

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Facing the challenge of the world today: God at work in our lives

Our house is littered with unfinished projects. Not all of them are mine, and they are unfinished for a variety of reasons. My daughter and I have been making a mini rocking chair for one of her bears for well over a year. To be strictly accurate, we have **not** been making it for most of that time - we have been busy doing other things! It's a fun project that will look really good when it's finished and it **will** be finished some day, but probably not next week! Other projects are less promising. My son started assembling and painting a simple model 18 months or so back. It went well for a few weeks, and then got put down and left. Since then his attention has shifted to his model trains and I rather doubt the old model will ever be completed! One project that I can **guarantee** will never be completed is the reversing lights for my Land Rover. I bought them around 6 years ago at a Land Rover fair, thinking they would make reversing down our unlit track at night much easier. They might if they were not still on a shelf in my garage! The reason I can be so sure they will never get fitted is that we sold the Land Rover nearly 2 years ago!

Unlike our family, God has no unfinished projects. Listen to this week's key verse. Paul writes to the Philippians, "[I am] confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." Philippians 1:6. Did you hear that? God **will** complete the project He has begun in your life. In fact, it is a characteristic of God that He always completes what He begins. There are a variety of reasons that my family fail to complete things. Lack of time, lack of resources, inability and loss of interest. None of these apply to God. The eternal God never runs out of time. The possessor of all creation never runs out of resources. The omnipotent God does not suffer from any inability and the unchanging One never loses interest, or grows bored. Everything that we find God starting in the Bible we also see Him finishing. Granted, there are sometimes thousands of years between start and finish, but God never leaves projects unfinished.

God led the nation of Israel out of Egypt. The people sometimes despaired of ever getting past the desert, and thought they were certain to starve, or die of thirst, but God finally led them into Canaan. The outcome was never in doubt. In Genesis 3, God promised to send a deliverer for humanity who would come from Eve's descendants. Perhaps she thought it would be one of her own sons. Generation after generation went by. The promise was repeated many times, but never fulfilled. Finally God sent His own Son into this world and fulfilled the promise in a way that nobody had imagined. God finished something He had started long before.

The same pattern is found in the way God deals with individuals. My wife and I have been reading Genesis at home and following again the story of Jacob, starting at Genesis 25. What a project God took on there! God promised blessings for Jacob before he was even born. (Genesis 25:23) Then again at Bethel, God promised wonderful things to the young man. (Genesis 28:13-15) But Jacob's character was nowhere close to being acceptable to God. Jacob was a schemer and a deceiver. He always had a plan to get what he wanted, and he was quite willing to cheat to see his plan completed. He was even prepared to trick his elderly father if he thought he could get away with it. (Genesis 27:1-40) Jacob was pretty much the moral opposite of his grandfather Abraham. If Abraham was famous for his faith (Hebrews 11:8-12, 17-18), Jacob was famous for his scheming self-reliance. Would God abandon Jacob as a hopeless case and choose another person to bless? Of course not! God did with Jacob exactly what He has always done: He completed what He had begun. It was a project that lasted all of Jacob's life, and it was many years before it bore much visible fruit, but God worked steadily in Jacob's life until He had transformed him. If you have taken Christ as your Saviour, then God promises to do exactly the same in your life. "He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." (Philippians 1:6)

Some of you might be thinking, "That's true for other people, but I have made a complete mess of my life. I have committed big sins with lasting consequences, even since I became a Christian. My life is never going to be transformed like that."

It should be said that sins do have consequences that we may have to live with for a long time. David suffered years of difficulties because of his adultery with Bathsheba. (2 Samuel 11:1-12:25) Some sins might also exclude us from certain areas of Christian service. Believers who have left wives and children because of sexual sin will not be suitable for leadership and pastoral roles in the church. But none of this means that such believers have been 'thrown on the scrapheap' by God. Not only does God fully intend such people to be restored to the enjoyment of faith in Christ and active fellowship with other believers, He also intends to lead them on to full spiritual maturity. In Joel 2:25, after

speaking about the judgement God will send on His people, Joel quotes God as saying, "So I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten ... You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God."

If you are still tempted to think that you are an exception, then remember the Gospel that saves you. What removed the guilt and punishment of all the sins you committed in the past? It was the death of Jesus Christ for those sins. To suggest that Jesus' death was insufficient to deal with some of those sins would be to insult the death of God's own Son, and to suggest that God had provided too small a salvation for certain human needs. What about the sins that we commit after we become Christians? Are they dealt with by some other mechanism? Of course, the answer is an emphatic 'No!' All our sins, past, present and future, are dealt with by the one death of Christ. To imagine that I have committed some sin that the cross of Christ cannot deal with is to insult the value of the cross and the great work that Christ did there. If you think that a lengthy period of self-punishment, followed by extended efforts at self-improvement are necessary before you can return to God and seek forgiveness, you are still failing to properly understand the Gospel. We don't preach to sinners that they must make a solid effort to improve themselves before they can come to God and accept His offer of free salvation through the death and resurrection of His Son! We tell them that they can never hope to make themselves acceptable to God by their own efforts, and that they need to come just as they are. Why should we preach a different message to ourselves when we have done wrong as Christians?

