

In the Midst of

Drowning

Tim Stapleton

“There is a way that seems right to a man...”

Proverbs 14.12



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*To family and friends ...
for helping me to put this together.*

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*Seemed like such fun, such happiness. No stress at all, just my way.
And wand'ring through the wilderness, I won't look up the right way.
Through all those years You knew, You stayed.
Whilst at sin's darkest door I played.
Yet my salvation's plan You made,
Before first night or day. ...*

Preface

“Moreover the law entered that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more.” (Rom 5.20)

I’m writing this book because I spent many years walking away from God, and I tell you this to my shame. I begin with Romans 5.20 because no one can deserve to have the least wrong they’ve committed forgiven them by God, yet He has forgiven me much wrong and so has shown me very much grace indeed. God’s love for His children is bigger than any catalogue of sins they have been ashamed to carry round with them. The choice of title will become clear later.

I hope this book will help to warn against backsliding. It is also my hope and prayer that it will help those whose walk with God is not as it should be at the present. And if you are reading this as someone who is not a Christian, perhaps with no desire to know God, please read on, and learn of One Who knows you better than anyone else, longs for you to come to Him and loves every one of His people with an everlasting love.

Above all, I want my God and Saviour Jesus Christ to be glorified through these pages. That is, I want Him to be made much of and shown to be the only reason our lives are worth living. I want Him to be shown to be the just, loving, caring Saviour, Great High Priest and King of kings that He is.

“Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!” (2 Cor 9.15)

“He must increase, but I must decrease.” (John 3.30)

1 What and Why?

“Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love” (Rev 2.4)

First, let's understand what backsliding really is. Any Christian has the potential to backslide, to stop putting in the effort required to live God's way and consequently to slip into a worldly, selfish way of life.

The people of the Church at Ephesus to whom Jesus was speaking in the above verse were not what they once were. As Christians we know we love God but we should not boast of this as we recognise that the wonderful and amazing thing is God's love for us. Yet sadly it is all too easy to turn our backs on God and His loving relationship with us which is unlike any other. So, what is the cause? There are as many reasons for backsliding as there are people of God who have experienced it.

Certainly the devil does all he can to turn Christians away from God and the godly life. Plus, none of us are perfect. We are all sinners with different characters and weaknesses so that we daily think, say and do things that are wrong in God's sight.

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Rom 3.23)

We are not perfect and could never make ourselves perfect even after a thousand lifetimes of trying. We fall for temptations, we start longing for worldly pleasures and soon, somewhere along the way, will come the idea that 'just a little' or 'just the once' won't do any harm. If the ways of the world and sin were a deep pool, then even just dipping in one toe still gets us wet! It is not possible to live God's way and the world's way at the same time. Jesus says: “No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other.” (Luke 16.13)

What else may cause a Christian to turn their eyes away from God? Grief or a burden of some kind can do it as well as temptation. We may, like Peter, take our eyes off Jesus and start to sink when looking upon the storm and waves around us. Questions will come to mind: how could God let this happen if He loves me? So where was God when I really needed Him? Certainly God is in Heaven, but why

isn't He here with me? He knows nothing of my sorrow and sadness. Yet who else could know us so completely but the One Who designed us? And look at Isaiah 53:3 "He is despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief".

But it is time for some encouragement. Although true Christians may fall into much sin, they still belong to God. One of the very many lies with which the devil tries to deceive people is to tell them that they are too bad for God. Jesus said: "All the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me, I will by no means cast out." (John 6.37)

You may have spent much time away from a godly life, you may feel as though you have completely let go of God, but as you can see from the above words of Jesus, Who is God Himself, He will never let you go.

"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." (Joshua 1.9)

Our perfectly holy God is completely just and must punish every sin. Our least offence against His law means that we deserve forever in Hell, a place just as real as the one in which you read these words. It is without God and everything that He is; love, peace, light, and so on. But look at these words from the apostle Paul: "For He [God the Father] made Him [Jesus] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." (2 Cor 5.21)

Here is where the encouragement comes in. God the Father placed all the sins of His people on Jesus Who bore them on the cross where He suffered the Hell we deserve, that we may be with Him in Heaven forever. When God's own Son 'became' our sin, His Father had to turn away from Him. That's how serious our sin is and that's how much God hates sin. So my boast is in God alone, for with Him everything is good, right and wonderful beyond imagining.

