

## SAFE ... BUT IS IT SOUND? Part 2

By Chris Hill

### Nightmare on Chapel Street

A young preacher stood gazing out over a congregation of aged, though attentive listeners. This was the young man's very first sermon and the little Baptist Chapel nestles still in the heart of that Somerset village. A startlingly beautiful girl had come with him as moral support and she sat, smiling, at the back as he launched into his message.

That young man was *me* and the lovely girl sitting in the back pew was Lindy, later to become my darling wife of fifty-three years! You will appreciate how anxious I was to impress Lindy with this my very first sermon. I certainly succeeded in impressing her. When we got back to the car and I turned to her in smug satisfaction, she ripped into me in a manner that scared me! As well it might. I had done a terrible thing: I had *lectured* those poor people and had not ministered the Word of God. It was an error never to be repeated. Lindy saw to that!

When I was born again, a loyal friend who had prayed for me over a number of years, presented me with a book which he believed would help me as a young Christian. It was a volume called "Systematic Theology" by Louis Berkhof. That remarkable book was packed solid with Reformed Doctrine and to my then untrained eye it appeared to be just what I needed to prepare a wonderful sermon!

I'm sure Dr Berkhof was a remarkable Christian, but his book was *not* what I needed at that stage. However, I determined to give the small Baptist congregation a sermon to remember and my chosen subject was "Justification by Faith" (what else?). I lifted that entire section out of Brother Berkhof's book and for a whole half hour let them have it with both barrels.

I have never been invited back!

The effect of Lindy's "positive encouragement" of her boy-friend's first "sermon" led me straight to the simplicity of Bible exposition and I have never

sought to change. The Holy Spirit's and Lindy's vigilance have guaranteed that! William Tyndale, the great 16<sup>th</sup> Century Reformer and Bible translator, vowed to create a translation that a humble ploughboy could read and understand. That surely should be the aim of every preacher also. Let me say that I am convinced that systematic theology has its place, but it is in the Study and not in the Pulpit!

The Bible must ever be our source and first recourse when we need to learn doctrine and certainly to proclaim it. The opinions of men (however erudite) must always take second place to Scripture.

It is in this belief that I venture on a most dangerous voyage! It is *fraught* with dangers, not least that of upsetting or even offending well-loved brothers and sisters who I care for and respect, but who adopt a different stance on the matter of assurance and the "Perseverance of the Saints" or "The eternal security of the believer". What holds us together in fellowship is our shared love for the Lord Jesus. We all live for Him and to serve Him without reserve and so in spite of possible disagreement, we embrace and move on!

### **Safe and sound?**

The matter I am addressing is basic to our understanding of the gospel. How sound is it to say that I am secure in my salvation? What is the foundation of that security? Can it be threatened? If it can, how and by whom?

These are questions that if wrongly answered have the power to undermine faith. Although I know I am born again, can I be certain that I am saved whatever happens to me or whatever I may do in a period or even a moment of backsliding?

What is the basis of my justification (made as if I had never sinned at all)? Is it faith in the finished work of our Lord Jesus Christ or is a level of self-achieved sanctification required?

This pursuit of truth will involve honest appraisal of some Bible passages that appear to question the whole idea of eternal security. Some refer to them as "Warning Passages". We must look at those as honestly as we can when the time comes. But the fundamental and glorious foundation of our position can only be the unchangeable character of God. So we start with Him: His greatness and His Eternal Plan of Salvation.

### **Where did it all begin?**

We begin with the character of God Himself. What does the Bible reveal about Him? One of the most wonderful revelations is His unchangeableness. We find that hard to relate to because *we* are extremely changeable! It is true to say that because we are made in our Father's image, certain of His characteristics are ours too. Mercy, justice, love, creativity, joy, peace patience, kindness, goodness, for example. In the exercise of these qualities and fruits we are showing we share them with Him, albeit at a vastly different level.

But He has other characteristics we cannot possibly share. For instance His power is unlimited (omnipotence); He is everywhere present at the same time (omnipresence) and He never changes (immutability).

