

CHAPTER 6

WHAT IS THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE? THE BAD NEWS FIRST – SIN AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.

*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.
Romans 3:23 (NIV)*

*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Romans 6:23 (NIV)*

To explain the gospel message properly we have to go back to the beginning of time and look at the creation of the world and of the human race. When we understand why God created us in the first place it helps us understand why Jesus had to come to save the human race. The main details of the creation of the world are set out in the early chapters of the book of Genesis. That is the first book of the Bible. At some point in the past, God decided to create planet earth, the universe and the human race. He did this in six literal 24 hour days, simply by speaking everything into existence.

He created the earth and then the stars and then all of the creatures that live on the earth. Finally He created man on the sixth day. He did so by creating one single man called Adam, which is just the Hebrew word for ‘man’. He then created a woman, called Eve, to be Adam’s wife.

When Adam and Eve were created they were perfect in every way. They came into existence as adults from the very beginning, with ready-made knowledge, and understanding. They also had the ability to relate to God and to speak to Him face to face. Adam was no caveman. Far from being primitive, he was probably much more intelligent and capable than we are. He may well have been cleverer than Einstein. He was created with knowledge already programmed into him. His mind operated perfectly, as did his body.

There was no sickness, death or sin in the world. All was perfect and in harmony with everything else. That was the way God designed the world and the human race. He intended that Adam and Eve should have children and populate the whole world with people who would have an equally perfect and sinless relationship with God.

The origin of sin in the human race – *the fall*

However, Adam and Eve then spoiled everything by disobeying God. They did so through eating fruit from a particular tree in the Garden of Eden, from which God had told them not to eat. This was the first occasion when a human being had ever sinned against God and it had massive consequences. It is known as “*the fall*”. From that moment, when they first disobeyed God, they lost their innocence and they died spiritually. Their eyes were opened so that they became aware for the first time of good and evil. They also became aware for the first time that they were naked and tried to cover up their nakedness. Previously they had been entirely relaxed and comfortable about it, due to their complete innocence.

More importantly, a physical death sentence was passed on Adam and Eve, such that they lost their immortality. That meant that they and all their descendants must one day die physically:

*Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned.
Romans 5:12 (NIV)*

From that moment their bodies began the aging process, with which we are familiar. They also became susceptible to illness, accidents and decay. Previously they had been immune to all of these things.

The way that Adam and Eve lived on the Earth originally was very similar to how Heaven will be. Suddenly, however, Adam and Eve found that the Earth itself, that God had created for them, had also dramatically changed.

It became for them as we know it today, full of death, sickness, sin, crime and violence. The whole world came under God's curse and has been so ever since. The very forces of nature now work against us at times and can be lethal, with earthquakes, floods, tornadoes, droughts and famines. Adam and Eve's sin affected not only themselves but the whole of nature. Plus, the soil began to produce thistles, weeds and thorns instead of being a beautiful garden. Therefore gardening and farming became very hard work, instead of being easy:

¹⁷To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. ¹⁸It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."

Genesis 3:17-19(NIV)

All of the chaos and misery, that we still experience today, came from that one first act of disobedience by Adam and Eve. Their very nature also changed, such that they were now inherently sinful rather than innocent. From that point on Adam and Eve continued to sin and every child born to them did the same.

This is because every human being from that point on, including you and me, has inherited a 'sin nature'. That means that we will inevitably sin. We sin because we are sinful by our very nature. The only question is how much we will sin and in what ways. We will shortly look in closer detail at our sin and its consequences. Before we do, we need to look at God's holiness, because it is the fact of God's perfect holiness that makes our sinfulness such a huge problem.

God's holiness

Why should God be so concerned about our sin and why should it make such a difference? The answer is that He is perfectly holy. We will never be able to understand God, or the gospel, unless we grasp this concept of His holiness. It is largely forgotten or ignored in the modern Western church. Therefore, even within churches, holiness is either not understood at all, or it is seriously misunderstood.

It tends to bring to mind images of someone who is stuffy and pompous. Yet that has nothing to do with it. Holiness is a quality that only God has. It is His utter sinless perfection and His absolute cleanness and righteousness. It means that in every way and at all times He is perfect. There is no evil in Him or any deception or selfishness or cruelty or any other form of wickedness. He is completely good and virtuous, to a degree that we cannot imagine.