Just one more word of encouragement - and a warning. Another lie of the devil is to try to convince backslidden Christians that they were never Christians in the first place. I know from personal experience how heavily such thoughts can weigh on a person's mind. So be comforted! If you once asked God to forgive you of your sins and

make you a new person through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ then He has and will continue to do so, although it may not feel like it. In Hebrews 12.2 Jesus is described as “the author and finisher of our faith”. It is God that starts the work of salvation within us, and God is eternal. That is the ‘finish’ of our faith; eternity with God. He will never leave a job unfinished. Also, think over these loving, caring words that God has given us: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1.9)

And: “Being confident of this very good thing, that He Who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.” (Phil 1.6)

When you give your life to God, He gives you the strength to live for Him. It is God’s work in you and for you that makes you right with Him. So trust in God completely and not yourself!

2 Early Days

“Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth; before the difficult days come, and the years draw near when you say, I have no pleasure in them.” (Eccles 12. 10)

I do not have many memories of the first three or four years of my life, apart from everyone being very big and having trouble figuring out which way was ‘off’ for a tap. The other one was playschool with the little bottles of milk now and then, mastering the technique of writing ‘the’, and the beginning of my love for plants. We all planted Nasturtium seeds in little pots and when they started to grow I begged to take mine home before everyone else did, and was allowed to.

In the early days of my life, I apparently looked very much like my Grandpa (Dad’s Dad) did as a boy. He was from the London area and spent many years as a Church Pastor, including two years with Albany Baptist Church, Australia. In fact, my four grandparents were Bible believing Christians and so are my parents.

Having Christian parents, I was taken to Sunday School and one or two services a week, and sometimes I actually managed to stay awake right to the end of the last hymn! Things from Bible verses and Bible stories did start to stick in my mind though and at seven years old, although in a very simple way, I realised it was important for Jesus to be with me in my life. So one day when alone in my room, I simply said “Jesus come into my heart.” Although it would be a few more years until I said to God I had sinned and asked His forgiveness, I have no doubt that God had begun to work within me back then. If you look into the New Testament you will find someone of certain similarities to myself: “When I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your Grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also.” (2 Tim 1.5)

Being in a Christian family doesn’t make you a Christian, any more than being in an orchard makes you an apple tree! You cannot rely on someone else’s faith to make you right with God or give you a place in Heaven. However, despite a vast number of imperfections through the years, God has brought me to know Him and given me the faith to accept the truth that is the Bible. I can just remember being tucked into bed by my Mum and on many evenings asking, “Do you think Je-

sus will come back tomorrow?” Aside from having Christian parents and grandparents, being able to remember the books of the Bible in order as we were taught to sing them in Sunday School, is something for which I am still very grateful. There are though many verses I still long to keep firmly lodged in my memory.

Even as a child, and in a Christian family, I was still just a sinner although in fewer and simpler ways. I really couldn't say where certain weaknesses that 'helped' me backslide began other than the simple fact that I was born a sinner. So here again, I would echo those words of Romans 3.23: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Growing up involved standard kid-growing-up-stuff - getting a bit taller, voice going up and down for an embarrassing week or two, thinking how unfair life was when I had to do what I was told, and slowly learning more about God, my Saviour Jesus Christ and my way around the Bible. To my great cost it was only many years later that I finally started to take seriously the great importance of spending time alone with God each day. Because these times just with God are so important and vital to our living godly lives, it is this above everything else that the devil will try to distract you from doing, using any of a vast array of excuses or even seemingly justifiable reasons. So do not be surprised to find having a Quiet Time with God is occasionally, frequently or daily the hardest thing to do. But I do not say that to make you feel low or downcast: "Through God we will do valiantly, for it is He Who shall tread down our enemies." (Psalm 60.12)

Simply being by yourself with God and pouring out all that is on your heart and mind to Him, as well as reading some of His Book is the most important part of a Christian's daily life: "But you, when you pray, enter into your room, and shutting your door, pray to your Father in secret." (Matt 6.6) And: "Your word I have hidden in my heart that I might not sin against you." (Psalm 119.11)

3 Signs of Change – Seen and Unseen

“O Timothy, guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge - by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith, grace be with you, Amen.” (1 Tim 6.20-21)

Firstly, change can be good; and growing up as a Christian with your faith becoming stronger, is always a good kind of change. My sister Hazel and I began thinking about being baptised. We knew we must show to others the faith God had given us, and very shortly after we started going to a Baptist Church where our Grandpa had once been the pastor, we heard an announcement for a baptismal service, a straightforward service with no frills. Apart from anything else, being baptised was a very simple way of saying that just as I was completely in the water, becoming a Christian made me completely in Christ. This is a very clear sign of change. However...

