

# 1. Being God's Human Beings

## *Not so random*

The question of what it is to be human is one that has surely entered the minds of any person who has the mental capacity to reflect on the deeper things of life. But just how far must we travel in our search for a satisfactory answer; an answer that we can confidently call truth or at least reality? Finding answers to such questions can and will take us in all sorts of directions, and so we need a starting point. Let's see what science has to say.

At a scientific level, humans, like all other animals, consist of cells, the very fabric of life. These cells work together to enable the physiological and biochemical processes required by the organism to take place as it lives in an environment that meets the conditions needed for life. The specific bundles of cells known as humans are, along with apes and lemurs, classified as mammals and belong to the order of primates – the highest level of mammal. They are first in the animal kingdom in brain development, with especially large cerebral hemispheres. That's right – humans have, in terms of the animal kingdom, relatively large brains.

But it's what drives these brains, beyond mere biological explanations, that should be of greater interest.

Science, despite being a discipline closely associated with logic, has nonetheless led people to strange places when it comes to finding answers about the human condition. In 1907, Duncan MacDougall, an American physician, conducted a bizarre investigation known as 'Weighing the Ghost'.<sup>1</sup> He actually attempted to measure the weight of the human soul. His investigation involved placing people literally on their death bed, enabling a difference in weight between the alive

---

<sup>1</sup> Anne Rooney, *The Story of Psychology*, Arcturus, London, 2015, p. 29.

specimen and the dead specimen to be taken at the exact moment the soul was to hypothetically leave the body. Not surprisingly, nothing was really gained from these experiments.

Science as a discipline can teach us many things, but it has its limits. Humans are more than complex cellular organisms, and not everything about us can be tested and measured scientifically. Unless we are prepared to tackle the ‘Who am I?’ question at a psychological and spiritual level, rather than at a material level, something of crucial importance to the understanding of what it is to be human remains a mystery.

While it would be foolish to deny that genetics plays a role in many aspects of who we are, just as it does throughout the animal kingdom, it cannot explain why we, unlike other animals, have a consciousness that calls us into a place of reflection and a search for meaning. You will find no written accounts reflecting on the longings of the heart from the perspective of a lemur. There’s just something higher about the human race, something that cannot be explained by including us purely as a piece of the evolutionary jigsaw puzzle.

There are many voices trying to flag down our attention, hoping to convince us that they have the keys to the vault holding the truth about who we are – voices of humanists, philosophers and religious teachers, among others.

Consider a thought from the Buddha: ‘All that we are is the result of what we have thought. The mind is everything. What we think, we become.’<sup>2</sup>

But what is the basis for such a claim? If we choose to venture down this path, our sense of meaning lies completely with the self, and it seems that the self has been unable to truly satisfy its own desire for higher meaning. The truth about who we are must transcend ourselves. Denial is a powerful mental state, but surely, we can’t deny that reality exists simply by thinking it into being something more palatable.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Thoughts of the Buddha: 24 enlightened quotations for every day guidance*, Affirmations, Bellingen NSW, 2014. (quotes printed on individual cards)

## 1. *Being God's Human Beings*

Alternatively, Genesis 1:26 clearly illuminates the special creative intentions that God has for human beings, explaining why we are the way we are.

*“Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish of the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”*

McKinlay puts it this way:

He gave his own reflection five senses to appreciate his beautiful creation. And with his own finger he delicately wrote his law of love on his little mirror as he breathed life into him. As the three persons love the eternal Godhead, so man was to image his Creator by loving God and his neighbour personally, perfectly and perpetually.<sup>3</sup>

It is exclusively through our understanding of who we are in relation to who God is that we come to comprehend what it means to be human. We have been gifted with the capacity to reflect the very nature of our Creator. Who we have become is often far from who we have been created to be, and perhaps that's why throughout history we have so widely missed the mark when it comes to answering the question of what it means to be human. The more we close our eyes and ears to all that Christ reveals to us about ourselves, the more we use our creative capacities to construct meaning from a source separated from truth and life itself.

