

THE WAY TO HUMAN FREEDOM
Study 4
***THE DILEMMA
OF A FALLEN HUMANITY***

So far in our series we have looked at who God is and marveled at the perfections of His holy Being as Father, Creator and King. We have seen what humankind was created to be—comprehending something of the magnificent nature of our high calling. But we have also seen what the entire human race has tragically become through the Fall (its moral fall) at the beginning of history.

The proclamation of human depravity in Study 3 may, indeed, have been disturbing. As those structured to be the image of God such naked revelation of our moral descent can understandably be personally unsettling—even infuriating!

However, in order to adequately diagnose the nature of our fallen-human condition—and come to embrace its glorious, divine solution—there is *still more* that needs to be said about the nature of our sad state.

In this study we will see how the dark dynamics of Study 3 heavily *impact* the life of every rebellious, human creature. It will be shown that *personal struggle* which is often attributed to an unfortunate background or difficult present circumstances, has a deeper and more immediate source.

Furthermore, it will be seen that each person living out of fellowship with God is faced with a *dilemma*. They have to choose between—what is for them—two totally unacceptable alternatives: *delight* in their Creator or a consistently threatening *despair*. And, naturally, in the face of such a dilemma there is, immediately, a relentless quest to establish a *third* alternative: one that involves neither delight in the Holy One nor the despair that is dreaded. This third alternative, however, is always based upon a ‘false promise of life’, which at best, never truly fulfills the deepest cry of the heart and, at worst, ends in what is constantly feared: an intolerably, dark-spirited sense of personal human hopelessness.

Our study will actually do two things: It will comprehensively describe the nature and effects of this dilemma, and will prepare the way for a decisive experience of THE UNMERITED AND LAVISHLY-ABUNDANT *GRACE OF GOD!* That is, a personally transforming revelation, that is able to bring *freedom* from the pursuit of false hopes and from despair’s ever-looming dark shadow.

Towards this liberating and life-giving end, then, an *irrefutable reality* is here going to be unfolded before our eyes: the nature of that *endless, restless struggle* that is known by all who live in ongoing rebellion against the One who created them and sustains them every moment.

But before we begin, there is something that must first be done: we need to observe some very significant background scenery.

our spiritual context:

(as those who are idolatrously God-refusing and rebellious)

- the dominion of darkness

(the oppressive realm of the world, the flesh and the devil)

The ‘dominion of darkness’ is a realm that operates with great power within the fallen-human scene. Every person who lives outside of a liberating assurance of

God's grace operates *every day* under the oppressive influence of its dark and deadly dominance.

Luke 1:79a

[They are] living in darkness and in the shadow of death.

Isaiah 60:2a

—*a dreadful, spiritual reality*

Darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples.

In order to know personal freedom and fullness, all must be *rescued* from the tyrannical realm of 'the dominion of darkness' (Colossians 1:13). Each one must be liberated from its deadening power through the total forgiveness of their sins, and the revitalizing of their human spirit through the gift of the Holy Spirit indwelling them. This will become increasingly apparent as we move through this study.

The dominion of darkness is made up of three elements: 'the world', 'the flesh' and 'the devil' (and the spiritual powers he commands). There is not one rebellious, fallen-human situation where these three dark entities do not dominate—maintaining the lifeless and restless enslavement to unrighteousness spoken of in Study 3.

Whatever their culture, class or environment, this is the deceptive and oppressive spiritual context in which every God-refusing person lives, every moment.

the world

In the Scriptures 'the world' may refer to three things:

- *a planet* (the earth, the creation, the world we live in—Acts 17:24: "[God] made the world")
- *a population* (the people who live in the world)—John 3:16: "God so loved the world.")
- *a power* (a powerful, anti-God system—1 John 2:15: "Do not love the world")

Here in describing the dominion of darkness we are speaking of the third of these: the world as a *power*. Being a powerful anti-God system, the world can be described as: *society set up and organized against God and His truth, opposing His will and perverting His way*.

The New Testament Scriptures speak much of this powerful system. The following are some examples:

Romans 12:2a

—*the world's insistent way of operating*

[There is] 'the pattern of this world'.

Galatians 1:4b

—*the world system's era of domination*

[There is] 'the present evil age'.

1 Corinthians 2:12b

—*the world's way of thinking*

[There is] 'the spirit [attitude or disposition] of the world'.

1 Corinthians 3:19a

—*the world's dysfunctional 'wisdom'*

The wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight.

1 John 4:5

—*the world's loyal instructors and their attentive hearers*

[False teachers] are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them.

Ephesians 2:2ab

—*the vocational action of every rebel human*

You followed the ways of this world.

James 4:4

—*a disastrous friendship*

Don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred towards God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

1 John 2:15b

—*a system devoid of divine love*

If you love the world, the love of the Father is not in you.

Ephesians 2:12b

—*the sad state of a rebellious humanity*

[Apart from the grace of God we are] without hope and without God in the world.

the flesh

'The flesh' is *our sinful humanity operating apart from response to the Holy Spirit, while being obsessed with ourselves and opposed to God, His will and His way*. This term sums up the things spoken of in the previous study on human fallen-ness, where, for the time, we spoke of the flesh as our 'sinful nature'.

Again, the New Testament places much emphasis upon our need to recognize this dark dynamic; one that is perpetually asserting itself within every rebellious, human heart and mind.

Ephesians 2:3

[All of us, who have received God's saving grace, once lived as those who were constantly energized by an attitude and disposition of disobedience towards Him] gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts.

Galatians 5:17a

The flesh desires what is contrary to [God's] Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other.

Romans 7:18

I know that [nothing good dwells in me], that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.

The flesh is a reality that keeps a person captive to all that is dark and humanly demeaning.

Galatians 3:22a

The Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner to sin.

Apart from the transforming power of the grace of God, all without exception are totally dominated by the strong, idolatrous passions of our fallen-human nature.

the devil—and the spiritual powers he commands

The devil, or Satan ('the serpent' in Genesis 3) is a personal, spiritual being originally appointed by God as a ruling angel, but who now exercises great evil power both against his Creator and towards humanity. From what is said of him in the Scriptures, the story of his place in history goes something like this:

Often known also as Lucifer ('the light-bearer'), he was created as a magnificent and beautiful creature with great authority and intelligence, and with enormous powers

within the realm of angelic vocation. But there was a deep, moral flaw that formed within him, whereby he came to fancy himself as being as near as one could possibly be to God; not near in terms of fellowship and communion but in regard to status and personal glory. When God brought the creation into being, he would have sung for joy together with all the other angels and spiritual creatures. However, we assume that his exalted pleasure was not solely in the glory of the Creator, but also in the dizzying prospect of his supreme position within all that had been made.

But then when God established humanity as His very image and likeness—to represent His own kingship and glory within the creation—and then gave the angels the noble vocation of serving His image in the fulfillment of its high calling, Lucifer fell into the grip of a most bitter envy and violent, jealous rage. And he said to the myriads of angels under his command: “Serve the humans? We are glorious beings who should be their lords, and ourselves the rulers of the creation! No! We will never live in their shadow! Here is what must be done: I will have the human couple evicted from their place and become myself ‘as God’, and you will be *with me* lords over humanity and the entire created world—and things will be as they really should be! The Creator has got it all wrong, and we are going to put it right. This declaration of human beings as the divine image has been for us a dark day. But we are going to turn on the lights!”

The result of the devil’s crazed obsession with being, as God, was that the awesome gifts he had received were horribly perverted, and he, himself, became a vile and polluted spring of all that is false. Glorious Lucifer was now ‘the evil one’, and in command of a countless number of angels¹ who had embraced his folly: demonic spiritual powers in the service of their master.

Having facilitated the Fall of humanity, Satan succeeded in bringing it under his heel to serve his purpose. And throughout history, he—together with his legions—has delighted to feed and inflame both human pride and hatred, and above all to incite those created as the image of God to join him in his wild hostility toward their Creator. His one aim is to blind the mind of every person to the awesomely lovely perfection of the Faithful One—the Living and True God, who is worthy every moment of their adoring love and joyous allegiance!