Not all change is good. Even with the most caring, loving and protective parents, a youngster growing up is sooner or later going to start finding out more and more about the world around them. And for me this meant finding out that vast numbers of people, Christians and non-Christians alike, were not living the same way as me. Along with the discoveries of growing up came general curiosity about not living the way I did, hand in hand with those old trip-ups, “maybe I’ll try that just once or twice” and “seems OK to me”. And so without wanting to glamorise sin or make it out to be anything good, only a handful of years after being baptised, having an occasional pint with a friend seemed rather a good idea. Sometimes this happened even with another Christian. So where was the harm in it? Let us hear from Paul again: “All things are lawful to me, but not all things contribute. All things are lawful to me but I will not be ruled by any.” (1 Cor 6.12 Interlinear Version)

As he has done since the Garden of Eden, the devil basically took some of God’s words, twisted them, and turned them into a temptation. Rather than shouting, “leave God and the church behind, start drinking, smoking and going to pubs and clubs all the time”, the subtle hissing voice of the devil suggested a quiet pint now and then. It is certainly true that, “I can do all things through Christ Who strengthens me” (Phil 4.13) but the more you start to think of self, the less you think of God and His strength, and so fall for temptations more and more.

Roughly a year or so after trying a pint, I was offered a cigarette by a non-Christian friend, and that became another “why not?” For now I was still going to Church and even taking part each year in a couple of weeks of Beach Mission. (It was at about twenty years old in fact, and on a mission in Cornwall that I met a girl I was to meet again many years later, and what amazing things have happened since then!) Anyway, the then unseen signs of change were simply a combination of curiosity, seeing how much bigger the world was than my life, with all it had to offer, being a sinner and sadly, starting to quieten my conscience without even saying a word.

Along with this, my daily walk with God developed into less reading the Bible, prayer reduced to a few hurried words, if that, and caring very much less about all things to do with church. Not only will the devil try to entice people away from God with worldly things, but sometimes he will attempt to discourage a person from continuing in God’s way within the church itself. These next few words may not seem like much but the one who hates God more than any other will come along and put a magnifying glass over a situation and say, “look how big a thing this really is, you can’t let that go unnoticed”.

It was at a church members’ meeting where we were discussing and deciding on all sorts of things that an elderly brother and very godly man stood up and politely made it clear that he must remain absent for the rest of the meeting. The reason, broadly speaking, was that things concerning some matter on the agenda had not been organised in the appropriate way and so this long-time Christian and church member would have nothing more to do with that meeting. The details are not important, but this did much to put me off church. Let me say that this is not meant to put down this brother who has been home with God for many years now, but simply to show that any number of things can contribute to a Christian slipping away from God.

At the end of my teenage years I less and less wanted to know about God and His love, and more and more about the world. The false wisdom of the world and those around me seemed so much more important than all that stuff I thought I had no choice but to learn and live out to the very letter when younger. Here too we can see something of this in God’s Word. In the Old Testament we read of Rehoboam, who having just become king, “rejected the advice which elders had given him and consulted the young men who had grown up with him who stood before him.” (1Kings 12.8)

This was of course, not the right plan. These men lacked wisdom, maturity and experience, and simply wanted things to be done their own way, and the king listened. And it was exactly the wrong plan of action I took; walking away from the church, my family and worst of all, from God. It saddens me still to think of the hurt I caused my loving, caring family. But how much more I grieved the heart of God. He had chosen me to be His child before the world ever began turning, through not one single merit within me but because “I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy.” (Rom 9.15)

Only a few years later it was decided that my membership at the Baptist Church should be cancelled as I had stopped going all together. Again I say this to my great shame. However, I must tell you this, God never left me or gave me up, even when I had given Him up. Such love is beyond the words of any language to fully describe. And that Jesus should suffer my Hell, is a wonder beyond all wonders. Only in Heaven will there be long enough to thank God for all He has done for me, because Heaven lasts forever.