Because of God's infinite holiness, it means that He cannot, and will not, allow any person to be in His presence unless they are equally holy. Thus, even one sin in your life will wreck the relationship between God and you. God has to be true to His nature and above all to His own holiness. He cannot

compromise on that by ignoring or overlooking sin of any kind. Let's look closer at God's holiness and why it is so important:

"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty."

Revelation 4:8(b) (NIV)

¹⁵But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; ¹⁶for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."

1 Peter 1:15-16 (NIV)

I am the LORD who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy.

Leviticus 11:45 (NIV)

"It is the LORD of hosts whom you should regard as holy. And He shall be your fear, And He shall be your dread.

Isaiah 8:13 (NASB)

God's attitude towards our sin

We see from the above verses that God takes His own holiness and sinlessness extremely seriously. There is no alternative for Him but to do so, because He must remain true to His own nature. Now consider by contrast the following passages. These show what our sin is like and how seriously God takes it:

⁵The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. ⁶The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.

Genesis 6:5-6 (NIV)

"Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine The soul who sins will die.

Ezekiel 18:4 (NASB)

¹¹Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence. ¹²God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways .

Genesis 6:11-12(NIV)

*I have listened attentively,
but they do not say what is right.
No one repents of his wickedness,
saying, "What have I done?
Each pursues his own course
like a horse charging into battle.*

Jeremiah 8:6 (NIV)

*¹The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."
They are corrupt, and their ways are vile;
there is no one who does good.*

*²God looks down from Heaven
on the sons of men
to see if there are any who understand,
any who seek God.*

*⁵The boastful shall not stand before Your eyes;
You hate all who do iniquity.*

*⁶You destroy those who speak falsehood;
The LORD abhors the man of bloodshed and
deceit.*

Psalms 5:5-6 (NASB)

*³Everyone has turned away,
they have together become corrupt;
there is no one who does good, not even one.*

Psalms 53:1-3 (NIV)

"Let us lie down in our shame, and let our humiliation cover us; for we have sinned against the LORD our God, we and our fathers, from our youth even to this day. And we have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God."

Jeremiah 3:25 (NASB)

These verses describe all of mankind. We are all like that, including you and me. This was not what God had intended. He had planned for the world to be perfect and for Adam and Eve, and all their descendants, to have a perfect relationship with Him, and each other, in a sinless way. In short, it was meant to be like Heaven will be.

Why did God allow Adam and Eve to sin?

One might ask why God allowed Adam and Eve to sin, given the terrible consequences it had for them and everyone since, including us. However, there was no alternative. Remember that God wants human beings to relate to Him freely and to voluntarily love, honour, obey and worship Him. He created us in order to do those things freely, not automatically, or by compulsion.

The big problem that God had was that, above all, He wanted us to be completely free, with genuine freedom of choice and free will. That has major implications. If men and women are to be truly free to choose to obey God, then that can only mean anything if they are equally free to choose not to. If God had created us with no option but to obey Him, then we would be reduced to mere toys for God to play with. Our love and worship towards Him would mean nothing.

You can ponder on that for as long as you wish, but you will not be able to find a way round it. If God cannot do so, then you cannot. It was of paramount importance to God that we be genuinely free. He therefore had to accept the consequence. That was that Adam and Eve, and all of us, would fail that test and would deliberately choose to disobey Him.

Our sin separates us from God

The moment when Adam and Eve first sinned was when the whole human race fell from its level of perfection to the dismal level where it is now. Consider these verses which refer to the separation that resulted between God and man. That separation arose because God could not allow sinful people like you and me to be in His presence:

¹⁹The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.
Galatians 5:19-21 (NIV)

"But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear."
Isaiah 59:2 (NIV)

³³ The LORD replied to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book."
Exodus 32:33 (NIV)

*⁵The arrogant cannot stand in your presence; you hate all who do wrong.
⁶You destroy those who tell lies; bloodthirsty and deceitful men the LORD abhors.*
Psalm 5:5-6 (NIV)

*¹Help, LORD, for the godly are no more, the faithful have vanished from among men
²Everyone lies to his neighbour; their flattering lips speak with deception*
Psalm 12:1-2 (NIV)

Now look at the passages below from apostle Paul's letter to the Romans. Chapter 1 of Romans is filled with important insights about the way people really are. Paul explains what a person's heart and mind are like and how wicked we can be when we don't repent or believe in God. He also deals with the difficult question of what happens to people who have never heard of Jesus Christ or the Bible. Can they be considered guilty even if they have never had a chance to know what the Bible says?