Understanding the truth of what it is to be human means avoiding reducing ourselves to a complex clump of cells answerable only to our DNA and being convinced by philosophies that preach the death of God and the power of the self. Surely, it would be more rational to turn to a God who knows us better than we know ourselves – a God who has experienced what it is to be human.

---

<sup>3</sup> Neil Cullan McKinlay, *The Song of Creation and Other Contemplations*, Dragonwick, Goonellabah NSW, 2006, p. 23.

*Everybody hurts*

When it comes to the problem of trying to make sense of pain and suffering in this life, surely nobody has been without their own personal set of struggles. Perhaps that's why the country music scene has such a huge following of people who identify with the melancholy, story-telling lyrics of broken relationships and the struggles we all face in the changing seasons of our lives.

Has anyone on their journey through life not questioned how they have somehow arrived at this unforeseen, and possibly unbearable, destination that is the present? If we could only wind back the hands of time, correct the irreversible consequences of our naïve choices. The hole we sometimes find ourselves in may not be our intended situation, but nevertheless the machine that is Western society holds us tight in its grip. The worries of this world, of this life, seem to have us by the scruff. It can feel as though every time we try and fill some of our hole with a shovel full of soil, the world sends in a high-powered digging machine to take us deeper.

As the old saying, 'There's a fine line between pleasure and pain', suggests, the experiences of life can be perceived as pendulum-like, swinging us from emotion to emotion as our circumstances drag us from ecstasy to despair and everywhere in between. If we pour all of our energy into bringing this pendulum to a grinding halt, however, what will be the consequence? If we attempt to walk the fine line between pleasure and pain, placing ourselves in protective bubbles, will it lead to the exclusion of life itself?

If we turn to the book of Ecclesiastes and to Christian existentialists for advice, we begin to gain some interesting perspectives. The goal common to much of humanity, that of seeking personal happiness above all else through wealth, fame and physical pleasure, is likened to chasing the wind. The values of the common person are reduced to vanity.

*Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what*

## 1. *Being God's Human Beings*

*I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun (Eccl 2:11).*

Time, wealth, possessions, popularity – all are potential idols that the world assures us maketh the person. How can we possibly seek to spend time with God, listening to his voice and leaning on his truth, if all of our time is spent chasing after the things that are here today and gone tomorrow?

The thirst for comfort, wealth and fame is unquenchable and consequently snuffs out the parts of life that point us to truth and meaning. Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard took this line of thinking to the extreme. It was said that Kierkegaard refused a parsonage, which would have brought him a steady income, left his fiancée and the chance of a settled family life and deliberately used his talent as a thinker to bring ridicule upon himself.<sup>4</sup> Why? Because he recognised that comfort, money and public approval are inferior values.

To anyone living in a modern, Western society, this way of thinking seems absurd; it goes against everything that the world has programmed our minds with since the day we left the womb. But then again, is it absurd to recognise the futile pursuits of the world for what they are, attempting to replace them with a way of living that actually awakens us to who we really are and who we have been created to be?

In relation to suffering, Karl Barth suggests, 'Participation in suffering means to suffer with Christ, to encounter God, as Jeremiah and Job encountered Him; to see Him in the tempest, to apprehend Him as Light in the darkness, to love Him when we are aware only of the roughness of His hand.'<sup>5</sup>

Whether we willingly plunge ourselves into suffering in the way that existentialists do or not, the reality still remains that to live is to experience both pleasure and pain. This is life. This

---

<sup>4</sup> Robert Olson, *An Introduction to Existentialism*, Dover, New York, 2017, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th edn, Oxford University Press, Oxford, translated by Edwyn Hoskyns, 1968, p. 301.

is a truth that cannot be avoided. The problem with pain and suffering is that we cannot avoid what is outside of our control. We must learn to play the cards dealt to us throughout our lives, knowing that life often deals us a losing hand.

