

Chapter 18

Will you accept or refuse?

When I lived in Uganda I employed someone to look after my garden. Peter was not particularly good at it but he did his best, despite some original ideas. (Do carrot plants really need beanpoles?) As he was very poor he needed the money, but one day he did not appear and I asked his friend where he was.

‘He is in prison’, Joseph replied.

Shocked, I asked him, ‘Why is he in prison?’

‘He had no money for poll tax’, said Joseph.

I knew that accommodation in our local prison was likely to be very unpleasant and it did not cost me much to send the cash and pay his debt. Peter did not refuse the gift or tell the judge that he would rather stay locked up. Instead, he believed that I meant it, accepted the offer and was quickly released. In the eyes of the law his debt was paid, and by accepting that, he was free. Although the offence would still be on his record he could return to the garden, happy, grateful and even more inventive.

We might sometimes have seen a sad advertisement, offering something for sale as ‘an unwanted gift’. How hurt the donor would be to see this and to recognise that something given as a mark of affection had not been wanted and the person it was intended for was so ungrateful that they were trying to get rid of it. Surely we should not hurt the Son of God by saying that we do not want the gift he so longs to give.

Moving from darkness into light

One day as I was writing this book I heard a knock at the door.

I answered it and there stood a neatly dressed little lady, carrying a big bag and asking very politely if I would be kind enough to look at what she had to sell. She was a gypsy. The striking thing about Rosie was her courtesy and her shining face. I’d met this before in other gypsies

and soon confirmed that, like them, she was a Christian and delighted to come in for a chat, just as two other gypsies, Pearl and Lily, had done before her. I had been intrigued when Pearl told me that they were 'hearing' the book of Exodus until I realised that they could not read. Recently the Bible Society has published a translation of the Gospels in the Romani language, spoken by many gypsies. This will be even more rewarding for them to hear until the full translation of the Bible is ready.

I asked Rosie to tell me her story. Like many in her community, and in common with certain other faiths, she had always believed in God. Yet she had never heard of Jesus until a company of French travellers came over to teach her people. She, along with many others, had gathered their caravans together in a field to hear what the newcomers had to say.

'They told me that Jesus died to be my personal Saviour', she said, 'and I knew, although I hadn't murdered anyone or anything, I was still a sinner. So I believed and trusted him. It was like coming from darkness into light,' she added happily, 'and he is with me all the time now.'

European gypsies, usually known as Roma, or Romanies, are often given a bad name and looked down on or even deported, by the societies around them. Yet for over half a century the love of Jesus has quietly been spreading among them and drawing many to put their trust in him, with consequent changes of behaviour. The same thing is happening among Australia's aboriginal people. Over a similar period, and in different parts of that great country, Christian faith is taking root.

Some years ago I was taken to northern Australia to see where some of these people live. The ground was littered with empty beer cans and the local bar was heavily protected against the frequent drunken assaults. Yet in a different area I glimpsed a tall, erect and handsome Aboriginal man, fit to be a chief among a people now so depraved, but showing what they could have been. I did not know his history, but the revival of spiritual life in both Aborigines and Romanies reminds me of some words in the Bible: 'God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. He chose the weak things ... the lowly ... the despised ...so that no one may boast before him.'¹

Rosie's open secret was that she had heard about Jesus, believed that he died for her, repented of her sins and knew that she had been forgiven. Her camp is often moved on but she said brightly, 'It doesn't matter, because it gives us a chance to spread the word of God.' Good news is for sharing and now she is sharing it with you.

It is time to decide

Not long ago a young Englishwoman, visiting a Christian family, was puzzled by the way they were speaking about someone she did not know. Finally she asked, 'Who is this Jesus you are all talking about?' If you have read so far, you should not be in her position of ignorance. Thankfully, when she was told what you have been told, she gave her life to Jesus as her Lord and Saviour. This was her grateful response as she realised that he had given his life to clear all possible charges against her.

The record given by so many past and present witnesses is clear and trustworthy. It is time to realise that it applies not only to others but to each of us individually. We have examined God's wonderful gift of a new life and a new lifestyle, offered to all through the mediation of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. The reality of this gift can no longer be ignored. It is for anyone wanting a fresh start, to be 'just as if' they had never sinned for, unlike Ugandan Peter's record, our sins are remembered no more. Not only is justification on offer but to claim it requires belief, repentance and acceptance, faith in Jesus' full payment of the ransom price then closing the transaction.^{2,3} Life is made new, both for this life and beyond, for although the wages of sin is death, the gift of God is everlasting life through Jesus Christ our Lord.⁴ How wonderful is that!

Before we go further, would you stop and think how this applies to you? I hope that by now you have a clearer grasp of the relief this could mean to you as well as giving joy to the great giver himself. Won't you tell him how sorry you are for your part in the sins that took Jesus to the cross? Then accept with heartfelt gratitude his gift of forgiveness now and everlasting spiritual life from now on. Thanks to Jesus' death and resurrection you will be made a new

person, set free from the wrongdoing that has held you captive and starting to behave in ways that please him. Any future sins, once admitted, will find forgiveness in the same way. This should also be remembered by any convinced believers who keep on feeling guilty after doing something wrong (or not doing something right) instead of owning up and asking to be forgiven.