The answer Paul gives is that nobody has any excuse for not believing in God. That is because the evidence of God's existence is plain for all to see. It is obvious because of His creation, i.e. the world and all the plants, animals, birds, fish, stars, and people that God has made. Even if we do not have the Bible, we can see all these things. They are enough in themselves to prove God's existence. So all men know deep down, that there is a God. They deny and ignore God because they don't want to obey Him. It is a deliberate choice to reject God.

Likewise, no person anywhere in the world, has any excuse for the sins they commit, even if they have never heard of Jesus. We all know, deep down, what is right and wrong. We all do evil things because we choose to do so, even if we have never heard of the Bible. So, a man isn't guilty because he doesn't know about Jesus Christ. He is guilty from the very beginning, because He chooses to reject God, whose existence is obvious. And he is guilty because he chooses to do sinful things, the wrongness of which is also obvious.

We all know all of that instinctively because of the conscience that God has put within us. It is like a form of 'software' which enables all of us to tell right from wrong. We all have that conscience programmed into us and we all deliberately choose to ignore it. So, we are all without any excuse. We are all guilty and deserve God's punishment, whether or not we know the Bible or have heard of Jesus Christ:

¹⁸The wrath of God is being revealed from Heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

²¹For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²²Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

Romans 1:18-23 (NIV)

Paul goes on in the same chapter to explain that people choose to reject God even though His existence is obvious. They worship false gods instead and thus become fools. Therefore, God eventually leaves them to get on with it. What it means is that because people decided to reject and ignore Him He "gave them over" or let them go, so that they could be free to behave as badly and as foolishly as they wanted to.

In other words, if we show God that we are determined to reject Him and to sin, He will, eventually, wash His hands of us. He then leaves us to take our sin and our stupidity to their limits. Look at verses 24-32 below to see the kinds of things people go on to do when they are left to behave as they wish:

²⁴Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. ²⁵They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator who is forever praised. Amen.

²⁶Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. ²⁷In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

²⁸Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, ³⁰slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; ³¹they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³²Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

Romans 1:24-32(NIV)

The letter to the Romans was written over 19 centuries ago but is as up to date as if it was written yesterday. Paul says that God's existence is obvious simply by looking at the natural world which He created. Thus, if we decide not to believe in God we are sinning because, deep in our hearts, we all know that He is real. Yet, we still choose to deny His existence and ignore Him. As a result we degenerate and our lives become ever more corrupt and depraved. God therefore has no alternative but to separate Himself from us.

None of us have any excuse

We have no excuse for not believing in God, or for our sins, even if we have never heard of the Bible or Christianity. Verses 19 and 20 above from Romans chapter one show that God has made the truth about Himself completely obvious. Nature itself, i.e. the beauty and order of God's creation, show us plainly that God exists and is real. Yet, we choose to ignore Him and do whatever we please rather than obey our conscience.

We are born knowing that God exists. It is self-evident anyway. But it does not suit us, so we blank Him out of our minds. If we do that we are guilty, no matter who we are, or how little we know. Therefore there is no unfairness on God's part. We all deserve His judgment.

The three main definitions of sin

In the verses above, three main words are used to define the different types of sin:

- a) **“Sin”** – This is the widest term and means falling short of God's perfect standard. It is like an arrow which is fired at a target but which falls several yards short of it. We are sinners because we simply do not match up to God's standard of holiness. Every failure to reach His standard is sin.
- b) **“Transgression”** – This means breaking some known law or rule. Thus, because Adam and Eve were told not to eat from that particular tree, it was a transgression when they did so. It was a specific rule that they broke. Thus, transgression is a particular category of sin. It is one of the ways that we 'fall short'.
- c) **“Iniquity”** – This means our tendency towards rebellion or lawlessness. Rebellion is the root of our sin problem. Every one of us, deep down, is a rebel against God. We defy Him and reject His authority in our lives. We refuse to obey, honour or serve Him in the way that we should.

We go about it in different ways and it takes different forms, but it is all based on rebellion. Thus, rebellion is a particular form of sin, but it is also a cause of sin.

Everybody is a sinner. There are no exceptions.