Despite His indescribable love for me, I turned my back on God. This is very serious indeed, but never think for a moment that there is no way back to walking in God’s light. “Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit”, says the Lord of Hosts.” (Zech 4.6)

4 Onward and Downward

“And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living.” (Luke 5.13)

Looking back, it is so obvious how completely impossible it is to live for God and to live in the ways of the world. So I had stopped having anything to do with church, and wanted as little as possible to do with my family, resenting, as I thought, having been forced into religion. Strangely though, it was many years before I would openly deny God as the apostle Peter did. But all the time I was finding it easier and easier to fit in with the world and my conscience was gradually buried deeper and deeper.

Attending church was replaced by various pursuits, largely of the pub variety, and I became more and more like my non-Christian friends and acquaintances. I followed their habits, their ways of speaking and thinking, and soon I knew no other way. Think on these words of a very wise man, who even wandered from God’s way himself: “for as he thinks in his heart, so is he.” (Prov 23.3)

One major reason to spend time every day alone with God is to become more like Jesus. However, the more you walk in the ways of the world, the more you become like it.

When you live God’s way, as much as any sinner can, you will always find opposition and difficulty in one form or another, not the least of which will be a daily barrage of temptations. Someone slipping and sliding away from God encounters temptations too but they are different. They appear as the things done by all others around you and become a very subtle encouragement to simply be the same as them. And then, of course, there will always be someone happy to agree that ‘yes’, religion really is a waste of time. Think of it like this: the more mud you wade through, the more it sticks to you and the heavier you get. So it becomes easier just to stay in the mud, rather than try to lift yourself out.

But back to Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son for a while. There are strong similarities between the prodigal son and myself. He was his father’s son to begin with, so obvious yet true. Despite this, and

knowing what was right, he wanted to go his own way and enjoy the pleasures of the world. Incidentally, since these were from the devil, 'tricks and lies' would be more appropriate words than 'pleasures'. They are not true pleasures, and only a person belonging to God will ever know what genuine pleasure, joy and happiness is. The Bible puts it like this: "You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy: at Your right hand are pleasures forever more." (Psalm 16.11)

Still, for someone far too proud to be wrong, it was the world and what it had to offer that I wanted. Sometimes I had jobs, and occasionally for a couple of years at a time, but I wasted many opportunities. When you care less about God, despite what you may want to think, you will find you really care less about yourself too.

But just as the prodigal son knew he still belonged to his father, there was some small part of my mind that hadn't thrown out absolutely everything I was taught in my younger days. I can recall opposing evolution as a completely false theory. But then, I can even remember, when I was about nine, saying to the rest of my class, with my teacher listening, that the Bible was true and God made the world. This amazes me every time I think about it. But whilst such thoughts crossed my mind, I was living the life of a backslider, following the world and not following God at all.

5 False Hope

'Then Agrippa said to Paul, "you almost persuade me to become a Christian.'" (Acts 26.28)

Although a Christian, I most definitely wasn't living as one. However, when I was about twenty six, I started going to a local Methodist church. The news of this, I think, cautiously pleased and almost certainly surprised my family. It certainly surprised me! But there I was, walking into a church full of strangers after not having been in one for several years. Everyone was friendly and welcoming and in the following months I even joined one of the mid week house group meetings.

How many months I attended this church I don't know but it certainly wasn't more than months. For this short time, my living as a Christian involved going to church and house groups but really nothing more. The pubs and the clubs remained. Once again I thought I could live with a foot in both worlds and once again, I utterly failed. Indeed, I was almost persuaded to take up my walk with God again, but greatly weakened intellectually and spiritually by turning my back on God for so long, the self-pleasing false pleasures of the world called continuously and I listened.

It was no good. I just couldn't restrict my life so much by going to church. "For Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed." (2 Tim 4.10) This Demas had lived and worked for God as a co-worker with the apostle Paul. And how sad Paul must have been to see his friend, like Solomon of old, go tumbling away with a love for the world.

