great verse, we can know five things. We can have these unshakeable convictions about what's happening to us when we encounter trouble and suddenly life hurts. But I really need to emphasize that this kind of knowing is about a certain perspective we can have on the various difficulties of life; but it's not an explanation of why these specific things are happening to us. We may not understand any of the details of God's plan in

permitting trouble to come into our lives. Job, who surely suffered more than anyone else in the whole of the Old Testament, never got to discover the reason why all the evils he suffered started piling up on him. We, the readers, in the comfort of our armchair, as we read the Bible – we're let in on the secret – but he never was. He simply learnt to trust in God in the humbling appreciation of glimpsing by how much God's wisdom exceeded his own.

So having clarified that, let's see what we really can know about what's happening when life hurts, based on God's revelation to us in Romans 8:28. The first thing we learn is: **God is at work in our lives**. When we read that God causes all things to work together, we should recognize that God is the active subject of the verb. It's God who causes the things to work together. In reality then, he's the one at work in our lives throughout all the troubles we're facing, unpleasant as they doubtless are. It might feel as if God has turned his back on us and abandoned us. But feelings are very different from faith. This verse teaches us to believe, and so to know, that God is working out his purpose in our life even at that difficult time.

Which brings us to the second of the five truths in this verse. **God is at work in us in all things** (v.17, 23 …). Not just in the good times, but also – and perhaps more so – in the times when bad things happen to us. C.S. Lewis put it slightly differently: he said God whispers to us in our pleasures; and shouts to us in our pain – pain being his megaphone. Physical pain is a means by which our body warns us against things that can damage us: such as a child learning not to play with fire. To use another analogy, in times of drought, trees grow deeper roots in search of water. Later, this experience brings with it the reward of greater stability through a better developed root structure extending throughout the soil. The bad time of drought actually left the tree better equipped to face future storms.

Having explored briefly how God can work out his purpose in our lives in the bad times as well as in the good – and perhaps even more so in those tough experiences – let's read what the apostle James has this to say on this same point:

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2-4)

But we must move on. We've covered two of the five unshakeable convictions hidden like treasure in Romans 8:28. We've seen that God is at work in us at all times. The third point begins to deal with **God's intention in allowing his child to pass through such trouble**. The verse states that it is '**for the good**' (v.29,30) – that is, for our longer-term and future good. We're not expected to fool ourselves into thinking that the present trouble through which we're passing is really a good thing in itself after all. No, that would be to part company with reality. Trials are, by definition, not pleasant and so not enjoyable. But as James wrote in James chapter 1 verses 2 to 4, we can by God's grace through faith in his Word, come to regard the present difficulty as a 'dreaded friend' or even as a 'glorious intruder' – to quote two Christians I've met who've passed through life-changing illnesses or accidents. Perhaps the analogy here is the tough time we have at the dentist – but it's finally worth it when we are left free of toothache as a result. In the same way we can pass through challenging growing pains in Christian life as we develop more of the character God desires to see in us, and later we may look back and be satisfied.

The fourth truth is a vital reminder. It reminds us that **God truly loves us**, and will not cause his child needless pain. This is where we learn that God is at work in us in all things for the good of those who love him. This is a necessary limitation. Verse 28 of Romans 8, from which we're bringing out this teaching, only applies to God's children – to those who've put their faith in Christ and so become his own.

Finally, we learn our fifth truth: that the God who works in us in all things for our good, that is the good of those who love him, is the **God** who **called us at the beginning** when we first responded to the Christian good news message and who **is continuing to shape us according to his ongoing purpose in us**. Everything that happens to us is purposeful if we submit to God's plan. And that ongoing purpose is shared in the very next verse, v.29. But let's read it together with verse 28 which we've been concentrating on thus far:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn

among many brothers. (Romans 8:28-29)

Clearly, it's God's purpose that we should become like his Son, Jesus. That's our destiny. All believers in the world to come will be perfectly like Christ, but God takes great delight in shaping our lives down here to reflect more and more the character of the one who entered into his glories by the pathway of sufferings. And when we go through troubles, let's not deny God's love to us as his people have at times done (Malachi 1:2), but let's say with Paul:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

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