Every one of us is guilty of all three of these different aspects of sinfulness. We all fall short of God's standards. We all break God's laws. We are all rebels. There are no exceptions. The Bible makes that unmistakably clear:

⁸If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

1 John 1:8-10 (NIV)

*And do not enter into judgment with Your servant,
For in Your sight no man living is righteous.*

Psalm 143:2 (NASB)

⁹What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all; for I have already charged that all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, ¹⁰as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹no one understands, no one seeks for God. ¹²All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one." ¹³"Their throat is an open grave, they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of asps is under their lips." ¹⁴"Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." ¹⁵"Their feet are swift to shed blood, ¹⁶in their paths are ruin and misery, ¹⁷and the way of peace they do not know." ¹⁸"There is no fear of God before their eyes."

Romans 3:9-18 (RSV)

The consequences of our sin – God's judgment

God's judgment is going to come upon the whole Earth and upon every person. None of us are exempt and nobody will escape it. Moreover it will be Jesus Christ Himself who will be our Judge:

And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead.

Acts 10:42 (NASB)

I said in my heart, " God shall judge the righteous and the wicked, For there is a time there for every purpose and for every work."

Ecclesiastes 3:17 (NKJV)

*¹¹The proud look of man will be abased
And the loftiness of man will be humbled,
And the LORD alone will be exalted in that day.*

*¹²For the LORD of hosts will have a day of reckoning
Against everyone who is proud and lofty
And against everyone who is lifted up,
That he may be abased.*

Isaiah 2:11-12 (NASB)

*⁷Let the sea roar and all it contains,
The world and those who dwell in it.*

⁸Let the rivers clap their hands,

Let the mountains sing together for joy

⁹Before the LORD, for He is coming to judge the earth;

*He will judge the world with righteousness
And the peoples with equity.*

Psalm 98:7-9 (NASB)

*⁶Wail, for the day of the LORD is near!
It will come as destruction from the Almighty.*

*⁷Therefore all hands will fall limp,
And every man's heart will melt.*

*⁸They will be terrified,
Pains and anguish will take hold of them;
They will writhe like a woman in labour,
They will look at one another in astonishment,
Their faces aflame.*

*⁹Behold, the day of the LORD is coming,
Cruel, with fury and burning anger,
To make the land a desolation;*

And He will exterminate its sinners from it.

*¹⁰For the stars of Heaven and their constellations
Will not flash forth their light;*

*The sun will be dark when it rises
And the moon will not shed its light.*

*¹¹Thus I will punish the world for its evil
And the wicked for their iniquity;
I will also put an end to the arrogance of the proud
And abase the haughtiness of the ruthless.*

Isaiah 13:6-11 (NASB)

“Just as man is destined to die once and after that face judgment”.

Hebrews 9:27 (NIV)

The above verse from Hebrews also shows that the idea of “reincarnation” is totally false. We only ever die once. After that, we are judged. There are no second chances. We do not come back to this earth as another person or animal, as Hindus believe. That is a false hope (if indeed that prospect can even be called a hope). We must face the fact that this life, whether long or short, is our one and only chance to repent, believe and follow Jesus. If we don't do it in this life, we never will.

When we die physically we then face God's ultimate and final judgment. See below how apostle Paul shows that the level of knowledge we each have will affect how we are judged. However, even those who have little or no knowledge of God or His law will still be answerable for what they do know about what is right and wrong:

¹ All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. ¹³For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. ¹⁴(Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, ¹⁵since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) ¹⁶This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.

Romans 2:12-16 (NIV)

Note how fair and just God is. He will judge each of us at different levels, according to what we know. The more we know, the stricter the judgment will be. But if you imagine that the answer

therefore is to deliberately avoid knowing anything, you would be wrong. **As we have seen, even a man who has never heard of Christianity or the Bible is still guilty, because God has written His law into all our hearts in the form of conscience.**

Even the most uneducated and simple person knows right from wrong. God writes it into our software. We are born with that knowledge. Thus nobody can ever say that they “did not know” they were sinning, because we all know. Our conscience tells us. Even if there are some specific laws that you don’t know about, there are plenty of others that you do know. You know the difference between right and wrong, whoever you are, and whatever country or group you come from.

