

O DEARLY, DEARLY HAS HE LOVED

A Lent Bible Study by John Birch © 2016

5.

O dearly, dearly has he loved!
And we must love him too,
And trust in his redeeming blood,
And try his works to do.

INTRODUCTION

You have a bright idea, a big one, and the first thought is, 'Why not go ahead and do it?'

What might be the 'foot on the brake considerations' that make you pause or even stops you from doing anything?

LIKE SHEEP RETURNING TO THE SHEPHERD

1 Peter 2:24-25; Colossians 1: 13-14, 2:24-25; Mark 16:20



In Old Testament times, when one kingdom clashed with another on the battlefield it was the custom for the victor to take the population of the defeated nation and transfer them to another land. We see that, for example, in the Book of Jeremiah where God is complaining that the rulers of his people are not being the shepherds he expects them to be, forgetting their duty of care and allowing the sheep to wander or be taken into captivity.

Then it was the tribes in the Northern Kingdom who had been taken away to Assyria, followed by the remaining tribes of the Southern Kingdom exiled in Babylon.

And Jeremiah gives what is a Messianic prophesy (see **Jeremiah 23:4-6**) in which he says that God will intervene and raise up a new Shepherd and Saviour for his people, bringing them safely out of captivity.

That's probably the thought behind Paul's words in **Colossians 1:13-14** where he talks of the believers having been brought from captivity in the kingdom of this world and into the 'kingdom of the Son'. Taken from darkness to light, from slavery into freedom, from condemnation to forgiveness, from the influence of the world to the sphere of God.

The last verse of our hymn is about our response to the cross, and there's much symbolism in the gospels on this subject. The curtain of the temple being torn from top to bottom as Jesus utters his last words on the cross tell us that through Jesus' sacrifice we now have direct and intimate contact with God. Jesus' words to the thief on a nearby cross show that forgiveness and salvation is for all. The response of the Gentile centurion to the crucifixion tells us that Jesus died for all nations.

Peter echoes Jeremiah and talks of sheep being led astray and brought back by their Shepherd and Saviour (**1 Peter 2:24-25**).

And that demands from us a response, both in the life that we lead and the offering that we give. Having been brought from darkness into light our lives should reflect that light, demonstrated by the love shown to us by Jesus Christ, and that should be revealed both in our worship and our attitude to others. We are called to live Christ-centred rather than self-centred lives.

And we are called, as the disciples were, to spread that light around, to be unafraid to share our faith with others, trusting that God will be with us as he was with those first disciples, to whom we also owe a debt of gratitude (**Mark 16:20**).

We must 'try his works to do', says the hymn, dip our feet in the water, take that first step, say the first word. Just do it and leave the rest to God.

Jesus Restores Your Relationship – Reconciliation



Throughout the Bible we discover that God seeks to be in relationship with us.

The idea of 'Reconciliation Atonement' suggests that our wayward behaviour and our sinful state have caused a breach, a chasm, a divide in our relationship with God. As a result, we are not able to hear God clearly, as if static has interfered with our reception and ability to listen to God's voice. We aren't able to know God's will for us, as if dizziness in our spirit has ruined our attentiveness to God. Thus, we are not able to see who we are created to be.

This helps us understand how Jesus' death on the cross bridges that impossible gap and restores our relationship with God.

Definition of Sin: Sin separates us from God and each other. It tears at the fabric of our relationships and renders us isolated and divided.

Definition of Salvation: Jesus bridges that gap and enables us to live in a full and free relationship with God and other people. The cross tears down the walls and brings us together to be healed, as well as to be healing agents for others.

RECONCILIATION IN THE BIBLE

Reconciliation is one of Paul's favourite ways to explain the work of Jesus on the cross. Paul reminds us that the cause of our separation from God is our sins – **Colossians 1:21-22**. Sin is described as evil. In fact, sin of any kind is a problem.

Because Jesus reconciled God with humanity through the cross, we can be agents for reconciliation with each other.

We cannot build a bridge to God; we cannot draw near to God by our own actions. The only one who can save us is God, and we must surrender ourselves to God's power.