And so there has intruded into the glorious kingdom of God a counterfeit kingdom, set up against a true knowledge of the Creator, His will and way: the dominion of darkness. None of its subjects, however, see it as darkness. Satan, being the brilliant creature that he is, has the insidious ability to give the impression that his kingdom is one of light and virtue—delighting to deceive humankind into believing that *they* may have such light and virtue within themselves, apart from intimate communion with the Living and True God.

The evil one is an incessant impartor of information, seeking to lead all into a false view of their humanity. Such a view may be somewhere between the extremes of a *highly exalted status* (which asserts that within human nature there is the seed of divinity²) and a *personally demeaning status* (which declares us to be merely another surviving animal in a world that has no real meaning). He is happy to see the image

¹ Revelation 12:4 speaks of a third of the angels being under the evil one’s power.

² In the times of the New Testament this was a central part of the ‘secret knowledge’ of a mystery cult that sought to intrude into Christian communities, and was strongly denounced by those whom Jesus commissioned to instruct His people. It is also part of much Eastern religious philosophy and various spiritualities of our present day.

of God diligently aspiring to ‘grand religious or non-religious possibilities’, or just pitifully languishing under ‘desperate-challenges’. His only agenda is that we don’t come to fulfill the high calling for which we were created!

The devil, of himself, has no power or authority and can only operate out of what he has received from his Creator. He is certainly not a force equal to God in the universe. There is no ‘spiritual dualism’ here with two equal and opposing powers battling it out. Satan is simply a powerful and rebellious spiritual *creature*. The Father, in His sovereign wisdom, has chosen to allow him—and the spiritual powers he commands—to continue in rebellion for a time.

Ezekiel 28:17a

—*the moral descent of the ancient king of Tyre, a clear representation of Satan’s fall*

Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom.

Isaiah 14:13–14b

—*the king of Tyre’s quest, a classic example of satanic ambition*

You said in your heart, “I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God. ... I will make myself like the Most High.”

The king of Tyre—a servant of the evil one—certainly reflected the nature of his master.

Yes, the devil in his fierce hatred for God vehemently hates humanity, seeks to lock it into its self-exalting rebellion, rob it of its true glory and see it ruined and wasted. His actions are relentless and not to be disregarded or taken lightly—as the following Scriptures make clear:

1 Peter 5:8b

[He is] ‘your enemy the devil’.

Revelation 12:10b

[He is] ‘the accuser’ [defamer, slanderer].

Matthew 4:3a

[He is] ‘the tempter’.

Matthew 13:19b

[He is] ‘the evil one’.

John 10:10a

[He is] the thief [who] comes only to steal, kill and destroy.

John 8:44b

He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

2 Corinthians 11:3a

[At the Fall] Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning.

2 Corinthians 11:14b

[Satan] masquerades as an angel of light.

Revelation 12:9a

[He is ‘the great dragon’], that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray.

Revelation 20:3b

[His powers are spent in] deceiving the nations.

2 Corinthians 4:4a

[He is] ‘the god of this age’ [who] has blinded the minds of unbelievers.

John 16:11b

[He is] 'the prince of this world'.

1 John 5:19

We know ... that the whole world [system] is under the control of the evil one.

John 8:44a

—*Jesus' words to 'respectable', religious leaders*

"You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires."

In Study 2 we saw—in outline—what it means to fulfill our holy calling to be the image and likeness of God. The great tragedy of our fallen humanity described in Study 3 is that the evil one has succeeded in forming, or better said, *deforming* us into his *own likeness!* HOW HORRIBLE!!!

And yet this is the personal and vocational reality of all who remain in rebellion towards the True and Living God. Their father is the devil and they are his servants. Everyday they unwittingly, yet willingly, live according to his way and do his will.

When Adam sinned, it was as if the serpent's poison entered into his humanity—and what was so for him has become so for us all from birth!

Ephesians 2:2b

—*servants of the serpent-king*

You followed the ways of ... the ruler of the kingdom of the air [who rules over the abiding attitude and disposition which energizes in those who are by nature disobedient].

2 Thessalonians 2:9–10b

—*the devil's tools of deception: the spectacular or just everyday, 'brain-numbing' passion*

He will use all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders that serve the lie, and all the ways that wickedness deceives those who are perishing.

Satan's great quest throughout history has been—and continues to be—to set up systems of worship that are directed towards him. Those engaged in such worship do so thinking they are offering it to an authentic god (or some other object of trust and allegiance)—unaware that they are, in reality, devotees of the evil one. His 'world system' is *a kingdom of false worship*—a realm that was initiated by him and is now maintained by him, with his adulation as its supreme goal.³

Job 1:7

—*the restless 'lord' of his dark domain*

The LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the LORD, "From roaming through the earth and going back and forth on it."

This despotic lord of his realm is always restlessly about his work. But we may know that 'the works of the devil' with all their counterfeit splendour have no life in them—only death. They are nothing like the works of our Faithful Creator, who has, in love, manifested His glory in the creation and delights to declare His very great and precious promises to all who trust Him! The Father's lavishly abundant giving is, in fact, a torment to that 'ancient serpent'. The evil one can't stand the nature of such unbridled, divine generosity—for there is no true 'give' in him, only 'take'.

³ As we progress through the series it will be seen what God has done to 'destroy the works of the devil' and liberate His people into the life-giving worship they were created to enjoy!

demonic powers

As we have already seen, Satan is head over countless numbers of fallen angels or demonic spirits. It is by these that he *incites and stirs up 'the flesh'* and *maintains the system of 'the world'*.

Having joined Lucifer in his quest to overthrow the kingdom and purpose of God, these spiritual beings were banished from their privileged position before their Maker. Then—like their lord—they were doomed to invisibly roam the earth⁴ until the day of their final condemnation at the climax of history.

From the time of their banishment, they have—in their own wild hatred for their Creator and His image—incessantly operated under Satan's command as 'spiritual terrorists' in God's world. Although their powerful influence should not be overstated, it is a fact that the impact of their energies among the nations has been, and is today, horrendous—in more ways than is generally supposed. Together with their master they are the enemies of God and His purpose—and, so, of humanity.⁵

The biblical testimony to the reality of these powers is clear:

Matthew 25:41b

[There is] 'the devil and his angels'.

Matthew 12:24b

[The devil was called] 'Beelzebul, the prince of demons'.

Ephesians 2:2b

[The devil is] 'the prince of the kingdom of the air'.

Colossians 2:8b

[There are] 'the [dark] elemental spiritual forces of this world'.

Revelation 16:14a

[There are] 'demonic spirits that perform signs'.

Ephesians 6:12

[There are] the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

1 Corinthians 10:20a

The sacrifices of [false religions] are offered to demons, not to God.

Galatians 4:8

—*the situation of those who worship other 'gods'*

When you did not know God you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods.

Just as the devil is the father of all God-refusing people, so also the demonic powers that operate behind the variously constructed deities of this world—which are not gods at all—rule over those who subject themselves to them. The government of these 'gods' is cruel and harsh. They care nothing for the welfare of those who serve them. And compared to the glorious power of God on behalf of His people, such forces are 'weak and miserable'—delighting only in their malignant ability to enslave and degrade the image of God through false worship (Galatians 4:9).

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⁴ Their abode is the 'heavenly realms'—which may be expressed as the 'unseen spiritual realm'.

⁵ The nations and cultures of the world have encountered the reality of dark spiritual power, and within their various myths and religious beliefs have used terms to describe their experience of its nature. As an aid to communication, the Bible has incorporated some of these well-known terms in its revelation of this dark and intrusive realm.

And so, this is the grim, spiritual context of a rebellious humanity. It truly is the dominion of darkness. The tremendous significance of these three elements will become evident throughout the rest of the series. To disregard them would be to ignore a menacing reality that affects human living at every level.⁶

Now we may give our attention to the *dilemma* that faces every person within this tyrannical environment: the plight of those who have chosen to persist in rebellion against a good and faithful Creator.

hard-hearted refusal of our dear & awesome Maker—in foolish pursuit of false promise of life—inevitably locks us into:

AN ENDLESS, RESTLESS STRUGGLE

In our introduction to this study, it was stated that the dilemma known in our rebellion, simply put, is this: fallen-human creatures don't want to *delight* in God, walk with Him nor do His will. But at the same time, they also can't bear the ever-threatening experience of *despair* that comes from living against Him. The problem is, though, that these are the only two truly substantial alternatives! It was also mentioned in the introduction that in our human resourcefulness we, nevertheless, relentlessly seek to create a *third alternative* that will solve our dilemma.