So, unless God intervenes to do something about it (and we shall see later that He did do something), then we are all doomed. There is no way that we can avoid God’s judgment and the eternal consequences of our sinfulness. The judgment for unbelievers, i.e. non-Christians, is spoken about further in the last book of the Bible, called Revelation. It makes frightening reading, but it is vitally important to face head on what the Bible says will happen to any person who rejects Jesus Christ and who therefore remains unforgiven. They will have to go to the judgment for unbelievers.

The judgment for non-Christians– the Great White Throne

¹¹Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the Heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. ¹²And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. ¹³The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done. ¹⁴Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. ¹⁵Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.
Revelation: 20: 11-15 (NIV)

That is a grim passage, but there are many others like it in the Bible where Jesus Himself speaks about the Lake of Fire and tells us what it will be. He warns us of it very clearly and directly, because it is a terrible place and He doesn't want us to ignore or underestimate it.

Verses where Jesus Himself speaks about the judgment for non-Christians and the Lake of Fire:

Please read all the following verses carefully and remember that all of these were spoken by Jesus personally. I have included a lot of examples because many people have a mental blockage about this. They are unable or unwilling to see Jesus as a person who will judge or punish us, or send anybody to Hell or to the Lake of Fire. But He will do all these things, as these passages show:

⁴I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do. ⁵But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into Hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him!
Luke 12:4-5 (NASB)

⁴⁰As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. ⁴¹The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. ⁴²They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.
Matthew 13:40-43 (NIV)

⁴⁹This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous ⁵⁰and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.
Matthew 13:49-50(NIV)

³¹When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in Heavenly glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. ³⁴Then the King will say to those on his right, Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world
Matthew 25:31-34 (NIV)

Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.
Matthew 25:46 (NIV)

(NB The phrase 'Son of Man' in the above passages means Jesus Himself. It is one of His many titles)

Many people are surprised when they realise that Jesus Himself said all these things (and more). It doesn't fit in with the public's image of Jesus. Yet, He really did say these things. Perhaps you need to change your view of Jesus and who He really is, the future Judge of all mankind. We need to consider very seriously what to do about that.

Verses where the apostles Peter or Paul refer to the drastic nature of God's judgment

If that series of verses spoken by Jesus Himself doesn't convince you that judgment is coming, look at some more verses from the writings of Paul and Peter. These prove that they too preached about judgment and the Lake of Fire, and very clearly. These passages also show that what Jesus had said earlier was not just for the Jewish people or for the time of the Old Testament. In these passages which follow, Peter and Paul are speaking in the New Testament. They are speaking to us:

⁸He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power
2 Thessalonians 1:8-9 (NIV)

⁴For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to Hell, putting them into gloomy dungeons to be held for judgment; ⁵if he did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood on its ungodly people, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others; ⁶if he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; ⁷and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men ⁸(for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard)— ⁹if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment.

2 Peter 2:4-9 (NIV)

⁷By the same word the present Heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.

2 Peter 3:7 (NIV)

I have not included every reference to Hell and the Lake of Fire, as there are very many more. But I have included several, to show that Hell and the Lake of Fire are consistent and major themes. Moreover, they show that the references to the Lake of Fire are mainly in the New Testament, rather

than the Old Testament. I have lost count of how many people have misguidedly said to me comments like: *"The God of the Old Testament was all about judgment, but Jesus and the New Testament are all about God's love."*

In fact, God is exactly the same in the Old and New Testaments. He does not change at all. We must therefore abandon any idea that judgment, Hell and the Lake of Fire no longer apply.

What kind of people will go to the Lake of Fire?

Many people say they can understand that other people are sinners, such as Adolf Hitler. They will accept that people like him might be worthy of the Lake of Fire, but not themselves. They say that they themselves are not really bad people, because they *"try to live a good life"* and do quite well, *"compared to other people"*. I have heard countless people say such things in one way or another. In their opinion they themselves would never be condemned by God or sent to Hell and the Lake of Fire when they die. That's because they look upon themselves as being *"basically good"*. But they are totally mistaken.

Before we can even begin to understand the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, we have got to grasp that you and I are both sinners. So is everybody in your family, everybody on your street, everybody in your town and everybody in the whole world. There are no exceptions whatsoever. Consider what King Solomon said on this point:

"When they sin against You (for there is no man who does not sin)....."
2 Chronicles 6:36(a) (NASB)

You might argue back that although you can accept that you are sometimes a sinner in small ways, you are not a 'bad' sinner. Perhaps you can only imagine God punishing a particularly bad sinner who commits dramatic crimes such as murder, but not someone like yourself. It would be nice if that was true, but that is not what the Bible says. Therefore if you believe that, then you are basing it simply upon your own wishful thinking and speculation. You would also be contradicting what God says directly about it.