Some may consider what I have said so far to be extremely serious or highly dangerous and so it is. Were it not for the immeasurable grace, mercy and loving kindness of God, I just couldn't say what kind of a mess my life would be in right now. It was certainly nothing special for years and years. It makes me pause and think as I write. There may be some of God's children who would say they fell much further away from God than I did, but I say again that all those God has chosen to be His were loved by Him before He created this world, and will be with Him forever when earthly life is over. And why does God choose to save any of us sinners in the first place? God said, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy". (Rom 9.15)

So whoever you are, or however bad you may have been, or even however much you think you are good enough without God, He still has this invitation for you: “Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God for He will abundantly pardon.” (Isaiah 55.6-7)

Occasionally I would let the thought pass through my mind that maybe some day much later in life I would get back to God, although I never considered how this might happen. Sadly, there must be many who never come to know God, who realise too late that putting God off until later is a mistake that will stay with them in the never-ending darkness of Hell. Make sure you are not one of them. For those who once knew they belonged to God, please don't delay in coming back to Him. Can you really think of a genuine reason not to? There isn't one! What is your pride worth before God? Or do you really think that on returning to God He will start raining vindictive punishments on you? Remember that when the prodigal son “came to himself” and headed back home, his father ran to meet him, put the best robe on him and commanded a great celebration feast; hardly a reluctant reunion on the part of the father!

See what love God has for you! Jesus was mocked, blasphemed to His face, was hit and had His beard ripped out. His back was whipped with cords of leather strips tipped with sharp pieces of bone or metal. A crown of long, sharp thorns was placed on His head and beaten down, pushing into the masses of nerve endings in a human scalp. Then metal spikes were hammered through His hands and feet and He was lifted upright on a cross of wood, where His bones would start to go out of joint. Every word spoken caused even more pain, whilst it became harder and harder to breath.

On top of the indescribable pain of crucifixion, God the Father poured out His wrath and judgement for the sins of His people on Jesus Christ, and He Who made this world suffered the Hell that ungrateful sinners such as you and I deserve, that we may be with Him in Heaven forever. How dare we think God wants to be hateful to us? It's our sin and wickedness that God hates, and that was taken care of by Jesus *completely*. So rightly is Jesus described as the One Who is altogether lovely!

Here are some lines from a sermon preached by a very godly man, Rev Charles Spurgeon, on the 23rd December 1855:

“Pause, my soul and wonder! Thou hadst goings forth in the person of Jesus from everlasting. Not only when thou wast born into the world did Christ love thee, but His delights were with sons of men before there were any sons of men. Often did He think of them; from everlasting to everlasting, He had set His affection upon them. What! Believer, has He had me in His hand, as His precious jewel, and will He now let me slip between His precious fingers? Did He choose me before the mountains were brought forth, or the channels of the deep scooped out, and will He lose me now? Impossible!”

6 Other gods before Him

“And such were some of you.” (1 Cor 6.11)

Many years ago I heard a very simple and true saying: “What you worship is what you live for.” Despite my life going downward fast, there were still things I was living for, but all worldly, selfish and sinful things. As I said earlier, temptations don’t always seem to be temptations when one is so far from God. Things would slowly creep in like many links forming a chain trying to enslave me to the world all the more. Living so far away from the light of God’s purity, holiness and perfection meant that I was living in a deep and heavy darkness. And this darkness meant that not only could I not see the multitude or magnitude of my sins and how much they were grieving God, and indeed my family, but I simply could not see the way in which I should be living. I had lost sight of the Light of the world, His Word, the Bible, and walking in His ways. The way of the world is sin, death and Hell, but look at what David said about living close to God in Psalm 36.9: “For with You is the fountain of life: in Your light we see light”.

I have always been fond of music, for the simple reason that it had a tune I liked. But things can stick in the head - rhythms, phrases, guitar riffs and, in my case, the overall feeling of hearing my own selection playing loud on a pub juke box. I wouldn’t say I’ve listened to the worst or the heaviest music, but over several years I did want more loud, heavy and definitely rebellious sounds. Find out some of the things I came across that are connected with rock music and see why this is such a great danger in itself. It’s about alcohol, drugs, sex, selfishness, hate, anger, violence, darkness of mind and soul, the devil himself. It rebels against all morals and definitely against God. Some will say, “Why should the devil have all the good music?” Well, he hasn’t! As for the Christian, we are not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. (Rom 12.2)

But by now this was my life and no one else’s. What I liked was what I had a right to like and as far as beliefs were concerned, whatever anyone else was into was fine just so long as they did not force it on someone else. I was worshipping, but tragically, almost anything but God. How much darkness there seems to hang over these last few words! How foolish to think I could live my own way for as long as I wanted.