Study 3 spoke of how for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (that God-given place of delight) there was only one promise of life: enjoyment of both the living word and dynamic, personal presence of their Creator. But, with the intrusion of *the serpent* into that blessed environment, there came the temptation to embrace his own God-refusing and self-exalting, 'serpentine' way—a temptation that came with a dazzling, false promise of life. And tragically, they chose to believe the lie and, in actual fact, transferred their allegiance from their Maker to the intruder.

This, then, was the establishment of a universal principle that operates within our fallen race: THE ENDLESS PURSUIT OF FALSE PROMISE OF LIFE! That is, promise which comes from the same dark and dominating source that the first pair encountered, and is based upon the same God-refusing and self-exalting agenda they embraced. And of course, it is such false promise that has, ever since, caused those three passions incited by the first deception to be a *blazing flame* within desperate, fallen-human hearts: illicit *idolatrous desire* for a life-giving *stimulation* of sensory experience, a life-giving *possession* of magnificent things and a life-giving *elevation* of personal status.

But as was also seen in Study 3, it is nothing more than an exercise in foolishness and futility, to idolatrously ascribe ultimate worth to anything other than our Creator—who is, Himself, the only true Sustainer and Fulfiller of our humanity. Such idolatrous focus promises much but—as must continue to be said—can never satisfy the deepest cries of the heart! When it fails—and, one way or another, it inevitably does—every, bright-eyed rebel finds themselves in that most dreaded of all places (or at least moving towards it): a state of dark-spirited despair. The old dilemma, far from being solved by fallen-human resourcefulness, continues to make its debilitating presence known.

⁶ The purpose of this entire series is, in fact, a proclamation of the Lord Jesus Christ's decisive *conquering* of the world, the flesh and the devil—and His manifestation of this by His word and works through His people among all nations!

Shortly, all of this will be graphically portrayed in the form of a diagram that will be very significant for us as the Series progresses. But firstly, we need to establish the key concept for this study, which declares for us what is the *divine* source of our endless restless-struggle: the personal action of ‘the wrath of God’ that is at work towards and within His rebel creatures.

*** *the action of God’s wrath (the holy anger of His love)***

Study 1 showed that God’s wrath is a *holy* anger. As such it is completely unlike the anger of sinful human beings. It is always—and gloriously—the anger of His love.

Our Maker has total integrity in the judgments He brings within human history. They are always right, just and fair, and always for the ultimate good of those who taste them—if they will respond truly to them.

A major way that God’s wrath is expressed is to *personally give us over* to the humanly debilitating consequences of our rebellion. The subsequent *despair* of His defiant creatures is not something He takes pleasure in. But it is, nonetheless, what He *rightly* gives us up to.

His righteous opposition to rebellious humanity is the strong ‘wrath of His love’ in which He commands all to turn from their defiance—and to know the incredible reality of His divine goodness, mercy and grace towards them!

He is by nature love, not wrath

Our Maker is justly wrathful in the face of human evil. But it could never be said that ‘God is wrath’. His word tells us that He is ‘love’ and that He is ‘light’—realities that are at the core of His divine Being. But that is not the case with His wrath. The wrath of God is a righteous *response* He makes to what is grievous and offensive to Him, the Holy One. It flows *out* of what He is; but is *not* what He is.

From the Scriptures below it is clear that wrath is, what might be called, ‘a secondary expression’ of God’s nature:

Lamentations 3:33

He does not willingly bring affliction or grief to any human being.

Isaiah 63:9a

In all their distress He too was distressed.

Ezekiel 18:23, 32

Do I take pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live? ... I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!

Jeremiah 3:19a,c

How gladly I would treat you like My children and give you ... the most beautiful inheritance.

Psalms 145:8–9

The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in [unfailing] love. The LORD is good to all; He has [mercy and] compassion on all He has made.

In His love for those who persistently refuse Him, His wrath is also so often mixed with wonderful expressions of goodness, mercy and compassion. How He delights to bless His beloved creatures—even in the midst of their flagrant rebellion!

Psalms 116:5b

God is full of [mercy and] compassion.

2 Corinthians 1:3b

[He is] the Father of [mercy and] compassion and the God of all comfort.

Isaiah 30:18a

The LORD longs to be gracious to you.

Deuteronomy 4:31a

The LORD your God is a merciful God.

Ephesians 2:4b

God ... is rich in mercy.

Micah 7:18b

[He delights] to show mercy.

Psalms 78:37b–38a, c

They were not faithful ... Yet He was merciful ... Time after time He restrained His anger and did not stir up His full wrath.

Psalms 103:10

He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.

It must also be emphasized here that there is nothing evil in the wrath that flows from the love and light of God's innermost Being. His wrath may definitely be experienced severely, but it could never be called evil. Evil at work in God's world in any form, however, is always an *expression* of His wrath, as in the wisdom of His purposeful love He gives rebel creatures over to their choices. And yet in this, as we've seen, His wrath is so often tempered by mercy.

love stirred to wrath

God is by nature love, not wrath. But in His love, wrath is rightly evoked in the face of what is abhorrent to Him. Everything that corrupts and violates our humanity—whatever rises up within us against *the revelation of His glory*—is confronted by His 'hot love'!

The prophet Isaiah expressed the nature of such confrontation in this way:

Isaiah 28:21b

[The LORD] will do His strange work, and perform His task, His alien task.

The desired action of the Holy One is to bless those He has created in His likeness. And yet in the face of human rebellion and sin He will carry out His 'strange work', His 'alien task' of judgment, for the establishment of His honour in His world and the needful correction of the objects of His love—if they will have it that way.

His righteous judgments within history have, in fact, always been with a view to correction and restoration—even those that are included in the terrifyingly direct, 'fierce, intervening actions' mentioned in Study 1. And yet tragically history has so often shown, that neither the Eden-like blessings of His goodness nor the debilitating judgments of His wrath have *moved the hearts* of His rebel creatures to turn from their ways—a telling fact, indeed, of our dire, fallen-human condition.

In the following Scriptures, we see the determined and dynamic nature of our Creator's wrath towards a stubbornly, rebellious humanity:

Romans 1:18

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and [unrighteousness] of those who [are all the time grasping hold of and suppressing the truth in unrighteousness].

Romans 1:24a

God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity.

Romans 1:26b

God gave them over to shameful lusts.

Romans 1:27b

[They] received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

Romans 1:28a

Since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, He gave them over to a depraved mind.

Psalms 81:11–12

The LORD said, “[They] would not listen to Me. [They] would not submit to Me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices.”

Isaiah 19:3b

—*given up to the occult*

He said, “I will bring their plans to nothing; they will consult the idols and the spirits of the dead, the mediums and the spiritists.”

2 Thessalonians 2:10b–11

—*given up to the full impact of perverse choice*

They refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie.

Isaiah 6:9–10

—*a tragic consequence of prolonged, willful rebellion*

[The LORD said:] “Go and tell this people: ‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving’. Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”

Psalms 7:11

—*a tragic daily necessity in the midst of fallen-human resolve*

God is a righteous judge, a God who [passes sentence and] expresses His wrath every day.

Isaiah 26:9b–10

When Your judgments come upon the earth, the people of the world learn righteousness. Though grace is shown to the wicked, they do not learn righteousness; even in a land of uprightness they go on doing evil and do not regard the majesty of the LORD.

2 Peter 2:9a, c

—*the ongoing torment of unflinching rebels*

The Lord knows how ... to hold the unrighteous for the Day of Judgment, while continuing their punishment.

Isaiah 5:24b–25a

—*His privileged people who fall into rebellion will taste the wrath of His love*

They have rejected the law of the LORD Almighty and spurned [His] word ...

Therefore, the LORD’S anger burns against His people.

Jeremiah 4:4b

[He says], “My wrath will break out and burn like fire.”