The church in Ephesus faced a major controversy, basically involving Jew vs Gentile. Jews understood themselves to be God's chosen people with whom God had made a covenant. Gentiles were outsiders who did not enjoy this special, close relationship with God. The Jews were insisting that the Gentiles first become Jewish through observation of the law and by circumcision. The Gentiles, though, felt that the Jews were a unique people with strange laws and appeared closed-minded.

The early church was filled with both Jew and Gentile – and Paul, as well as other Christian preachers, upheld the view that salvation through Christ was offered to ALL – Jew and Gentile alike.

Ephesians 2: 8-10 – shows Paul seeking to create an equal environment about who has the right to be a child of God. He is basically saying that the truth of God and the heart of God, is bigger than the boxes – Jew, Gentile, other – that people are placed in.

The movement of God in the Gospels is an ever-widening circle of God's hospitality to more and more people. We note that Jesus and the apostles were engaged in breaking down cultural, economic, social or spiritual barriers.

Jesus engages in a conversation with a Samaritan woman at a well and visited her village. (**John 4**)

Jesus tells the disciples to let the children come to him. (**Matthew 19:13-14**)

Where there was hostility towards the Canaanites, Jesus met a foreigner whose faith impressed him like no other. (**Luke 7:9**)

Peter discovers in a dream that before God there are neither clean nor unclean. (**Acts 10:13ff**)

The church is called to be the antidote to tribalism; the alternative to the divisiveness that has infected society. Paul reiterates this thinking in [Ephesians 2:13-14](#).

SAUL AND ANANIAS

We should recall that when we first meet Paul he was known as Saul. He was a fierce persecutor of those who followed the Christian way. By his own account in [Acts 22:1-16](#) he was responsible for 'binding' Christian men and women – he was an eyewitness to the stoning of Stephen.

He was on his way to Damascus to serve an arrest warrant when he encountered God in a completely unexpected way ([Acts 9: 1-20](#)). A blinding light stopped him in his tracks, and he heard Jesus ask him: *"Why are you persecuting me?"*

It was a truly dramatic event – Saul was blind and had to rely on his travelling companions to guide him, step by step, to Damascus.

Ananias, a follower of Jesus, was a prayerful, obedient Christian, who was given a remarkable task – to meet Paul face to face. He was nervous at first because Paul's reputation towards Christians went ahead of him. Ananias even asked God if he knew what he was doing. So, through his encounter with Saul, Ananias discovered that **no amount of hatred in a person's heart is too big for God to redeem. No person is beyond the reach of God.**

We see here an example of God's 'prevenient grace' – God at work in us before we even knew it. Paul refers to this in [Romans 5:8](#).

Note that the first words out of Ananias' mouth were: *"Brother Saul."* Ananias represents any one of us – called by God to be an instrument of God's reconciliation. It could be, like Ananias, that God has a few surprises for us!

THE CHURCH WE LONG FOR

The reconciling work of Jesus makes possible a vision for the church in which we are not only brought together in unity across our

differences, but that we can be a unifying voice for a divided world. This kind of church is part of the imagination of God and can be a compelling vision for us to realise today.

No one can repair a broken relationship with God on their own. No one can locate and conquer every sin in their lives by themselves. No one can earn their salvation. It is through Christ that we are reconciled to God, and God seeks to reconcile us to each other.

In [Ephesians 4:3-6](#), Paul expresses God's call to address disunity and tribalism in our churches, and in our communities.

It begins with the welcome – one that, among many things, is inclusive, overflowing with love, accepting, committed to Jesus, unified in love, trustworthy, open to change, peaceful and gracious. It is a church that does not erect walls between people, is not afraid of the stranger, and is okay with saying that it does not have all the answers - but is willing to struggle to discover the way that God would lead us.

PROS AND CONS OF RECONCILIATION ATONEMENT

On the 'con' side, to claim that we have a broken relationship with God might suggest that God is distant or absent from us, which in turn can undermine our belief that Jesus is always near.

On the 'pro' side, it is very relevant for anyone who feels alienated or estranged from God or another person. It is also relevant to the divisiveness which exists throughout our society.