Consider the phenomenon known as ‘the butterfly effect’. As part of an idea used by physicists in chaos theory, the butterfly effect describes a minute alteration to the initial state of a physical system that can result in a large, significant difference to the state at a later time. The concept famously uses the exaggerated example of a butterfly flapping its wings in one country, only to cause a cyclone in another due to the initial environmental change caused by the beating of the wings.

In a sense, the butterfly effect can help us to understand the problem of pain, because life appears chaotic. It is chaotic in that outside factors such as other people, the natural world, financial instability and disease can be the cause of our suffering, and we have little to no control over how they will affect us personally and collectively. What we *do* have control over is how we will respond when bad things happen, not in the sense that we won’t feel broken and torn apart, but in relation to who we turn to in order to make sense of life and its tribulations. It is here that, by the work of the Holy Spirit, we will see that only in Christ the perceived chaos is actually all under control; there is an endpoint where suffering will cease, and there is comfort in the refuge of our God.

Martin Luther was certainly subjected to his fair share of trials and tribulations and offers us the following thoughts: ‘When left and forsaken of all men, in my highest weakness, in trembling, and in fear of death, when persecuted of the wicked world, then I felt most deeply the divine power which this name, Christ Jesus, communicated unto me.’<sup>6</sup>

As finite, frail human beings, we need to be aware of who

---

<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther, *The Tabletalk of Martin Luther*, Christian Focus, Scotland, 2003, p. 186.

## 1. Being God's Human Beings

we are and who God is, becoming wrapped in the one who is greater than ourselves.

*Hear my cry, Oh God; listen to my prayer. From the ends of the earth I call to you, I call as my heart grows faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I. For you have been my refuge, a strong tower against the foe. I long to dwell in your tent forever and take refuge in the shelter of your wings (Ps 61:1-4).*

*Wherever I go, there I am*

To better understand the problem of pain and suffering and why our only hope of refuge exists in God and not ourselves, we need to consider the part we all play. After all, one thing is for certain in this life: we cannot escape ourselves.

It is popular to hold that most people are basically good people. Well, at least that's the delusion many of us choose to live in. But it would be difficult for anyone to convincingly deny the fact that evil has a real presence in this world. One doesn't have to travel far through the pages of history to find extraordinarily cruel cases of evil.

Take communist Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot, for example. In his time of political leadership, an estimated one-and-a-half to two million Cambodians died of starvation, execution, disease or exhaustion. Evil is at its most obvious in cases like these. But disturbingly, it can be found lurking in the hearts of every human being, as the inherited seed of our most ancient ancestors.

This is why, in his book *Deliver Us from Evil*, Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias suggests that evil is found not just where blood has been spilled; rather, it is found in the self-absorbed human heart.<sup>7</sup> The psalmist is in agreement:

*For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you*

---

<sup>7</sup> Ravi Zacharias, *Deliver Us from Evil*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville TN, 1997.

*speak and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in that secret place (Ps 51:3–6).*

When most people contemplate the association of sin with humanity, they connect sin with behaviour rather than inherent nature. Descriptions such as those found in Jon Ronson's *The Psychopath Test* probably fit with more commonly accepted ideas about who should wear the sin label.<sup>8</sup> Psychiatrists often regard psychopaths as inhuman, relentlessly evil forces that are forever harming society. Surely in comparison, the average person can't be regarded as sinful?

In the year 1987, Mikhail Gorbachev released his book *Perestroika*, which proposed in detail his 'New Thinking for Our Country and the World'. Gorbachev, with seemingly the best intentions for his Soviet comrades and the human race in mind, proposed the following:

Perestroika is giving socialism the most progressive forms of social organisation; it is the fullest exposure of the humanist nature of our social system in its crucial aspects – economic, social, political and moral.<sup>9</sup>

With this part of history now in the rear-view mirror, the question can be asked, 'Why didn't Perestroika succeed in creating a peaceful, thriving utopia for the masses?'

While many may suggest the answer to be complex, might not a better suggestion be that it failed due to its inability to account for the common thread of sin that can never be revolutionised away from the human condition?