Deuteronomy 29:19b–20a

—*those who persist in rebellion*

They invoke a blessing on themselves and therefore think, “I will be safe, even though I persist in going my own way” ... The LORD will never be willing to forgive them; His wrath and zeal will burn against them.

Psalms 90:11b

[Lord] Your wrath is as great as the fear [and reverent awe] that is Your due.

The joyous, trembling and reverent awe that our Maker is worthy of is, indeed, vast in its dimensions. The impact of His wrath against ugly, human disdain towards Him would, rightly, be in *direct proportion* to this enormous fact of His worthiness. No wonder divine wrath is felt so keenly! Of course, as we’ve been saying, its full force is rarely known. Such is His great mercy.

tasting the wrath of the Holy One

The experience of God’s wrath is never pleasant; it is not meant to be. Again, the testimony of the Scriptures comes with a stark clarity:

Psalms 107:10a–11

Some sat in darkness and the deepest gloom ... for they had rebelled against the words of God and despised the counsel of the Most High.

Jeremiah 3:21

A cry is heard ... the weeping and pleading of the people ... because they have perverted their ways and have forgotten the LORD their God.

Isaiah 50:11

All you who light fires and provide yourselves with flaming torches, go, walk in the light of your fires and of the torches you have set ablaze. This is what you shall receive from My hand: you will lie down in torment.

Jeremiah 2:19

“Your wickedness will punish you; your backsliding will rebuke you. Consider then and realize how evil and bitter it is for you when you forsake the LORD your God and have no awe of Me,” declares the Lord, the LORD Almighty.

Isaiah 1:5b–6a

Why do you persist in your rebellion? ... Your whole heart is afflicted. From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness.

the ever-present choice

Yes, the experience of God’s wrath is never pleasant. But it is also something that may be avoided by simply responding truly to His word.

Isaiah 28:12

He said, “This is the resting-place, let the weary rest”; and, “This is the place of repose”—but they would not listen.

Jeremiah 5:3b

[He] crushed them but they refused correction. They made their faces harder than stone and refused to repent.

Isaiah 30:15b

“In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it.”

‘Repentance’ is a word that has not yet been used in this series, but will often appear from here on. It speaks of a ‘radical change of mind’—an attitude that is so often linked with this matter of ‘salvation’ mentioned by Isaiah. In Study 1, we saw that

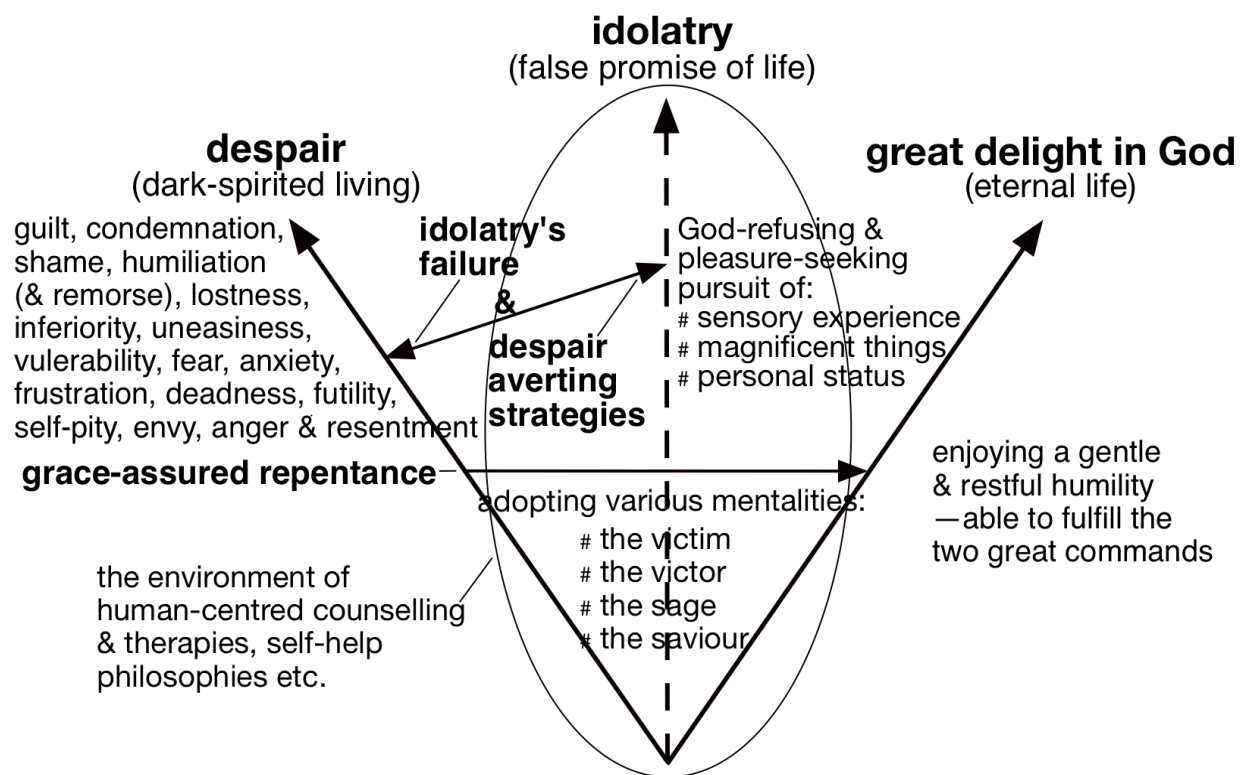
salvation means deliverance, rescue, safety, restoration, integration, wholeness and healing (a healing, soothing ointment is called a 'salve'). Later in the series the incredible nature of God's salvation for a sinful humanity will be magnificently set before us—with its liberating and restfully integrating effects in every area of human life and vocation. But this is what an unrepentant person, in fact, refuses.

2 Corinthians 7:10

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

The exercise of repentance and faith in God's grace, is the only way out of a life that is 'lifelessly and restlessly enslaved to unrighteousness'. Refusal of repentance brings constantly recurring despair, with its regret-filled 'worldly sorrow' pressing the rebel into a foolish and endless pursuit of false hope.

It's time then, for this dilemma to be illustrated in the following diagram:



On the right is that supreme expression of true human experience, *great delight in God*—and enjoyment of the eternal quality of life that is in Him alone.

Then in the centre is *idolatry*, based upon *false promise of life*, and characterized by God-refusing and pleasure-seeking desire for sensory stimulation, magnificent possession and personal elevation.

This centre-piece of fallen-human pursuit—idolatrously grasped, false promise—is rightly indicated by a *broken line*, showing that unlike the great delight in God we were created for, idolatry is by no means a substantial part of human experience. For since it is against the way of our created being, such *false worth-ship* given to what is created will always ultimately *fail*—leaving a desperate, false believer with no real hope of gaining the authentic pleasure their humanity cries out for.

The end result is the inevitable arrival of that old enemy, *despair*, with its tormenting and dark-spirited ravages of guilt, condemnation, shame, humiliation (& remorse),

lostness, inferiority, uneasiness, vulnerability, fear, anxiety, frustration, deadness, futility, self-pity, envy, anger and resentment—all of which will be identified as we move through this study. Such a dark reality is rightly illustrated by an *unbroken* line indicating, its frighteningly, *substantial* nature.

Between the lines depicting idolatry and despair there is another that indicates a movement back and forth. On the one hand, this shows idolatry's *inevitable failure* and the resulting direction towards despair, while on the other it indicates the rebel's desperate and stubbornly insistent drive to *re-establish* some vibrant promise of life—through idolatrously devised, 'despair-averting strategies'. These are, in fact, '*wrath-averting strategies*' (and will be referred to as such throughout this study); strategies designed to *turn aside* and *prevent* the—rightful, divinely initiated—onset of despair's personally debilitating presence.