The moment we realise we have committed some sin we must fight any urge to hide from God until we have cleaned ourselves up a bit. Rather, we must run immediately **to** God so that we might be forgiven and receive the 'cleaning up' that only Christ and His death can ever produce. (1 John 1:9)

Sometimes our problem is not some particularly big sin that we have been guilty of, but many years of wasted time. Either we only became a believer in relatively old age, or we have been a believer for many years but have simply failed to grow, or actively serve Christ for years, perhaps decades. The sense of waste and guilt that this creates can be so great that it effectively stops us from making any progress in our Christian life. The more you focus in this way on the time you have wasted in the past, the less inclined you are to start using your time usefully now. This wastes more time, so that next time you look back you feel even more defeated! The only way to break the circle is to change the way you look back. When Paul looked back on his life before he became a Christian, he was unforgiving about what he had been and done. We remember how he called himself the 'chief of sinners' (1 Timothy 1:15). But Paul realised that the past cannot be changed, even God cannot do that. However, God had, in spectacular grace, forgiven the past and God's grace was still operating in the present. So he says, in 1 Corinthians 15:10, "But by the grace of God I am what I am". The present and the future can be changed, so that is where Paul lived his life. He planned for the future, always recognising God's right to overrule his plans, and lived in the present. Past mistakes are available to learn from, but letting them prevent progress in the present is foolish. When I was in high school, there was a popular poster that read, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life". Maybe you need to take that motto to heart.

I have taken some time to deal with possible problems before I look positively at the subject of 'God at work in our lives'. We will consider two questions:

- What do you want to do with your life?
- What does God want to do in your life?

### 1. **What do you want to do with your life?**

It's the sort of question that frustrated parents ask their older children when they are showing no signs of settling down to a steady job: 'What are you going to do with your life?' When we are very young, we tend to think no further than what we are going to do with today. As we grow up, our horizon extends to weeks, months and years. At some point, we need to ask what we are going to do with our life as a whole, otherwise we risk frittering it away a few weeks at a time. Even much later in life, it can be helpful to consider the whole time that we may have left to live, and how we can best use it.

When parents ask the question they usually mean 'what career are you going to pursue'. When young people consider what they are going to do, they are more likely to think about their dreams of being a famous rock star! What we are really thinking about is what will make us as happy as possible. Christians know that they must also consider what will please their Father in heaven. Such is our perverted view of God that we often think that the more we please God the less fun we will have. Therefore, living the Christian life becomes a process of having as much fun as I can without offending God too much. This approach fails to notice that the teaching and experience of the Bible's writers is that living for God is actually a joyful, pleasurable experience. Psalm 119 is a psalm not just about the psalmist's delight in the word of God, but also his delight in living by it. "Make me walk in the path of Your commandments, for I delight in it." (Psalm 119:35).

As we set out to find joy in pleasing God with our lives, we then run into the issue of how to make right choices about what we should actually do. Should all serious Christians become missionaries or preachers, or follow some other full time Christian service? What if I make a mistake in one of life's big choices? I don't think God is half so concerned about what we do as how we do it. God wants me to use the gifts that He has given me to honour Him, but He is more concerned about my attitude than my career choice.

Let's say God has given me the aptitude to be a good business man but none of the gifts needed to be a missionary. Would I honour God more by being a missionary? Clearly not, since God did not give me the gifts or calling to fulfil that role. So then I decide to set up in business and, being a believer, I naturally behave honestly and fairly. In due time, I have some success: how do I react? Do I congratulate myself on my skill and start dreaming about what I can spend my profits on, or do I thank God for giving me both the skills and the opportunities to succeed, and think about how I can use my increased wealth to increase my Christian giving? Or perhaps business does not go as well as I had hoped, and my honesty is holding me back from various ways to increase profits. Do I conclude that God has stopped helping me, and that I need to be more flexible with my morals to help myself along a little? Or perhaps I have started the wrong business, or I should really have become a solicitor! Rather, I should ask God what He is trying to teach me through the difficulties and thank Him that I have suffered just a little bit for the sake of righteousness. It is these kinds of decisions that determine what we make of our lives. We far too easily forget the statement of Paul that, "Godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Timothy 6:6). It is one of life's ironies that we strive to achieve more because we think that this will make us content. Then, when we have more, we find that we are not content, so we strive for a little more. The process goes on and on until we realise that a large part of our life has gone by, and we are still not content. Try making 1 Timothy 6:8 your motto: "Having food and clothing, with these we shall be content."