The atheist view on sin has to be that it is non-existent, in that it is subjective, and I decide what is right and wrong. Atheist Richard Dawkins, in his book *The God Delusion*, asks,

---

<sup>8</sup> Jon Ronson, *The Psychopath Test: A journey through the madness test*, Picador, London, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika*, Harper and Row, New York, 1987, p. 35.

'What kind of ethical philosophy is it that condemns every child, even before it is born, to inherit the sin of a remote ancestor [Adam]?'<sup>10</sup> Atheists – and people with many other worldviews alike – struggle with the notion that we are all born with sin at the core of our nature.

So how did the human heart become this way? Could it be that the Sunday school stories about what went on in Eden were really profound lessons concerning the origins of inherent human sin?

Martin Luther confessed that it is evident in Scripture that all human beings come originally from one man, Adam, and from this individual, by means of birth, the fall, guilt and sin come along with it and are inherited.

As described by systematic theologian Louis Berkhof, the essence of Adam's sin lay in the fact that he placed himself in opposition to God, refusing to subject his will to the will of God and to have God determine the course of his life.<sup>11</sup> To put it another way, Adam desired to be like God and so, in pride, defied his Creator.

Many years have passed since the writings of Genesis, but as the saying goes, 'There's no such thing as the evolution of the human spirit'. Blinded as we are by the pride at the heart of our sinful nature, Jesus clearly lays before us some harsh truths about our inability to recognise the person in the mirror.

*'Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?' (Mt 7:3)*

The truth about sinful nature is that it is inherent in all of us. We can be transformed, however, by the knowledge that although we are dead in sin, we are made alive in Christ.

Dr Leon Morris recognised this when he wrote:

To put it bluntly and plainly, if Christ is not my Substitute,

---

<sup>10</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Transworld, London, 2006, p. 285.

<sup>11</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids MI/ Cambridge UK, 1996, p. 221.

I still occupy the place of a condemned sinner. If my sins and my guilt are not transferred to him, if he did not take them upon himself, then surely they remain with me. If he did not deal with my sins, I must face their consequences. If my penalty was not borne by him, it still hangs over me. There is no other possibility.<sup>12</sup>

None of us can shift the blame for the sin that we personally bring into this world. We, as free people, have the ability to make choices and must live with the consequences of the wrong decisions of both ourselves and others. Here the relationship between evil, sin and suffering become painfully apparent, with world history highlighting time and again what twisted hearts are capable of enacting – even to the point of crucifying the Son of God.

### *Naked before God*

You would, I believe, struggle to find a more profound text capable of explaining the broken state of our world and the condition of humanity than Genesis chapters 2 and 3. In the garden of Eden, human beings first did what they have continued to do ever since. Creating God in their own image, they continue to live in the delusion of their self-constructed truths.

In *Being Human*, Peter Vardy suggests that postmodernism has led us to lose confidence in the very concept of truth, and as such its impact has been devastating.<sup>13</sup> The Western world suffers from the perceived lack of meaning brought about by the so-called ‘death of God’. Humanism has become aligned with the idea that human beings result from a universe evolving through random events with no meaning. Could this lack of real purpose lie at the heart of many of modern society’s problems?

---

<sup>12</sup> Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge UK, 1999, p. 410.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Vardy, *Being Human: Fulfilling genetic and spiritual potential*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 2003, p. 95.

## 1. Being God's Human Beings

Putting the broken condition of the world aside, there is still an important truth that we need to confront. God is God and we are not. There is no religious or philosophical construct within which we can work to save ourselves and become right with God. After all, we are all born with an innate desire for a bite of that forbidden fruit that leads to death, as the story goes. Fortunately, Jesus reminds us in Luke's Gospel that what's impossible for humanity is possible with God. In other words, God has a way to make things right.

John Stott, in his book *The Cross of Christ*, exposes the human heart well. He suggests:

*We insist on paying for what we have done. We cannot stand the humiliation of acknowledging our bankruptcy and allowing somebody else to pay for us. The notion that this somebody else should be God himself is just too much to take. We would rather perish than repent, rather lose ourselves than humble ourselves.<sup>14</sup>*

Despite any desperate attempts we make, we cannot hide from God. We can't hide by clinging to so called 'alternative truths' that deny our humanity and God's divinity. We, like Adam and Eve, cannot hide and avoid standing naked before God.