And so, with both the incessant failure of idolatry and the equally incessant personal drive to achieve some fresh basis for hope, God-refusers find themselves always moving backwards and forwards between these two hallmarks of fallen-human endeavour: 'false promise of life' and 'dark-spirited living'. This, then, is the nature of the 'endless, restless struggle' we are speaking of in this study.⁷

One film scriptwriter has described our fallen-human situation with these words: "We are all born into this world shipwrecked, struggling between hope and despair." That is, between *false* hope and despair. Although not a very pleasant image, it is certainly one many would painfully identify with.

dogged—yet futile—fallen-human resourcefulness

Mention has already been made of the incredible—yet futile—resourcefulness of fallen humanity in its persistent resolve to gain the life that has been tragically forfeited. A bit more perspective here may be helpful in this regard.

Some—for various reasons—have extremely well maintained, wrath-averting strategies in place, and don't find themselves often experiencing the depths of despair that others do. But nevertheless, constant vigilance is required for this to be so. Every honest-minded person will acknowledge that the peace and joys known in their creaturely rebellion are extremely fragile.

In seeking to overcome the ever-present threat of despair, our self-delivering efforts can often be very 'religious'. Thus, we may form our *own* idea of the god we will worship. Such a self-constructed—or adopted—deity is often 'user-friendly' and is called upon to serve our purposes! Clearly there may be some comfort gained from such images. But they can never bring the authentic freedom and fullness that the human spirit demands.

It may be, of course, that a view of God or a spiritual belief-system—that has been constructed, adopted or inherited—is one that is far from convenient or comforting. They are often, in fact, extremely oppressive. Either way, here we have further illustration of the Study 3 diagram, which portrays how some 'false system of belief' is embraced as part of the relentless quest for life.

Although our despair/wrath-averting mechanisms are futile—being destined to fail—we nevertheless ceaselessly *reconstruct* and *reshape* them, in our all-consuming mission to succeed in godlessly seeking life. There is, actually, nothing quite so

⁷ Other elements of the diagram will be explained and illustrated as we continue.

demeaning to our humanity than the incessant *restlessness* that characterizes such pursuits.

The words of our Maker:

Jeremiah 2:36a–37b

—*from one thing to another, but to no benefit*

Why do you go about so much, changing your ways? You will be disappointed ... you will not be helped [—you will not ‘save the day’].

Isaiah 57:10

—*the rebel’s untiring determination to pursue the illusion of self-deliverance*

You wearied yourself by such going about, but you would not say, ‘It is hopeless’. You found renewal of your strength and so you did not faint.

Our strategies of self-deliverance are many and our dogged resourcefulness in maintaining them amazing. But no matter how vigilant we are, it is true that none of these devices will ultimately accomplish what they promise. Even in the best of times there is so often the sense that despair may soon be ‘knocking at the door’.

Yes, idolatry, with its false promise of life and fiery passions, will inevitably prove to be a false hope. And the fact will always remain, that in life before ‘the Living God’ there will only ever be two *substantial* possibilities: *delight in Him*—out of an untroubled conscience and a free spirit—or the *despair* that is the rightful result of living against Him. Both the glory of the first and the tragic futility of the second will be revealed as we proceed.

refused repentance: remorse—the hopeless sorrow

In the diagram above we see that the experience of despair is often accompanied by *remorse*. Remorse is an attitude of sorrow, but not an authentic one. It is a self-absorbed regret for the way things have turned out. “I’ve done the wrong thing”, “I’ve let myself down”, “I’ve really messed things up”, “I’ve wrecked everything for myself”, “I’m never going to make it”, “I’ve ruined my reputation”. It has to do with a dark spirit of *humiliation*, personally and before others—and of course, in reality, before the Ever-Personally-Present One. It is a persistent expression of the ‘dark-spirited living’ referred to in the diagram.

Remorse is so different to the beautiful experience of *repentance*. Repentance involves a clear-spirited sorrow before God, which—through assurance of His grace—brings, as we’ve seen, a complete *change of mind* towards Him. Then, as the diagram indicates, this decisive mind-change brings liberation into a new day of ‘*great delight in God*’ and enjoyment of a gentle and restful humility—with love for Him and all others.

Future studies will show in detail how such repentance and faith bring us immediately back into fellowship with God—and, so, into that eternal quality of life we were created for.

The restoration that repentance and faith bring is, indeed, both swift and liberating! Remorse, however, only serves to keep us in the never-ending, restless struggle that we hate but won’t give up on: the struggle between those persistently erected, idolatrous, wrath-averting structures and that degree of *personal desolation* which always returns when they fail.

How completely foolish it would be—in the face of our human fallen-ness—to remain in a dark-spirited and tormenting bog of hopeless remorse. And this, when—as future

studies will show—there is always the liberating and transforming power of a *grace-assured repentance* instantly available!

doing it tough—and adopting various mentalities

In the diagram we also see that there are four particular *mentalities* that are adopted in the midst of the restless struggle that is being spoken of here in Study 4. These—together with our ‘despair/wrath-averting strategies’—are set within the general environment of ‘human-centred counseling and therapies, and self-help philosophies, etc’. More will be said of the nature of this realm as we continue.

It is a fact that in a life lived against *God* there is often the sense of having everything against *us*. “Life is hard,” we say, “But it’s not our fault. We deserve better.” And so, we doggedly make use of various ‘mental, coping mechanisms’. And the mentalities mentioned in the diagram, particularly the first, are certainly examples of this.

The ‘**victim mentality**’ is one in which we always choose to see ourselves as the object of unfair and oppressive circumstances or actions. It is a way of viewing life that is readily built into the mind of a rebellious human creature.

Another means of coping with the feeling that ‘everything is against us’ is the ‘**victor mentality**’—which says, “It’s tough, but I’m tougher. I’m a survivor—an over-comer! I have a positive mental attitude and know how to handle whatever has come or will come my way. I know what I want, and no person, situation or thing will prevent me from getting it!”⁸

Then, related to victor thinking, there is the ‘**sage mentality**’. Having ‘overcome the odds’ (or convinced ourselves that we have), there is a personal drive to proudly pass on our ‘wisdom’ to needy strugglers around us, who haven’t come to our place of triumph. The sage is convinced that they are the one ‘who has the word that needs to be heard’ (by those who have clearly not been initiated into the secret).

Finally, often related closely to the previous three, is the ‘**saviour mentality**’. “It’s tough for other people too, but they don’t need to worry—I’m here!” Some actually survive personally by taking on a ‘saving role’ towards others: a ‘Mr. or Ms. Fix-it!’ This may involve ‘practical help’; or it might take the shape of a more ‘therapeutic’ engagement in others’ lives. Many actually find themselves driven into various (other-person-saving) counselling and therapeutic roles—often as a means of ‘self-healing’, processing their own struggle as they ‘help’ others.

Actually, the *sage* and *saviour* mentalities, both of which are usually very much related to that of the *victor*, can, clearly, often be expressed with something of a superior, ‘monarchical’ (kingly / queenly) attitude: “People have big problems and need my wisdom and my help. And, yes, luckily for them I am here. Someone needs to ascend to a place of authority and command, and that person is me!” This is an unfortunate, self-asserting, self-serving and self-aggrandizing stance to be taken within our personal human dilemma.

These different mentalities, then, are habitual ways of regarding ourselves in the midst of restless pursuit of what is falsely promised. But tragically such states of mind also, only serve to keep us from an authentic experience of God’s love, and the

⁸ Further on in the series it will be seen that there certainly *is* a grand *overcoming* to be enjoyed by faith in the word that declares God’s grace. Although this involves personal decisiveness and mental discipline, it is a very different thing to the desperate and proudly self-focused attitude of ‘victor thinking’.

equally authentic love for Him and others that we were created to have the joy of expressing. These mentalities will be mentioned variously throughout this study, as well as in others to come—and ultimately, in these, showing how they finally may be transformed into something that is different altogether!

living against the Giver of Life is never the easy option

Study 3 spoke of an ‘inner thrust of hostility’ towards our Maker: a dark intrusion into our heart that vandalizes our humanity and robs it of its truly, life-giving sparkle as the image of God.

Although in our rebellion we hate despair, we also hate the prospect of repentance, and in our hostility towards God *demand* that there be that *third alternative* mentioned earlier. The *rage* of a despairing rebel—created to know the blessedness of the Creator Himself—is deep-seated and never far from expression, one way or another. Such anger powerfully fuels the endless, restless struggle we are speaking of.

