

Sermon Given by

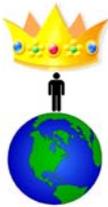
Simon Scott

At the Morning Services on 7<sup>th</sup> March 2010

## “We respond”

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Today is the past in our series of Gospel truths to live by and we've reached the point where the rubber hits the road. If I can be allowed one final re-cap of the ground we have covered.



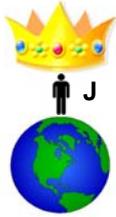
We began at the beginning, with God as the Prime Mover of the Universe. The one who made everything and who therefore rules over everything. Including you and me – although, under God, humanity has the high dignity of ruling over God's creation for him. It doesn't take much for us to see that this is not how the world is today.



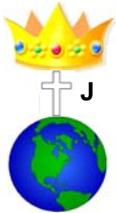
Why? Because we all reject the ruler, God, by trying to run life our own way without him. Hence the small crown on our own heads. This is something we all do. For some of us it happens very obviously; for others it is more a case of just living for ourselves and ignoring God. We can even ignore God whilst at the same time giving him some qualified acknowledgement. We doff our hats in his direction once a week so we can ignore him the rest of the time. Notice before we move on to the next slide how our relationship is skewed with God, but also with creation. When we step away from God, it affects our ability to rule over God's world as we should and creation is out of joint as a result. We've seen examples of that in numerous ways in recent times. We just cannot control our own lives, or society or the world – that is all down to us not letting God control us. So what will God do about this rebellion?



The answer is that God won't let us rebel against him forever. The Bible says that God won't let us rebel against him forever. For one very good reason: because he really is in charge. He is God and he is good; and he cannot allow the world he loves to drift on indefinitely in chaos. He will deal decisively with all that ruins his creation. Which means he is going to judge each of us after we die. No one spoke more clearly about the judgement than Jesus – because he knew it is the great future reality we all need to be aware of. As Hebrews 9 verse 27 puts it: man is destined to die once and after that to face judgment. God's justice sounds hard, but...



Because of his love, God sent his Son into the world, the man Christ Jesus. Apart from the letter J, you will see that this slide looks just like the first one. That is quite right – because Jesus, as a man, lived under God’s rule as we were intended to. He didn’t rebel against God; he didn’t deserve judgment. But nonetheless he died on the cross.



The Bible explains that as God’s loving plan to rescue human beings. His Son did not deserve to be judged, but he bore the judgement human beings deserve for their sin, so they need not bear that judgement themselves. It means that God is able to forgive our sin, not because he just turns a blind eye on it. But because our sin has already been punished, when Jesus died. And that’s not all!



God raised Jesus to life again as Ruler of the world. It didn’t end on Good Friday – three days later on Easter Day, Jesus came out of the tomb, never to die again. It puts beyond doubt the fact that Jesus has beaten the great enemy, death. Thank God for that. It shows that the living Lord Jesus as the first to rise from the dead is the Author of a whole new Creation. He can give us here and now in that lovely phrase of John Chapman’s, a fresh start. And he will be the one who enacts God’s judgment at the end of time. He had been judged and condemned in a human court; but God has completely vindicated Jesus by raising him and the tables are going to be turned completely: Jesus will pronounce God’s judgement at the end of time. That is the ground we have covered. Where then does it leave us? Well you will see with the next slide that we have as I mentioned reached the point where the rubber hits the road. If Jesus has really done all that it takes for us to be rescued from judgement and if Jesus really is one the throne of the universe, then there are only two ways to live.



One is to carry on exactly as we are. Living as if we were in charge, ignoring God and ignoring Jesus and all that he has done. Which has only one possible outcome. If God has placed Jesus on the throne of the universe and I live with no reference to Jesus then I am continuing in rebellion against God and I will ultimately pay for that rebellion. That is where we all find ourselves. I like the clarity of that illustration I heard about from an old preacher: He had a card with a Scripture text on it: ‘What must I do to be saved?’ From Acts 16.30. On the reverse of the card was the

answer to that question, given in the very next verse. 'Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved'. Then he had another card with a different question on it. What must I do to be damned? But the back of that card was blank. What must I do to be damned? Absolutely nothing, in one sense. It doesn't require any new action from us. We are already under judgment. If I carry on as I am, living for myself, I will be judged and condemned.