But thank God that we can be confident to stand naked before God with the knowledge that we are justified in Christ, not ourselves. We can take heart in the truth that humanity's saviour is not humanity.

### *Hope worth hoping for*

World renowned scientist Stephen Hawking was once asked to share his opinion on the divisive issue of euthanasia. His well-documented answer was, "The victim should have the right to end his life, if he wants. But I think it would be a great mistake. However bad life may seem, there is always something

---

<sup>14</sup> John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, Inter-Varsity, Nottingham, 2006, p. 191.

you can do and succeed at. While there's life, there is hope.<sup>15</sup>

While there may be some truth in this response, it raises other questions such as, 'Hope in what?'

Not so long ago, in a city not so far away, Louis Theroux conducted a documentary-style investigation into the decisions that people make after being informed by medical specialists that they, or a close loved one, has very little time, if any, to live.<sup>16</sup> This may be due to cancer, or any other cruel disease or medical situation requiring life support. The findings of the investigation indicated that in the majority of cases, patients or next of kin were willing to do whatever it takes, no matter how distressing and painful, for hope of a medical miracle, thus avoiding death for whatever short amount of extra time they could gain. Very rarely, and seemingly miraculously, patients on artificial life-support do awake, but sadly for the majority of patients, their hope goes in vain.

Nonetheless, hope seems to be imbedded into our DNA. But where we choose to direct our hope remains widely varied.

So, what hope is worth hoping for?

Should we grasp hold of the hope offered by Eastern teachings such as Hinduism? This would at least give us hope that if we live rightly according to its teachings, we may move one step closer to *Moksha*, thus becoming one with Brahman (the ultimate reality) where we belong. But then again, if things don't go so well, all we can expect is to be reborn into a lower form of caste life. Hope in this case falls on us. That's a lot of pressure.

---

<sup>15</sup> 'Stephen Hawking: Terminally ill patients should have the right to die', *The Evening Standard*, 17 September 2013, 'Terminally <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/health/stephen-hawking-terminally-ill-patients-should-have-the-right-to-die-8822083.html>. His quote is a response to issues surrounding terminally ill patients and their right to die.

<sup>16</sup> BBC documentary presenter Louis Theroux, in an episode called 'Choosing Death' from a series 'Altered States', investigated California's right to die laws for terminally ill patients and those who are in pain but not terminally ill. The documentary was broadcast on 18 November 2018.

## 1. Being God's Human Beings

Hope in a world rife with suffering must offer a way of dealing with the unbearable. We could dedicate our lives to the avoidance of suffering by following the Buddhist teaching, extinguishing all desire through eliminating all human cravings. But then why would we want to eliminate craving the very things that God made us to crave? Things such as love for one and other, or the desire to be amid the beauty of creation itself.

Make no mistake. There are things in this life worth hoping for. We're all aware of the clichéd longings of potential Miss Universe contestants as they 'hope for world peace'. An end to war and the suffering surrounding war, a solution for the effects of climate change, the eradication of domestic violence – these are aims worthy of our hope, but in the end, they cannot satisfy the deep desire in us for an ultimate hope, a hope that satisfies the questions that reach into the realm of eternity.

Ultimately, Christian hope rests on the fact that everything will be made, and is being made, perfectly new through Christ, including our relationship with God. As Christopher Wright suggests, 'Revelation rolls back the curse to welcome the unhindered presence of God with the simple, world-changing words, "No longer will there be any curse" (Rev 22:3).'<sup>17</sup>

But if hope worth hoping for is to be found in Christ, then how can we be assured of this hope?

The truth as expressed in God's word, the Bible, assures those who belong to God that the hope we have in Christ will not go in vain. It is a rock we can build our lives on. Assurance in hope is thus dependent on the gift of faith. It cannot be accepted in any other way.