Our Lord's immutability comes into focus when we consider Scripture verses like Psalm 33:11, "*But the plans of the Lord stand firm for ever, the purposes of His heart through all generations.*"

Then again in Psalm 102:25-27, the writer speaks of earth and heaven, "*... they will perish, but You remain; they will all grow old like a garment ... they will be changed. But You are the same, and Your years will never end.*"

Once our Lord God has decided that He will follow a certain course of action, it is sure to happen. Isaiah 46:9-11 states it plainly, "*I am God and there is no other; I am God and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times what is still to come. I say, 'My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please ... what I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do.'*"

Joseph Hart wrote of this glorious attribute of our Lord God in his lovely hymn, *This, this is the God we adore,  
Our faithful, unchangeable Friend,  
Whose love is as great as His power,  
And neither knows measure nor end.*

Another and more modern hymn carrying the same message is Thomas Chisholm's wonderful "Great is Thy faithfulness". It means a great deal to Lindy and me because it was one of our Wedding hymns that raised the roof at Sherborne Abbey. As well it might! Every one of our fifty-three years together has been testimony to its truth. Praise the Lord! The hymn includes these inspiring lines,

*"Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father:  
There is no shadow of turning with Thee.  
Thou changest not: Thy compassions they fail not;  
As Thou hast been Thou for ever wilt be.*

*Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness!  
Morning by morning new mercies I see.  
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided –  
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!”*

The Lord’s purposes are absolutely sure – immutable. They stand firm for ever. But that is true also and equally of His *promises*. If He promises something He cannot be unfaithful to it. That is His unchangeable character.

In Numbers 23:19 the Lord spoke through an unlikely prophetic voice – that of Balaam – when he was instructed to speak to Balak,  
*“God is not a man, that He should lie,  
Nor a son of man that He should change His mind.  
Does He speak and then not act?  
Does He promise and not fulfil?”*

This is a very serious matter. If our Lord God can change His mind about either His purposes or His promises our trust in Him is bound to be compromised. If it is so, I can no longer trust His Word and my faith will be completely undermined.

### **Looking at the big picture**

But let us get back to God’s Plan of Salvation. Where did it all begin? When were you and I set apart for salvation? Some might say, “When I was born again.” However, when we look more closely at the Bible we may need to push the date back quite considerably!

In Romans 8:28-30 Paul writes one of the most astonishing statements concerning the assurance of the saints – that is to say, you and me.  
*“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those He predestined, He also called; those He called, He also justified; those He justified He also glorified.”*

This passage tells us such mysteries and marvels that it must rank as one of the most profound triplets of verses in the entire Bible!

Enshrined within these verses is a priceless gem of revelation which answers the question, “Why have I become a Christian in the first place?” The remarkable

answer Paul gives is, “... *that I, in company with many brothers, might be conformed to the image of God’s Son, the Lord Jesus!*”

The eternal Lord God longs for a family and He has planned to bring that family into being since before the foundation of the world. You and I are members of that family and it is confirmed by our New Birth. God did that sovereignly by the operation of His Holy Spirit. Our names were written into the Lamb’s Book of Life *before the foundation of the world!* And we shall be revealed in our glorified form when our Lord Jesus Christ is revealed to the world at His Second Coming.

All the words Paul used in Romans 8:28-30 are in the Greek Aorist Tense. It is the Past Tense: the Perfect Tense conveying the idea of completion. It is definitely *done*: finished.

Paul speaks of what God has done as far as He is concerned.

God foreknew us: it is *done*.

God predestined us: it is *done*.

God called us: it is *done*.

God justified us: it is *done*.

God glorified us: it is *done*.

The Aorist Tense confirms that this has all been decided upon in God’s great Salvation Plan. It is all DONE! As far as He is concerned the Plan was completed before the foundation of the world. And our names were written in at that point! Glory to God!

Now the point is this: if through my spiritual shortcomings I can be cast away and end up in hell (as some suggest), where does that leave God? We might say, “with egg on His face” because He clearly got it wrong when He wrote my name into the Lamb’s Book of Life.

Please do not think me disrespectful of my Heavenly Father, but I find that conclusion inescapable.

But let us thank the Lord that this is not true. He never changes: His Word is Yes and Amen! The issue is *not* our ability to hold on to Him. You and I are eternally *safe*: eternally *secure* because *He* will always hold on to *us*!

Rejoice! Again I say, Rejoice!