All of the wrath-averting actions spoken of in this study are the result of a choice to refuse the One who calls us into the ‘righteousness, peace and joy’ of His kingdom. ‘In the flesh’ we are determined to have these things our *own* way, apart from Him—always pressing to gain new hope of personal rest and vitality through our endeavours. But it is indeed an unchangeable fact that living against the Giver of Life is never the easy option. The way is *hard* for all who find themselves *striking out* against the way and will of God.

Acts 26:14

[The Lord said,] “It is hard for you to kick against the goads.”

The ‘goads’ were sharp spikes fitted to an ox cart or to the end of a hand-held pole designed to discourage the ox from kicking back against the driver. Some particularly unruly and stubborn oxen would keep on kicking until their legs were painfully bloodied—a less than flattering picture of our unrelenting hostility towards a good Creator!

He is by no means a ‘driver of oxen’ in the perverse way this image may be viewed. That would better describe Satan. But He is the Holy One, who in His great love always desires to direct us into His life-giving way. And—as our key concept in this study is now about to show—He will *give us up* to the painful consequences of our foolish and wickedly willful rebellion.

How senseless and needless is such ongoing, personal struggle. But, as will be seen, how simple and eternally liberating is the salvation that has been made available to every person! No one needs to continue on in life without full enjoyment of the goodness, mercy and grace of the One who has formed them.

God’s commandment into life is to be decisively responded to: ‘Repent and live!’ Those who come to repentance understand that like the rest of humanity they were once by nature objects of divine wrath—literally ‘children of wrath’, who lived every day under the impact of their willful refusal of the Holy One, who has always loved them (Ephesians 2:3b). And how relieved they are to be free at last from their self-imposed struggle!⁹

⁹ Once a person comes to receive the extraordinary salvation referred to above, they are not exempt from the experience we have been speaking of here. All foolishly persistent rebellion will certainly result in tasting the wrath of the Faithful One. However, for those who have received God’s grace this will never be ‘wrath unto condemnation’. It will be totally with a

We will look now in detail at the deep anguish that is known under the wrath of our Maker's love, and the ways we defiantly attempt to avert it—to turn it aside and, somehow, neutralize its impact. All this may be rather confronting and seem a little forthright in tone. But we are dealing with matters that are very slippery indeed, and they need to be handled with a 'strong grip', lest their urgent, personal implications go unidentified. What is at stake here is our capacity for entrance into the true freedom of spirit and fullness of life that we were created for.

Firstly, in the wrath of His love God personally gives us over to despair-producing:

GUILT

in regard to the CONSCIENCE—having to bear with a dark-spirited sense of **condemnation & shame**
wrath-averting strategy: desperately seeking relief by blaming someone or something else, condemning others, performing better, changing the rules, denying the facts or self-punishment

In coming to the matter of guilt we are touching upon what is at the heart of all personal despair. *Unrelieved guilt* is the most basic and painful element of the dilemma that rebellious humanity faces. We will see throughout the rest of this study that every element of our endless, restless struggle is, in fact, 'guilt-charged'.

the need for some clarity in regard to this matter of guilt

Some clarity is, indeed, necessary at this point. Because here our emphasis is upon the nature of the despair we *feel*, we will be examining the universal, fallen-human experience of *guilt feelings*. But it must be understood that our feelings of guilt arise out of a deeper and more dreadful reality than mere personal failure. We feel guilty because we are, in fact, *guilty before God*: the 'Holy One', 'the Judge of all the earth'. Feelings of guilt are usually the fruit of *actual guilt* before our Maker: a guilt that is constant, regardless of what is, or is not, personally felt at any time.

Along with feelings of guilt, then, there is very naturally a dark-spirited sense of *condemnation* and *shame (or sense of dishonour)*. These two are inseparable elements of human experience wherever there is the presence of guilt within the human conscience.

false guilt—and so, false feelings of guilt, condemnation and shame

As alluded to in Study 3, it is important to understand that some experiences of guilt, condemnation and shame have no real basis in the word of God. They are founded not upon violation of 'the Law of our Maker', but upon failure to keep 'the laws / codes' of fallen-human cultures. These are constructed by any given society, group

view to their being restored to faithfulness—as it clearly was among the LORD'S people in the Old Testament period. The wrath of His love is a strong, fatherly chastening and discipline—rightfully painful. A future study will spell out in detail the nature of a rebellious believer's experience of wrath, while another will show how *every* experience of struggle and anguish is to do with the Father's purposeful, developmental action towards His children—that they may more truly fulfill their high human calling. This also is the exercise of divine discipline.

or family, in order to promote the best possible experience of human freedom and fullness in a fallen world.

Such social codes contain laws that enable, to varying degrees, a more functional and integrated expression of common life. These include certain cultural practices that have to do with those—soon to be spelt-out—Study 5 categories: vocational activity, marriage and family life, and rest and recreation. Such cultural practices may be in line with ‘creational law’ (which our Maker has built into the nature of things in His world) or they may be against it. It is in regard to these social codes that it is possible to have ‘false guilt’ that is culturally conditioned, rather than true guilt; and, with this, a false sense of condemnation and shame.

the relentless demands of the human conscience

It is an absolute fact that nothing will satisfy the *conscience* of one made in God’s image except total conformity to His holy law: ‘the high human calling’ and all that His word has declared in regard to it’s outworking. Only what satisfies the holy Being of our Creator can truly satisfy this ‘inner judge of the human soul’.

Romans 2:15

The requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.

Study 3 showed that the conscience is not always an accurate guide. It depends very much on how it has been educated. But regardless of the cultural instruction someone’s conscience has received, the human spirit is structured by its Maker to be *truly free* only when His holy law is fulfilled. Even if all of the *culturally conditioned* requirements of the conscience were kept, that would not remove the unending demands of *divine* law that are—by creation—etched into the deepest parts of a person’s being. Even the *false guilt* we feel when violating various cultural codes, is, nevertheless, still based upon the *actual guilt* of our persistent, fallen-human moral failure.

a noble humanity in a courtroom environment

In a later study it will be shown that every day in this life—as moral creatures created to be the image of God—we live within ‘a courtroom environment’. And in this, we cannot desist from making *moral judgments* in regard to our-selves and those around us. No matter how diligently we may seek to think differently we, nevertheless, consistently find ourselves being either ‘the judged’ or ‘the judge’—‘the condemned and ashamed’ or the ‘condemner and shamer’ of others.

our ‘guilt-averting strategies’

There is, indeed, no despair like that which comes from a tormented and unrelieved conscience; it is unbearable. And so, we relentlessly do whatever we can to escape from its pain.

It was said earlier that our wrath-averting mechanisms are, actually, idolatrous. Those used in this area of ‘guilt-relief’ may not appear to be idolatrous, in the way that idolatry is generally viewed. But they are, nevertheless, things we give ‘worth-ship’ to as a promise of finding comfort for our conscience. They are what we immediately resort to instead of *acknowledging* the God-revealed truth of our situation, and *looking* to what *He* has done to bring relief and freedom in it.

The averting mechanisms we use in the face of guilt are many and are desperately implemented. They are the ‘first line of defense’ in our perpetual war against personal despair.

Any of us may strongly insist that we have no guilt—at least in a particular situation—and yet the presence of these guilt-averting strategies actually proclaims the opposite to be true.

1) blaming someone or something else

We try to godlessly find relief from the accusations of our conscience by *blaming* our behaviour on *someone* or *something* else. “It wasn’t *my* fault!” “It happened because of my difficult circumstances.” “It was because of my unfortunate background”. “It was because of the way my parents treated me.” “It was because of the genes I have inherited—what can you do about that!” “It was because I have been deprived of so much.” “I wouldn’t have thought, said, or done it if *they* hadn’t said or done *that!*” “I’m not that kind of person, but you can only take so much!”

This is all part of the ‘victim mentality’ referred to earlier. Of course, there *are* many kinds of unfortunate and painful things that happen to us—often very sad and even horrible things. But to take on the role of a victim is never the way of personal freedom and fullness.