I would always want for more money than I had, and that certainly wasn't very much, especially since I was on the dole more often than not. I know many people are unemployed through no fault of their own, but not me! It was a case of not caring about myself as I wasn't caring about God. I was lodging in a friend's house, not a close friend, so far from ideal. If going out was not affordable, I'd hide myself away with some science or fantasy fiction book.

At this point the dates can get a little more precise. In the middle of August 2008, and very much to my surprise, I received a letter from a girl I had met many years before, on a United Beach Mission team in Cornwall! My sister, Hazel, whom I believe has far stronger faith than most people I've ever met, has had M.E. - Myalgic Encephalomyelitis, a neurological condition - since she was eighteen. Although suffering much from it and unable to follow normal employment, she has spent many years working hard, with her computer mainly, to help other M.E. sufferers and talking of her Christian faith along with it. Her website is well worth a visit: www.oneagleswings.me.uk The girl who wrote me the letter had kept in touch with Hazel and so was able to find my contact details.

Not only was I surprised by this neat and friendly letter, but I felt sad, embarrassed and almost guilty over now being a completely different person from the one she had known many years before. I decided to reply, and definitely very soon, but, of course, I didn't. I only carried on wasting my life away. I do still have the letter but I never replied. Lois was a Christian and I wasn't living like one in any way so I just couldn't do it. Although I had over the previous year started to renew contact with some Christian friends who I had known years ago, I was basically still living the same life, going nowhere, same sinner!

7 In the Midst of Drowning

“Come now, and let us reason together,” says the Lord, “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow: Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool.” (Isaiah 1.18)

I was continuing to achieve nothing except wasting what money I had, keeping not the best of company, and frequently succeeding in my attempts not to think about God.

“And at the end of the time I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to Heaven, and my understanding returned to me; and I blessed the Most High and praised and honoured Him Who lives forever ...” (Dan 4.34)

And then, two months later, on the fifteenth of October 2008 another letter arrived and along with it a book. The letter of course was from Lois who had decided, praise God, to give communicating with me one more try. The book was *Man Over Board*, by Sinclair B Ferguson, a book about Jonah. Why I decided to read it I do not know, certain as I was that it would be talking of God and the Bible. But read it I did, and on page 39 of its 114 pages, the author asks his readers to consider if there is anything of Jonah in them and puts the simple question “AM I JONAH?” Two verses from a hymn by Charles Wesley followed:

O Jesus, full of pardoning grace,
More full of grace than I of sin,
Yet once again I seek Thy face;
Open Thine arms and take me in,
And freely my backslidings heal,
And love the faithless sinner still.

Thou know'st the way to bring me back,
My fallen spirit to restore;
O, for Thy truth and mercy's sake,
Forgive, and bid me sin no more;
The ruins of my soul repair,
And make my heart a house of prayer.

I don't think I could have read any further just then, had I wanted to, for the tears that blurred my vision. From Heaven God had reached down right into my very heart, with the love, mercy and grace that are

infinitely above human ability to grasp. It stopped me completely. I had run away from God, wanting nothing of God for many long, dark years and now it was time for an end of all that was my way of life. The recovery had begun. "Who is a God like You pardoning iniquity? He will again have compassion on us, and will subdue our iniquities." (Mic 7.18-19)

Human beings do not have love like this. Think of the best the world can do in comparison, with its books, films, buildings and the arts; even the very finest and noblest of all this will one day fade and fail, and crumble into dust. But God offers you infinite love culminating in the perfect life of eternity with Him. You could not give the whole world in exchange for that!

Along with my tears were words of prayer, and God heard and answered. As I continue to wonder at such love the words of another hymn come to mind:

Oh love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in Thee.
I give Thee back the life I owe,
That in Thine ocean depths its flow
May richer fuller be.

Just as Jonah was in the midst of drowning when God heard his prayer and rescued him, so in the midst of drowning in my sins God heard the first sincere prayer I had prayed in many years, picked me up and rescued me. Such an incredible thing! And only because of God, and Him alone.