If you can learn to be content with the basic necessities of life (which is what the phrase 'food and clothing' implies) and hold anything above that as available to use in God's service, you will be well on your way to a happy life and become immune to many of the worries that consume most people in the west.

## **2. What does God want to do in your life?**

God's primary goal in your life is to produce a complete, mature Christian character. Paul has several ways of expressing this. "That you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:19). "A perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). "That the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:17). They all describe a completed person. God's ultimate goal is to reproduce the thoughts, words and behaviour of His Son in you. Everything else is more or less secondary to this. Understanding this fact makes it much easier to face many of life's problems. It is often said that God is more committed to our character than our comfort. This means that when I have done my best to act righteously in a difficult situation and I have been unfairly criticised, my proper response is not to complain that I deserved better and decide not to bother next time. The right approach is to think through what I can learn from my difficult circumstances, otherwise God may keep sending more difficulties to press home the point! Most of us have times when we would rather God was a bit less concerned with developing our character. Put bluntly, we see the need for the forgiveness at the beginning of our salvation, and look forward to the promise of glory at the end, but we would rather not bother with the 'growth' bit in the middle! We think of it as one of those optional extras that you can decide to take with your new car. We feel that we didn't select the 'spiritual growth' option, and don't like having to pay for it!

We've all seen the 'men at work' signs that are put out at the roadside when some maintenance job is being done. When we are saved, God puts a 'God at work' sign next to us and it stays there all our lives! As we were thinking at the beginning, God does not abandon His projects, and will complete what He has begun. Perhaps there is a better analogy in house restoration than road repairs. When we are saved God takes up His residence inside us by His Spirit (Ephesians 1:13). Of course, it needs a work of new creation before our hearts are suitable for the presence of God and that work is God's alone, and accomplished in an instant.

But my life and character still fall a long way short of God's standards. So He sets about a programme of improvements. The bedrooms of my mind need much rubbish clearing out (we get practical advice for this in Philippians 4:8) and they also need expanding to begin to understand some of God's great truths (see the prayers in Ephesians 1:15-23 and Ephesians 3:14-21). The living room of my heart also needs serious extension to make room for greater love for God and for other believers and unbelievers (Psalm 119:32). God will want to create a study so that I have somewhere to seriously apply myself to His word (Psalm 1:2) and the kitchen will need totally refurbishing to move me away from microwaved junk food to a balanced diet, including solid meat (1 Corinthians 3:2). The exterior will need several coats of paint in order to reflect the character of the new owner (1 Peter 2:9). A new lighting system will be required (1 Thessalonians 5:4-5), and the windows will certainly need attention (Ephesians 1:18). A project like this is not completed in a few days and there are always times in any big project where you despair of things ever improving. But we don't need to despair. Although God certainly intends us to work with Him on the large scale refurbishment, He is the owner and project manager, and He has given His personal guarantee that He will complete

the job! (Philippians 1:6) By the way, you might want to go online to obtain the transcript in order to check out the series of Bible references I have just given.

The distinction I have made between what I want to do with my life and what God wants to do in it should not be made too sharply. If I am pulling in a different direction from God, something has gone wrong. When we start to view everything we do as an opportunity to work **with** God on the development of our Christian character, it opens up new parts of our lives.

Christians in full time 'secular' work sometimes get frustrated that a large percentage of their time is spent just earning a living and a very small percentage is available to work for Christ. Full time mothers and full time carers have similar frustrations. These frustrations are reduced enormously if we treat the day's activities as God given opportunities for character development. Believe me, the everyday world of work provides ample opportunities to develop patience and perseverance!

God realises that we all accept that characteristics such as patience and perseverance are virtues, and are as plainly demanded from us by Scripture as they were evident in the character of Jesus (for example Colossians 3:13). He also realises that we will never go out of our way to seek opportunities to practise them. So, in His mercy, He provides such opportunities regularly, and we, in our ignorance, complain bitterly! Try working your way through an epistle in the New Testament (you might start with James) and make a note of every aspect of Christian character that is commanded or commended in the letter. Then work your way through the list of character traits one by one, and spend two or three days looking for opportunities in your everyday life to develop that characteristic. You will probably find that the most fertile areas for development are the situations and people that you struggle with most. There is nothing like an infuriating family member, or colleague, to give you scope to practise being gracious! All those situations where you feel out of your depth and floundering become opportunities to develop your faith and prayerfulness! Try this out for a few weeks and you will find that what seemed like unnecessary frustrations that you were praying for God to remove, were actually His set lessons to help you develop in ways that He recognised were necessary for you.

## **Conclusion**

Let's learn to treat the 'God at work' sign next to our lives as a promise of His persistent, loving attention rather than a threat to our well being. Let's be ready to welcome the opportunities our loving Father offers us to co-operate with Him in transforming our substandard lives into suitable residences for the King of kings!

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