Genesis 3:11b–13

—*Adam and Eve playing the ‘blame game’*

[The LORD said to the man], “Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?” The man said, “The woman You put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.” Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

“IT WASN’T MY FAULT!!!” each cried. And notice what Adam said: “The woman *You* put here with me, *she* ... Yes, *I* did it, but *You* put *her* in the picture. You can’t blame *me!*”

What happened there at the beginning of fallen-human history has continued down through the millennia: the endless—and relationally destructive—blaming of others for our own willful choices.

We, like Adam, *in effect* say to God Himself: “It was the parents *You* gave me!”; “It was the genetic history *You* caused me to inherit!”; “It was the circumstances and environment that *You* permitted!”; “God, You have made it so hard. You can’t blame *me!*”

Here again we see that horrible, inner thrust of hostility towards our Maker spoken of in the first key concept of Study 3. There it was seen that this is what always rises up towards Him whenever the conscience is gracelessly troubled in His presence. Whether such hostility is acknowledged or not, the fact is that fellowship with God is lost.

This hostility, then, is also directed towards those around us who have become the means of highlighting our guilt. Whenever we have a sense of personal human failure towards another, our innate antagonism towards God is likely to well up in an angry reaction towards them as well. Every expression of a hostile spirit towards either God or others, *always*, comes from our proud and fearful reaction to the unbearable presence of guilt in regard to them.

Dumping guilt onto our Maker and others for *our* own choices clearly has a disastrous impact upon our relationship with both Him and them. It is also personally

demeaning. To not take responsibility for our actions and *reactions* does, indeed, rob us of the moral dignity for which we were created. It is also greatly dishonouring to our glorious Creator!

Some actually develop a *personal identity* based upon a sense of being ‘hard done by’. In their eyes, people, situations and things are always against them. This seems to be their lot in life, and it is all ‘very unfair’. Such endless, cruel oppression is why they haven’t performed and still don’t perform as their conscience demands. Their bitter cry is: “I am to be pitied, not condemned!” This surely is a tragic expression of the victim mentality.

Again, let it be here acknowledged that the personal pain and hardship that life’s circumstances often bring can be severe. No one should minimize the reality of these. But assuming a personal identity of ‘victim-hood’ is neither a God-honouring nor humanly healthy way to respond to such things.

2) condemning others

As expressed in regard to ‘the courtroom environment’ mentioned earlier, we try to godlessly find relief from the accusations of our conscience by attempting to bring other people under condemnation. “If judgment has got to come upon someone it should be upon *him* or *her* or *them*!” This kind of thing is simply another desperate attempt to dump our sense of personal failure, condemnation, dishonour and shame elsewhere.

Here it is right to emphasize again the tremendously vital principle expressed above: that a bitter, angry and critical spirit is always the sign of an ailing conscience. It is the sure indication of a dark, hostile, dread-filled and loveless attitude towards God. The ‘inner thrust of hostility’ referred to in Study 3 is always directed primarily towards the Creator, and then in the direction of others who remind us of our guilt before Him.

In a later study it will be seen that there *is* a true and righteous anger that is entirely appropriate. But behind such true anger is always the following: personal joy and humility before God; a jealous passion for His honour, pleasure, glory and praise; humility before the one who has been offensive towards us (as a fellow-sinner and object of mercy and grace); together with affectionate desire for their ultimate blessedness. How very different to the kind of self-obsessed, angry criticism and condemnation referred to above!

The thing we criticize most vehemently in others is, often, where we ourselves—at least in our secret heart—fail the most. And our irritation with such a one is because they are openly doing what we work so hard at covering up!

In our next study we’ll be looking at something of the life of King David. Although a righteous man, he on one particular occasion became a classic example of the *self-righteous* rage that arises in the midst of personal guilt and un-repentance. The offence he fiercely condemned in another was, in principle, the very thing that he himself was guilty of (2 Samuel 12:1–9).

The apostle Paul knew what was behind a condemning and critical spirit. He said:

Romans 2:1

“You have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.”

All who engage in this kind of guilt-charged condemnation and accusation of others are, in fact, expressing the likeness of Satan: ‘the accuser’. He delights in inciting such perversity!

3) performing better

We try to godlessly find relief from the accusations of our conscience by seeking to improve our own moral performance. “I will *feel* better if I *do* better!” “*This* is what I am *really* like!”

All of our lives we have been striving to achieve a *righteousness of our own*. We do this in order to *justify* ourselves. That is, to declare ourselves blameless before God and others and so *satisfy the constant demands of the conscience*. This is all part of our unrelenting quest to maintain a sense of fallen-human, self-exalting, personal pride.

Romans 10:3a

They did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own. In a later study we will look at the glorious fact of the Father’s free gift of a ‘right moral status’ in His presence, through simple faith alone—the primary need of every person! Where this *divine gift* is not consciously enjoyed there will always be a powerful, inner drive to proudly establish our own *humanly-attained* moral status—either through attempting to keep the revealed law of God or by seeking to uphold general, personal values.

But although such *self-righteousness* promises much, it actually delivers *little* when it comes to the relief we seek. Every imagined success is soon followed by an inevitable failure. Then it’s back to the old despair, and so often, to the *anger* that is expressed towards those we blame for our fall—or in general, towards anyone who we feel is worthy of condemnation in some way.

This matter of striving for a self-exalting ‘righteousness of our own’ also has much to do with the ‘victor mentality’ referred to above. “Life is *hard* and some people are morally weak in it all. But I am a person with *standards*—and I *attain* them!” Here self-display is often a prominent element.

In this way—in our ‘performance madness’—there is the constant need to compare ourselves with others. Competition and performance usually go hand in hand. And so, we find ourselves saying things like, “I can’t understand how others can do that. It’s something I *never* do.” or “I do this, but unfortunately others don’t.” There will always be ‘bad performers’ with whom we may favourably compare ourselves!

Self-obsessed, *other-person-reducing self-righteousness* is never far away when there is *unresolved guilt* nagging at the conscience.

Even as we are exposed to the averting-strategies outlined in this section, we may well be tending to think of how they apply to others, rather than to ourselves! This matter of *guilt-averting strategy* is such a huge issue for us all.

4) changing the rules

As mentioned in Study 3, we continually attempt find godless relief from the accusations of our conscience by constructing our own laws. “What I did—or am not doing—is not wrong. Everybody operates this way—its OK!” Or, just simply, “I don’t believe it is wrong. My conscience doesn’t condemn me. I’m doing what is *right*—or at least what is right for me!”

Others of us don’t even bother claiming that our actions were not wrong. We simply say, “I did what I did. It wasn’t right, but there will be no judgment. It doesn’t matter.”

Here the new rule is that we are not accountable to God, only to ourselves. In this there is great pride in saying, “I don’t need to excuse myself. I can face the facts, and move on.” It all sounds very strong and noble. But—in the depths—a God-given conscience is never satisfied by such proud, moral bravado.

Romans 1:32

—*endless promotion and affirmation of ‘the new rules’*

Although 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.

1 Timothy 4:2b

—*a conscience which has become hardened against the truth over years of rule-changing*

[There are those] whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.

When someone’s skin has been badly burned and seared it becomes completely insensitive to pain—except around the extreme edges of the burn where it is often *hypersensitive*. In the same way, those whose conscience has been seared—having no apparent pain of guilt in the face of moral failure—are often irrationally and oppressively *super sensitive* in other areas. If deeply embedded guilt doesn’t appear in one way, it will in another!

We may change the rules, but nothing can be done about the law of God that was implanted within our deepest parts by creation.

5) denying the facts

Then we may try to godlessly find relief from the accusations of our conscience by going into ‘denial mode’: either blocking out of our mind the true facts of what we’ve done or *not* done, or attempting to retell the story in a way that will favour our case; or in order to avoid the pain of exposure we just lie!

Denying the facts of our personal failure so as to avoid condemnation—like all of these guilt-averting mechanisms—is a sad, humanly unhealthy and God-dishonouring way to live. And it must be said that it is a particularly self-demeaning thing when it is, *we* ourselves, that we are trying to deceive.

6) punishing ourselves

We may even be led to attempt to godlessly find relief from the accusations of our conscience by engaging in various forms of self-punishment. This can be part of the *performing better* solution, often taking the shape of excruciating labour! Or it can take other forms such as remorseful self-condemnation and even deliberate, physical self-harm.