It was recently suggested to me by a wise Christian brother that I start reading the books of Chronicles and one verse struck me in particular: "For many fell dead, because the war was God's." (1 Chron 5.22) This victory that God gave the tribes of Israel over their enemies illustrates not only how God loved His people and kept His promise to bless them, but also that we can only overcome the wrong in our lives through God. As Jesus said: "I am the Vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing." (John 15.5) And Paul: "I can do all things through Christ Who strengthens me." (Phil 4.13)

All these happenings were a huge delight to parents, sister and I don't know how many other people who had been praying for me for

years. It was a very humbling thing to discover that so many people had been praying for me, many of whom I had not even met. How much more humbling and amazing to know that before I was born God loved me, and that on the cross Jesus Christ bore the penalty for my every sin and for which I deserved a lost eternity in Hell. Such is the love of Jesus for sinners, yet how ungrateful we are!

Although many were delighted to learn that a turnaround had begun in my life, it didn't take long for our adversary, the devil, to show that he was not! It soon became clear that I was no longer welcome at my lodgings and I had to leave without notice with a few clothes and books in a bag. For ten days I suppose I was technically homeless, but never went without a bed under a friendly roof, or without food. When someone starts drawing near to God by His grace, the devil hates it. He is strong but what is his strength when compared to the infinite strength of God? It is always good to remember: "The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms." (Deut 33.27)

After a couple of false starts I found a couple of friendly churches, got to know some local Christians and started reading the Bible a great deal. I received a very generous gift from one of these Churches which enabled me to move into a rented bedsit. I only had to spend one night without a mattress! God has been good to me then and especially now, giving me far more blessings than can be told.

8 Run the Race

“See I have set before you an open door...” (Rev 3.8)

God had given me a little home of my own and after a bit more searching, He led me to a Baptist Church where I found the solid Bible teaching I was craving. I did indeed receive much help and encouragement from the other churches I attended, but solid spiritual food from unswerving Bible preaching and teaching is an absolute must for Christians young and old. So God found me this church which Lois and I still visit occasionally, and how good it is to see them.

Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love.
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.

Despite this, I'm still just a sinner and I know that perfection will not come until I meet Jesus Christ my Saviour. There were plenty of temptations and sad to say I fell for many of them. This, combined with fresh memories of how I had been living, did not have a good effect on me. It's not for nothing that the devil is called the “accuser of the brethren”. (Rev 12.10) I had slipped again, so could I really be forgiven again, really? Had I ever truly become a Christian?

There are many wicked fiery darts the devil uses and these questions can be among the worst of them. How often and for how long these dismal, dark skies of doubt dropped their worst storms I don't know, but again through God's strength alone I can say 'yes' I'm a sinner and 'yes' I deserve Hell, but 'YES' Jesus bore the curse and shame of all my sin and guilt, and 'YES' He suffered the very Hell I deserve. Hallelujah! With clothes made of the righteousness of Jesus Christ Himself, I have been made worthy of Heaven. “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things God has prepared for those who love Him.” (1 Cor 2.9) And how can a mere sinner love God? “We love Him because He first loved us.” (1 John 4.19)

Since God started to turn me back to Him, and through the three months the bedsit was my home, not only did God help me through churches but through the girl who later became my wife. After sending my first letter to her in many years, I received the second of many

book-containing packages that contained the one thing for which I had been praying but couldn't afford - a Bible. I read it right through in the following year.

I mentioned earlier that a decline in prayer and Bible reading marked the years before I completely filled my life with worldliness. Time to emphasise that again! You may be attending every church meeting there is and helping out with every activity, but sliding away from God begins where only you and God see. What happens in private will eventually come out in public so keep close to God! You can never deceive Him. Do not deceive yourself! "Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you, cleanse your hands you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded." (James 4.7-8)

As I said, serious doubts came. It wasn't for a moment a case of wondering if God was real or the Bible true. These were certainties for me. But what the devil did in Eden, he was doing to me - mixing lies with truth. Certainly there is God and I am a sinner. Where the lie came in was in my sins being virtually infinite and God's love for me, finite. Exactly the wrong way round! Have you ever felt like this, or do you now? Do you truly despair of yourself for falling into the same sins again and again, more times than you can remember? Well, Jesus died for them all. As well as God counting us completely justified from the moment we become a Christian, He continues to forgive our sins as we continue to confess them and seek the victory over them. (1 John 1.9) Repenting is not just a one-off event of turning to God and away from our sins, it is a continuous action through the rest of our lives. This is why it is not possible to 'stand still' spiritually speaking. We either slowly but surely grow to be more godly, or we stagnate. It's just a little like a pond with a fresh water stream flowing into it, or a land-locked pond doing nothing but becoming more and more dirty and vile-smelling.