To respond to our Saviour's gracious love will be to love him in return and make him Lord of our lives, now and for evermore. Death will be to find him ready to give us a welcome to a new home with him.⁵ Yet it is possible to be inwardly moved but still undecided, although not to decide is to decide. Decision is an act of the directed will.

A knock on the door

There is a beautiful painting by the artist Holman Hunt showing the thorn-crowned Jesus knocking on a long closed ivy-covered door. There is no light in the windows but he has a lantern in his hand, ready to illuminate the inner darkness. But first he needs to be invited in. The picture shows no handle on the outside of the door, so the decision to open up rests with the person inside. Perhaps too busy to look outside, or fearful of what might happen when they do open the door, some people prefer to turn a deaf ear. Yet the knocking continues as long as there is hope of a response. On the back of the original painting the artist had written, 'Forgive me, Lord, for keeping you waiting so long'.

In *Revelation*, the last book of the Bible, Jesus says, 'So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.'⁶ He longs to come in to share your life, so will you invite him in to clean you up and bring with him fresh light for your spirit? In the person of his Holy Spirit, he will do just that.

Feelings do not alter facts

After such a decision some people feel joyful that a great load has lifted, while others simply accept his promise without the great

emotion that perhaps they had expected. I am reminded of the old story of Mr Fact, Mr Faith and Mr Feeling, three men walking along a high and narrow wall. To let Mr Feeling lead is asking for trouble. One moment he will be jumping for joy and the next looking down, afraid of taking a false step or falling off the narrow wall. Mr Fact should go first, Mr Faith following him, with Mr Feeling still having a place, but well to the back.

We need to have faith in the facts about Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension with his offer of justification as recorded in our handbook, the Bible, and put complete faith in him. By asking him to be our Lord we will then look for his help as we learn to walk in his steps every day. Joy and peace are likely to follow as we go on with him⁷ but the grace of perseverance is as important. With our eyes fixed firmly on our trustworthy Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ we walk in step with him and do not lose heart, whatever lies ahead.⁸

What is the alternative?

We are, of course, free to choose. Jesus gave the assurance of everlasting life to those who believe in him but warned of the risk of condemnation for those who do not.⁹ We only have word pictures of what that will involve, but in one of Jesus' stories he speaks graphically of the horror of being consciously separated from God.¹⁰ Although he did mention hell many times, it was as warning rather than threat. Certain offences, actions, destinations and desires would lead there but could be voluntarily cut out of our lives and thoughts to avoid that fate.¹¹ Many of us will have allowed our hands to do unworthy things, our feet to take us to unworthy places and our eyes to watch or read unworthy things. Only as we offer every part of ourselves to God will he supply the needed strength to obey his word.^{12,13}

If the idea of hell appals us, it will also appal Jesus that despite his warnings many still choose the path to destruction because they find it less restricting.¹⁴ He spoke much more joyfully about entering the kingdom of heaven than heading for hell, for he gladly offers fullness of life here and now,¹⁵ with the prospect of even greater joys ahead as death takes us out of time into eternity.

Yet we are also told that there will be a day of judgment, when we will have to account to God himself about what we did about his offer of forgiveness and how we have spent our lives.^{16, 17} Our future destiny will depend on our response. How much better it will be, if each of us can be confident that Jesus will step forward and claim us as already being washed clean and accepted as members of his family and kingdom.

Don't leave it too late

It is always easy, in a busy life, for the urgent to push out the important. None of us knows how long life will last, but as death is not the end it is urgent as well as important for each of us to consider what we look forward to next. We must not risk that knock on our door falling silent. We must listen out for it and respond. Some who read this may once have responded, but since then worries, wealth or other priorities have edged out the one who would have provided for all your needs. Jesus may be knocking on your door, too, to be invited in again to his rightful place as Lord of your life.

When I was a student a local woman came to the dermatology clinic, her face partly covered by a scarf. We were all terribly shocked when she took this off to reveal a huge malignant ulcer already eroding most of one cheek. It had started small and she hoped it would heal up on its own. Sadly she had come too late to be cured by the limited therapy then available. We cannot heal ourselves of the malignancy of sin that threatens to destroy us. Hear Jesus' knock on your door, and delay no longer to invite him in to heal you and make you fully alive for the rest of this life – and beyond.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, I am truly sorry for keeping you out of my life for so long. I had not realised quite how much you love me, or that you died to save me from past, present and future sins. I ask you to forgive me for holding on to your rightful place for so long and without reserve commit myself to you now. By your Holy Spirit please change me into your likeness and help me to be your loving servant, trusting and obeying you, for the rest of my life. Amen.

Further resources

- Lewis CS. *The great divorce*. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1945.
- Nouwen HJM. *The return of the prodigal son*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994.

References

1. 1 Corinthians 1:26-31
2. Romans 5:1
3. 1 Timothy 2:3-6
4. Romans 6:23
5. John 14:1-3
6. Revelation 3:19-20
7. Galatians 5:22
8. Hebrews 12:1-3
9. John 3:16-21
10. Luke 16:19-31
11. Mark 9:42-49
12. Romans 12:1
13. 1 Peter 1:5
14. Matthew 7:13-14
15. John 10:10
16. Romans 14:10
17. 1 Corinthians 3:10-15

PART TWO