Thankfully God has a new, alternative way for us to relate to him. If we submit to Jesus as our ruler and rely on Jesus' death and resurrection then we can know for sure that we are forgiven and accepted by God. It is wonderful news because this is a throw back to what we had in our very first picture: we are relating properly to God, forgiven, accepted, given new life and God pieces our lives together again, with him as our Friend and our Heavenly Father. And that is a loving relationship which will be ours for all eternity. There are only those two ways to live and two destinies. I remember hearing about a friend talking to someone he knew who was sitting on the fence spiritually and he was given very helpful advice by an elder Christian friend as to how he could help him. 'Tell him there is no fence to sit on,' said his friend. There is no middle ground – in the Bible it is always one way or the other: sheep and goats, the broad way or the narrow way, heaven or hell.

So it obviously becomes massively important for us to be sure what action God is calling on us to take. And I am going to look to Acts 20 verse 21 to describe what we need to do: ***I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.***

This is the apostle Paul, summing up his preaching ministry for the two years plus he was in Ephesus. This was the message he preached, it didn't matter who it was to, Jews or Greeks, the religious or the pagan. Boiled down to its irreducible minimum it has two elements: repentance and faith.

When I put it like that you perhaps can tell that Paul is in very good company. What was the distilled version of Jesus message? Repentance and faith. You can find it in Mark 1:15: ***'The time has come; the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.'***

I want in our remaining time to unpack these two vital terms, repentance and faith. I have two headings: **the start of the Christian life and the heart of the Christian life.**

## The start of the Christian life

I want to address myself to begin with to the person who is asking ‘what do I need to do to respond to the gospel truths we have been thinking about?’

There may well be someone present, even if you are a regular in the congregation here, who needs to make a response because you haven’t yet done so. And I’m assuming that we all can benefit by knowing what response we should be calling for from friends who are ready to respond.

It’s been pointed out that when Jesus promised to make his disciples into fishers of men, he wasn’t intending them to say at the end of their lives that they had merely ‘influenced’ fish – they were to catch fish, to hook them and hold them. In other words to evangelise them to the point where they make a response of repentance and faith.

So what do we mean by those words in that setting?

Perhaps we need to unpack the jargon element in those two words: **To repent** doesn’t just mean feeling sorry and saying sorry to God for what I have done wrong – it includes that, but it means more: it means to stop rebelling against God and to start living with him in charge.

There is an important passage in 2 Corinthians 7 where Paul describes two different kinds of sorrow – a worldly sorrow for wrongdoing and a godly sorrow for sin. What is the difference between the two? Well, godly sorrow is sorry enough about sin to leave it. That is the point where it becomes repentance.

There is similar confusion over the word ‘**faith**’ today. To believe doesn’t mean to take a step of faith, as in to take a leap of faith – some people are sceptical and they can’t do that, but some people are credulous and they can suspend disbelief and just respond to God without cast-iron evidence and that, we are told, is ‘faith’. Not according to the Bible. We are not called on to be gullible; we are invited to examine and weigh the evidence for Christ.

To believe doesn’t even mean I agree with the Creed: I assent that Jesus is the Son of God and that he died for sinners.

It includes that, but it means more: it’s the sort of trust where I entrust myself to him. I put my life and my eternity in his hands – and it focuses very clearly on the cross, because that is the grounds of my confidence that I can entrust myself to him.

Put repentance and faith together and what do you have? Renouncing my rebellion and relying on Jesus. And if they are genuine expressions of repentance and faith, those two will always be inseparable, hand in hand with each other. Repentance and faith are like Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

There’s no such thing as genuine repentance without faith: repentance without faith is just legalism, trying harder and failing; I feel guilty and yet I’m powerless to change the past or the future. The wheels are just spinning in the mud and going nowhere.

Equally, there's no such thing as genuine faith without repentance. Faith without repentance is just presumption – a cocky overconfidence which assumes that God will be happy enough with me, because I am happy enough with myself.

Put it another way, if I am to receive the real Jesus into my life, then I must take him as he really is. Both as Lord and Saviour. He is Lord, so I must repent; and thank God, he is Saviour, so I must trust him for my rescue.

So repentance and faith are there at the start of the Christian life. And I would encourage you for the sake of your own assurance to check carefully whether you have ever really given clear expression to them.