Something I have learned recently and will continue to learn is that my faith does not depend on my feelings. Jonah was thrown into the sea during a raging storm, went down into the darkness of deep water, seaweed wrapping itself around him and not being able to breath for a time. Then, he was inside a huge fish for three days! Do you think he was full of the joy of being alive and one of God's children? Yet he prayed, and God heard his prayer. So what makes you or I any different? There is nowhere we can go that will hide us from God

as David said in Psalm 139. And just as well because I was in such darkness that I lost sight of the Light of the world Himself.

God never threw me away though, and never will. I long to be perfect, to sin against God no more and most of all to see my Saviour. "As for me, I will see Your face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied when I awake in Your likeness." (Psalm 17.15)

Thank You Lord for not leaving me. Thank You for saving this worthless sinner and showing him such indescribable love.

9 Providence

“If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in Heaven give good things to those who ask Him.” (Matt 7.11)

Many blessings indeed God has given me, and given us, each one of them tokens of His undeserved grace. Just before Christmas 2008, Lois and I met for the first time in fifteen years! Amazing, and how much to talk about too. In February 2009 life began anew for me in Northern Ireland. In March we were engaged, to the enormous and tearful delight of both our families and in November 2009 we were married! This is the only time I have ever asked God to give me someone as my wife, and He did, a match made in Heaven!

There is so much more that could be said of this amazing new life God has given me. Early last year He gave me a job working with plants, again using that interest He had put into my head at just a few years old. But far above all else is how wonderfully God loves and controls all things. His gracious providence towards His children, lovingly planning and caring for even the smallest details of our lives, exceeds the most fertile imagination.

One day we will all meet the God Who made us, and all will bow before Him. This will be the most awesome, wonderful and fearful day in history. I cannot say how I will feel exactly on that day, in that “moment, in the twinkling of an eye” when I shall be changed from sinner to sinless, but I know it will be the start of living in the presence of God forever. My certainty isn’t based on anything I have done but on the perfect justifying work of salvation accomplished by the perfect One, the Friend Who sticks closer than a brother, my Lord Jesus Christ.

When talking of Jesus Christ and knowing Him, it is impossible to give the whole picture without speaking of Hell. It is a real place of real unknowable and eternal punishment, reserved for everyone who remains without God all their earthly life. Hell is also what Jesus suffered for all who come to Him, that they might enjoy Heaven forever with Him. The Gospel, the good news of the Bible, tells of the greatest act of love of all time. Many years ago a godly Christian was asked what their favourite words outside of the Bible were. The answer was simply, “Jesus loves me”! Jesus spoke more of Hell than

Heaven. He wanted to warn people of where they were heading, with no uncertainty. Those who belong to God will have forever to find out what Heaven is like, and that really is a wonderful thought!

Finally, a couple of verses which mean much to me and a poem written around November time in 2008. May God bless you.

“Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your loving kindness: according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions.” (Psalm 51.1)

Once More With Feeling

Seemed like such fun, such happiness. No stress at all, just my way.
And wand’ring through the wilderness, I won’t look up the right way.
Through all those years You knew, You stayed.
Whilst at sin’s darkest door I played.
Yet my salvation’s plan You made,
Before first night or day.

No help at all to friend or self, no holiness, Christ likeness.
Faith and belief left on the shelf whilst hiding in the darkness.
And yet once more You called to me,
My sin, and such great love to see.
You me awoke and then set free.
To learn once more Your greatness.

There’s no compare to love so great, no equal of forgiveness.
For scarlet sinner You did wait and clothe him all in whiteness.
Now lead me on great Father lead,
To live for You, to sow the seed.
That many more may yet be freed,
And know Christ’s love so selfless.

“Come now and let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they are like crimson, they shall be as wool.” (Isaiah 1.18)