The key to understanding Christianity is to realise that you really are a sinner and that your sin is not trivial, but grievous. Therefore unless you become a Christian and have your sins forgiven, you are facing God's wrath, just the same as all the other people whom you, perhaps, imagine to be "worse" than you. God finds all of us guilty and unworthy to be in His presence. I am not exaggerating, as I will seek to demonstrate. Let me explain it with an illustration:

Imagine that you had in front of you 10 glasses of water into which cyanide poison has been placed. In the first glass there are ten teaspoons of cyanide and in the second glass there are nine and then eight, and so on, down to the tenth glass, which only has one teaspoon of cyanide in it. Which of the ten glasses of water would you be willing to drink? The answer is that you would not drink any of them. That is exactly how God sees sin in us. The exact amount of sin in you, compared to someone else, is not the point. Any sin at all is like cyanide to God. That's how He sees it. That's why He must reject even the very "best" people.

The point is that it might be that I am a far worse sinner than you. Perhaps your life (as you imagine it to be) is represented by the glass of water with only one teaspoon of cyanide in it? Even if I was to agree with you about that and accept your assumption, what good would it do you? The point is that God has declared that He will not accept *any* sin in His presence, not even a single sin on a single day in the middle of a life that is otherwise sinless.

Even that one sin would separate you from God because it would be an abomination that He could not accept. We have to realise what God is really like. Many people have been misled through false ideas that have been put around about God being a kindly old gentleman, slightly senile, who would not harm anyone or get angry about anything. Likewise with Jesus, He is often portrayed as a sappy weakling who goes around patting children on the head and being nice. That is very far from the truth.

The fear of the Lord

The reality is that the Bible tells us that “*our God is a consuming fire*” and that we are to fear and respect Him. Consider the following passages. I will underline each of the references to the “*fear of God*” or the “*fear of the Lord*” to illustrate how clearly the concept is emphasised in the Bible. There are many other verses too, which I could have added:

*Let all the earth fear the LORD;
Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him.
Psalm 33:8 (NASB)*

*The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread,
Isaiah 8:13 (NIV)*

*²⁸Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, ²⁹for our "God is a consuming fire."
Hebrews 12:28-29 (NIV)*

*Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear Him,
On those who hope for His lovingkindness,
Psalm 33:18 (NASB)*

Yet the reality is that most of mankind does not fear God. On the contrary, it ignores and despises Him:

*"There is no fear of God before their eyes"
Romans 3:18 (NIV)*

To get a picture of God's Holiness and the awe and reverence we need to feel towards Him, imagine the Niagara Falls. If you were to go too close to the edge, then the immense power of that waterfall would sweep you away to your death. Yet if that happened, it would not be the fault of the waterfall. It is in the very nature of the Niagara Falls that it has colossal power. You therefore treat it with respect and fear. You would be a fool not to fear the Niagara Falls.

That is partly what is meant when the Bible repeatedly tells us that we need to fear God. It is a consistent theme emphasised throughout the whole Bible. Here are some more verses to prove that fact and to prove that I am not over stating any of this or taking it out of context:

*Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!
Deuteronomy 5:29 (NIV)*

*¹³Now all has been heard;
here is the conclusion of the matter:*

⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me holy is his name⁵⁰His mercy extends to those

***Fear God and keep his commandments,
for this is the whole duty of man.***

***¹⁴For God will bring every deed into judgment,
including every hidden thing,
whether it is good or evil.***

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 (NIV)

who fear him from generation to generation.

Luke 1:49-50

***Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD and shun evil.***

Proverbs 3:7 (NIV)

¹At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. ²He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.

Acts 10:1-2 (NIV)

²⁶If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, ²⁷but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. ²⁸Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. ²⁹How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? ³⁰For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay,"¹ and again, "The Lord will judge his people."² ³¹It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Hebrews 10:26-31 (NIV)

What does the fear of God really mean?