If our default setting is that we live our lives ignoring God and out of relationship with him, what repentance and faith boils down to is this: it must express itself in a decisive prayer where I **turn** from my sin, I **trust** Christ and I **tell** him that that is what I am doing.

Hold onto those three ts if that sort of thing is a help to you: turn, trust and tell him. The last t – **telling him** - is crucial: I need to re-open communication with the God I have ignored, **by praying** – a prayer is part of what it means to express repentance and faith.

I always want to ask someone whether they have done that and not just give people the benefit of the doubt.

'Giving people the benefit of the doubt' should mean we assume that they **haven't** made a clear response to Jesus Christ and that they need to. So we don't want to leave it up to chance – and we ask them. I'm asking you this morning. Have you ever done that?

Billy Graham once asked President Lyndon Baines Johnson, point blank – 'Have you ever definitely and personally asked Jesus Christ to come into your life?' Johnson answered: 'I hope so'. But Billy Graham was not content to leave it at that: 'Normally', he said, 'when someone says 'I hope so' that answer worries me'.

Repentance and faith are at the start of the Christian life, and if therefore you aren't sure that you have made a start, I want to urge you to make sure. Too much hangs on this to settle for saying, 'I hope so'.

But I want to give my remaining time to a second heading. Repentance and faith are at **the heart of the Christian life**.

### **The heart of the Christian life.**

In other words, I go on exactly as I started. Turning from sin, trusting Jesus for my forgiveness and for my future and telling him that that is what I am doing: I express the relationship in prayer.

There is a joke I sometimes tell in a wedding sermon, if I think I can get away with it. It's about a couple in their nineties are both having problems remembering things.

During a checkup, the doctor tells them that they're physically okay, but they might want to start writing things down to help them remember. Later that night, while watching TV, the old

man gets up from his chair. "Want anything while I'm in the kitchen?" he asks. "Will you get me a bowl of ice cream?" "Sure." "Don't you think you should write it down so you can remember it?" she asks. "No, I can remember it." "Well, I'd like some strawberries on top, too. Maybe you should write it down, so's not to forget it?" He says, "I can remember that. You want a bowl of ice cream with strawberries." "I'd also like whipped cream. I'm certain you'll forget that, write it down?" she asks. Irritated, he says, "I don't need to write it down, I can remember it! Ice cream with strawberries and whipped cream – I've got it, for goodness sake!" Then he toddles into the kitchen.

After about 20 minutes, the old man returns from the kitchen and hands his wife a plate of bacon and eggs. She stares at the plate for a moment. "Where's my toast?"

I tell that joke on a wedding day to remind a couple to think about each other not in the full flush of their youthful ardour, but sixty years on.

The commitment of Day One is to be the commitment of every day after Day One. We will need to spend a lifetime unpacking what the marriage relationship will mean – literally till 'death us do part'.

And because we are talking about **a relationship** with God through Jesus Christ, precisely the acts needed at the start of **that** relationship will need to be continued thereafter: repentance and faith are the **heart** of the relationship.

I sometimes say that the initial commitment is a matter of ***giving all that I know of myself to all that I know of Christ***. And I then go on to say that we need to keep on doing that as we get to know more about ourselves and more about Jesus.

Hopefully I have **some** awareness of my sin when I come to Christ, but there are whole areas of my life which I haven't even begun to detect any serious problem with when I become a Christian.

Every one of us is a combination of all our yesterdays and however many years lived without Christ means we all have baggage and it takes time to be aware of how deep sin runs in our whole make-up. So keep repenting...

At the same time I may have seen **something** of what a wonderful Saviour Jesus is when I first prayed a prayer of commitment. But surely that awareness of how wonderful he is should be growing as I get to know him better. Relying on him when I start out will be filled out when I keep trusting that he loves me because he loved me, through unemployment, or not having children or maybe through having impossibly difficult children or financial hardship, or bereavement. Keep relying...

So will you commit yourself to repentance and faith today and every day, for the first time if necessary or for the thousandth time if necessary? I love preaching a sermon when I know for a certainty that it is 100% relevant to everyone, myself included. And I have the apostle Paul on my side with that, don't I: Remember what he said: ***'I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.'***

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Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>.  
These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)