In this life we will place our hope in many things, all of which contribute to shape our lives. The question that will define our lives, though, comes down to, 'What will be the source of our ultimate hope, and in what truth will our hope

---

<sup>17</sup> Christopher J.H. Wright, *The God I don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids MI, 2008, p. 211.

rest?’ While I long for my children to live in a world where freedom, beauty and love rule, it is only through Christ that this is ultimately possible. The good news can be found exclusively in the ultimate hope that has been made possible through Christ alone. This is a hope worth hoping for, a sure and certain hope – a living hope.

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade ... kept in heaven for you (1 Pet 1:3-4).*

### *The immortal mortals*

This hope worth hoping for is one that can drastically alter our perspective on reality and should be reflected on in view of our own lives and the lives of those we connect with.

I have a vivid recollection of a situation in which I found myself reflecting, once again, on the deep things of life. It was during a boxing class that I first heard the tragic news of the death of a man I used to partner up with in training. He had quite suddenly died of brain cancer. I didn’t know a lot about this man, except that he was only about sixty years of age and that he had dedicated much of his time in life to learning and teaching martial arts.

Hearing this news stirred up my thinking about the things of life and death yet again. We all dedicate our lives to a whole range of pursuits, but in the end, what do any of them really mean? Does most of what we do mean anything at all? One thing that stands out at funerals is the general belief that each person, once pronounced dead, is considered to have been the greatest person to ever have lived, and that it seems important in some respect for the person to be able to live on, whether in our hearts and minds or simply on a well-worded inscription in a graveyard.

## 1. Being God's Human Beings

What is it about humanity that makes us obsessed with living on, or to put it another way, with immortality?

Perhaps you're familiar with Irene Cara's song *Fame*,<sup>18</sup> in which she claims she will live forever, calling everyone to remember her name. Lyrics such as these just might sum up why we in the West are so caught up in fame. Do we really believe that through fame we can live forever? We've all seen the legacy of rock stars such as Prince being kept alive by the power of the media, but how does Prince himself benefit from this approach to achieving immortality? He's dead!

While there are many religious beliefs and teachings about immortality, for now, let's focus on what science has to offer. Charles Darwin, through his theory of evolution by means of natural selection and survival of the fittest, teaches us that we can live on through the passing on of our genes. In other words, we have the potential to achieve immortality through reproduction – an ability that is shared throughout the animal kingdom.

Take, for instance, lions. A lion pride consists of a group of closely related females and a smaller group of separately interrelated males, present for a shorter time. When a new male enters the pride and earns his right to take over the pride, he kills the young cubs fathered by the previous males. Why? I believe Darwin would argue that he is playing his role in the survival of the fittest and passing on his genetic information. You could say he is living on through his genes.

This logic isn't exclusive to the animal kingdom. People have been reproducing their way to immortality for as long as history has been recorded, especially when it comes to royalty. The film *Braveheart* has a classic line that highlights the importance to a king for his bloodline to continue. When the cruel King Edward the Longshanks was approaching his final breath, Queen Isabella whispers in his ear, 'You see? Death

---

<sup>18</sup> Michael Gore and Dean Pitchford, *Fame*, RSO, 1980. Performed by Irene Cara for the film *Fame*.

comes to us all. But before it comes to you, know this: your blood dies with you. A child who is not of your line grows in my belly. Your son will not sit long on the throne. I swear it.<sup>19</sup>

Death does come to us all. True immortality, that's another question altogether, bloodline or no bloodline.

What then can we learn from the Christian Scriptures about death? The writer of Ecclesiastes reflects:

*Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: as one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return (Eccl 3:19–20).*

This gloomy reflection provides us with a reality check as to who we are. Human beings are not God. We are not immortal, and no attempts we make can change that truth.

Thankfully the Scriptures don't leave it at that. There is a way that our thirst for immortality can be satisfied. This is what lies at the heart of the good news of the Gospel message.

*When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:54–56).*

When Jesus was dying on the cross between two convicted criminals, the following message of hope was given.