There are various aspects to fearing God. In part it means that we are to literally fear Him. You should be in awe of Him, because of His colossal power and the dreadful consequences of being on the wrong side of Him. In fact, you would be a fool not to fear Him. Yet there is more to it than just fear. There is also awe, respect and reverence. We need to feel all of those things, and intensely. Indeed, when we consider God it should cause us to tremble:

***Tremble, O earth, before the Lord,
Before the God of Jacob,***

Psalms 114:7 (NASB)

***My flesh trembles for fear of You,
And I am afraid of Your judgments.***

Psalms 119:120 (NASB)

Many years ago, the Queen came to visit the town where I lived. I was standing by a path next to the Queen as she walked along slowly. There was a certain moment when the Queen stopped right next to me and stood for a little while only perhaps 3 feet from me. I could have reached out and touched her. Yet, I was in awe that I was standing right next to the Queen. It seemed unthinkable to do anything to draw attention to myself, or to speak, or move. I felt rooted to the spot.

I was in the presence of someone great, at least in comparison to me. That placed boundaries on what I could say or do. That experience has often come back to me when I have thought about the reverence and fear that we need to feel towards the Lord God Almighty. However much respect we might properly show towards the Queen, the fact is that she is still only a human being like the rest of us. She is a sinner who is mortal and fallible, with limited knowledge and strength. But God is infinitely greater.

The fear of the Lord also involves being overwhelmed by how extraordinarily brilliant God is. He is the only person who is all-knowing, all-powerful and who is present everywhere. He is perfect, holy, righteous, wise, magnificent, creative, imaginative, artistic and musical. He possesses every virtue to an infinite degree. Given that He is all those things and has all those immense qualities, how much more should we be in awe of Him? He is indescribably impressive.

If you were to imagine a person who combined all the qualities of the Queen, Shakespeare, Isaac Newton, Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln, Albert Einstein, Mozart, Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci and a host of other brilliant scholars, artists, scientists, musicians, mathematicians, politicians and monarchs, then that might give you a fragment of a picture of how awesome God is. Yet He is infinitely more than such an imaginary composite person could be.

Remember that God created the entire universe. Even within our own galaxy, the Milky Way, there are billions of stars. Yet there are billions of other such galaxies in the universe. He created all of them in a single day, simply by speaking them into existence. He did it through the power of His own words and His creative imagination. Reflect on that for a moment. That is how powerful He is.

At the same time, He created all of what we know as the arts and every other form of beauty. Every person who creates any piece of music, art or poetry is just reflecting a little glimpse of what God naturally is. He is an artist, as you will immediately see by just looking at the beauty of the world that He created. You only have to see a sunset to know that it was intentionally created by a brilliant artist. It cannot have come about by chance. It's obvious, likewise, that each of the creatures that He has made, and especially the human race, have a beauty and complexity that make clear that they were designed by someone of the utmost brilliance. None of it is accidental and none of it 'evolved' by itself.

For all these reasons, we must respect, honour and fear God. We must do so because of who and what He is and because of what He can do with us and to us. That may not be a fashionable way to talk about God, but as we have seen in the verses quoted earlier, He repeatedly describes Himself in the Bible as someone who is to be feared. He does not merely suggest that. He commands it. It is up to us to choose whether to listen to Him or obey Him. But we must recognise the terrible consequences of failing to do so.

³⁰For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people."³¹It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Hebrews 10:30-31 (NIV)

Therefore, let me come back to my earlier point. Do not be so misguided as to imagine that you are not a sinner or that you are not such a bad sinner as to be in any danger of God's wrath and separation from him in the Lake of Fire. I have no desire to offend or insult you, or anybody, or to be impolite about any of this. But we may as well face facts. No matter who you are, you are a sinner. Therefore you are in the same position as me and everybody else. The only question is what are you going to do about it?

The disadvantage of being a "respectable" person

The people who find it hardest to realise the extent and seriousness of their own sin are the so called "respectable" people. If you have a job, own a house, and have never been to prison or convicted of a crime, then beware. The chances are very high that you will miss the point and assume that sin is what 'other people' do. Please be willing to abandon any self-righteous ideas about yourself. Accept that when the Bible speaks of sin and sinners, it means you and me. It does not mean "them", or "others", or "that group over there". We are all sinners:

There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins.

Ecclesiastes 7:20 (NIV)

Finally, remember that if we don't fear the Lord and put Him first then there will be dire consequences:

²⁴ But be sure to fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you. ²⁵ Yet if you persist in doing evil, both you and your king will be swept away."

1 Samuel 12:24-25 (NIV)