*One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: 'Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' But the other criminal rebuked him. 'Don't you fear God,' he said, 'since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done*

---

<sup>19</sup> Quote from the Mel Gibson film *Braveheart*, Icon Entertainment International, The Ladd Company, USA, 1995.

## 1. Being God's Human Beings

*nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' Jesus answered him, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise' (Lk 23:39-43).*

In the end, we can choose to put our hope in a vast array of things but the only true way to immortality requires us to enter through what Jesus referred to as 'the narrow gate' (Mt 7:13-14). What Christ achieved on the cross gives us an exclusive hope, in that we mere mortals can receive the gift of immortality through his grace.

### *Falling from Graceland*

While living in God's grace is certainly our only hope of an eternity in his presence, is our hope assured?

The whole concept of 'falling from grace' has found itself in the centre of many Christian debates throughout the centuries. It refers to a person who at one time lived under God's grace, only to fall away to a state of God's condemnation. This whole concept rattles around in my mind because it infers that a person can at one time be a follower of Christ, only to reject this calling and deny the work of the Holy Spirit. A Lutheran pastor I know once likened this to giving God, and therefore his gift of grace, the proverbial finger. Obviously if we start journeying down this road, seeking to find answers where answers may not be found, we come to the hurdle of what it means to be God's elect.

People like to suggest that questions concerning Christian election and predestination are not worth getting too obsessed with, as in the end only God knows the answer, and the whole subject can become divisive. The problem is that our understanding of predestination impacts our ability to tackle the question, 'Can a person who is truly elect in Christ, having been transformed by the Holy Spirit, reject God, never to live under grace again?'

Lutheran pastor Friedemann Hebart suggests that the gift

of grace, made possible through what Christ has done, exists for all of humanity, as all have been chosen by God. It is the refusal of this gift that leads to the rejection of those who turn their back on God. God doesn't cause human opposition, even though he foresees it. According to the Formula for Concord:

The reason why all who hear the Word do not come to faith and therefore receive the greater damnation is not that God did not want them to be saved. It is their own fault because they heard the Word of God not to learn but only to despise, blaspheme, and ridicule it, and they resisted the Holy Spirit who wanted to work within them.<sup>20</sup>

While this helps us to understand how God's grace can be rejected, it doesn't answer the question of whether grace can be rejected following a person's sincere willingness to let the Spirit work within their hearts.

What we can hold on to is the clear teaching throughout the Scriptures of God's ultimate control. Those who truly belong to Christ will not fall from grace; rather, Christ will ensure that they will be heirs to his eternal kingdom as adopted sons and daughters.

Perhaps one of the most important passages in the Scriptures that helps us to address this concern can be found in John 10:27–30:

*Jesus said, 'My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one.'*

In these words, Jesus makes it clear that those who belong to him can feel secure in the knowledge that they will not fall from grace, but rather be held onto in such a way that nothing

---

<sup>20</sup> Hebart Friedemann, *One in the Gospel: The Formula of Concord for our day*, 2nd edn, Openbook, Howden SA, 2000, p. 148.

## 1. Being God's Human Beings

can separate them from him.

While the comfort and security of this truth is something that the Christian can wrap themselves up in for eternity, it still leaves us with the question, 'What about those who claim to have had faith and accepted Christ, but have now turned their backs on God?'

There have been many stories of pastors and devout church members who have renounced their faith, changed faith, turned to atheism or humanism or given up on life altogether. I have read stories of several famous, influential people who have dabbled in Christianity, only to fall away and follow the next path. While I suspect these are the types of stories that lead to the whole idea of 'falling from grace', only God will ever know the truth about the inner workings of each individual. I therefore believe it is wise for all of us to refrain from making any judgements regarding 'the sheep and the goats'.

What we have discovered on our journey so far is that while we continue to live in a world of broken, sinful people, pain and suffering will be an unavoidable part of our reality. The good news is that we can place our hope in something worth hoping for: a hope that can never be taken away. Those who live in God's grace will be held ever so tightly in the eternal hands of the Almighty.

*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 (Rom 3:23-24).*