The ultimate tragedy in this regard, of course, is the all too frequent result of guilt’s unrelieved torture: that dark-spirited act of suicide. What a horrible outcome this is for those who have been created to know and enjoy the personal freedom and fullness that belongs to the image of God.

the futility of our efforts

These, then, are the devices that are constantly in operation around and within us every day, whenever the conscience remains unrelieved. The problem with them all, however, is that they don’t work! In fact, being yet further expressions of rebellion against our Maker, they only serve to increase our guilt and the pain it brings.

Jeremiah 2:22–23b

[The Sovereign LORD declares,] “Although you wash yourself with soap and use an abundance of cleansing powder, the stain of your guilt is still before Me ... How can you say, ‘I am not defiled’.”

Jeremiah 6:14

—*shallow, futile comfort from the godless ‘counsellors’*

They dress the wound of My people as though it were not serious. “Peace, peace,” they say, when there is no peace.

As our diagram showed, there are always human counsellors who ignore the treasures of divine wisdom, seeking to solve problems that come from a choice to live against the Creator’s way. The world will always provide an army of such counsellors and therapists, to help their fellow-strugglers find ‘guilt-relief’ through the establishment and maintenance of guilt-averting strategies. But any peace that is gained from these efforts is far from what the human spirit longs to know—as the following Scriptures show:

Isaiah 59:12b

“Our offences are ever with us.”

Ezekiel 33:10b

Our offenses and sins weigh us down.

Psalms 32:3–4

When I kept silent [about my sins], my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.

Isaiah 57:20–21

The wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. “There is no peace,” says my God, “for the wicked.”

Psalms 38:3–4

Because of Your wrath there is no health in my body; my bones have no soundness because of my sin. My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear.

Psalms 40:12b

My sins have overtaken me.

Proverbs 18:14

One’s spirit provides strength in times of sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear.

Jonah 4:9

—*the prophet Jonah’s guilt-charged anger before God: a debilitating, dark-spirited depression*

God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry ... ?”

“It is,” he said, “And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.”

Much of our depression can actually be an expression of sullen, smoldering anger towards God. We feel that He has done what He *shouldn’t* have or that He hasn’t done what He *should* have. And behind it all is the nagging sense—consciously acknowledged or not—that we *deserve* it to be this way. There is, of course, clinical depression. But this can also often be complicated and intensified by what we are speaking of here.

Guilt is the most oppressive reality in fallen-human experience. It is understandable that we work so hard and resourcefully to avert it and be done with it. But it must also

be understood that such willfully, God-refusing action is greatly offensive to the One in whose presence we live.

Thankfully, this is not the end of the story in relation to human guilt and the conscience. Much more will be spoken of in this regard in future studies. WE WILL SEE WHAT GOD HAS DONE—BY HIS INCREDIBLE MERCY AND GRACE—TO BRING US INTO THE SHEER AND UTTER DELIGHT OF ABSOLUTE LIBERTY IN THIS AREA!!!

Secondly, in the wrath of His love God personally gives us over to despair-producing:

INSECURITY

in regard to PERSONHOOD—having to bear with a dark-spirited sense of **lostness and inferiority**

wrath-averting strategy: desperately seeking to gain personal and vocational significance—& ‘dealing with the competition’?

In our fallen-ness we live in rejection of both the love of the Father and our high calling. The result is that we are without the magnificent, God-given personal and vocational identity we were created for, and so, fail to *live truly* as the likeness of God should. It is no wonder, then, that we feel both *lost* and *inferior*—with inferiority, of course, being closely related to the guilt-charged sense of shame (or dishonour) spoken of in our previous section. The matters of personal *moral status* and *identity* really are, inseparable.

And so, in the Scriptures we have such statements as these:

Romans 3:23

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Romans 3:12a

All have turned away, they have together become worthless.

Jeremiah 2:5b

They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves.

Psalms 22:6

—the dreaded cry of those who have lost any sense of their Creator’s esteem, and that of their fellow creatures

“I am a worm and not a human being, scorned by everyone and despised by the people.”

John 8:34b

—the personally demeaning experience of bondage to habitual patterns of unrighteous and desperate living

Everyone who sins is a slave to sin.

Lamentations 5:16a

—the sense of nobility as the image of God, gone

The crown has fallen from our head.

Jeremiah 50:6a, c

—part of a society of restless, homeless spirits

[The LORD declared,] “My people have been lost sheep ... They wandered over mountain and hill and forgot their own resting place.”

the struggle for 'self-esteem'

Those who refuse the glorious identity they were created to enjoy find themselves trying to set up other ways of feeling personally significant. Self-esteem is sought through *being* a 'good person' (related to self-justification) or by being good at *doing* certain things, or being *seen* to enjoy something, or by *owning* certain things or having a particular *task* to accomplish. The personal and vocational images we may create for ourselves are almost unlimited!

It's said that some have 'good self-esteem' while others have 'poor self-esteem'. In the light of all we've been seeing such terms may be understood in this way: Those who don't walk with God yet have *good* self-esteem are those whose wrath-averting strategies are currently working quite well. In their proud rebellion against their Creator, they feel that their level of personal, relational and vocational attainment is fine, even excellent! On the other hand, those who also refuse fellowship with God and suffer from *poor* self-esteem are usually those whose wrath-averting strategies are ineffective. *They too*, long to be proudly confident and able to feel that apart from their Maker they have an excellent level of personal, relational and vocational attainment, but fail miserably!

It must be said, of course, that the 'good' self-esteem of all fallen-human creatures is very fragile. The slightest look or tone of disdain or word of criticism can plunge the 'self-ennobling rebel' back into a bitter-spirited despair. Such a delicate sense of elevated, personal status requires constant diligence. This, indeed, must be vigilantly maintained, regardless of the cost—which is often very high, relationally and otherwise.

Sadly, in our fallen world many have suffered deep, relational pain that leaves their attempts at self-authentication and self-validation in tatters. And apart from a transforming experience of God's grace, such people find themselves desperately striving to salvage a sense of self-worth for the rest of their days—even with otherwise outstanding levels of attainment.

It must be evident that (in spite of the grandeur and nobility that is expressed within much of fallen-human living) all God-refusing pursuit of self-esteem, whether successful or not, is by nature *self-obsessed* and *self-serving* (even within sacrificial self-giving)—an endless preoccupation for any who have guilt before the One who made them.

This is, indeed, not a very flattering assessment of such a dominant area of personal quest in our world. It may even be viewed as offensive. With the issue of self-worth being at the heart of a vastly significant amount of personal crisis, one understands why this pursuit is naturally enshrined as a *supreme virtue* within fallen-human society. However, as was said in our previous study, we are dealing with the reality of a deadly *dis-ease* among us! This is a universal affliction, in fact, which needs to be decisively diagnosed and eradicated on the basis of our merciful Maker's revealed wisdom—with a view to a wholehearted embracing of His guaranteed, life-giving cure! And so, our assessment will need to continue to be one that is starkly stated.

becoming a self-worshipping 'saviour' or 'ruler' of others

The tragedy of all godless pursuit of *self-worth* is that it is a pursuit of *self-worship* (self-worth-ship)—which is, in fact, ever-diligently incited by dark spiritual powers. And again, it must be emphasized that such desperate personal pursuit is both humanly demeaning and greatly offensive to our Maker.

Mention was made before of the *saviour mentality*. Taking on the roles of ‘counsellor’, ‘educator’, ‘social worker’, ‘religious worker’, or ‘reliever of the oppressed’ are common ways of bolstering a sense of personal value. The self-affirmation is, “I am somebody because other people *need* me!” In this, some simply adopt a general role of ‘practical helper’ in order to gain a sense of self-esteem from labouring on behalf of others—usually with a view to receiving acceptance and affirmation for their efforts.

Although in these kinds of saviour roles there may be much that is noble and sincere, there can also be a certain amount of self-exalting ‘control’ as well. As mentioned previously, this saviour mentality can be expressed in a monarchical way. ‘His or her majesty’ says, “Things are not as they ought to be around here. But I’m just the one who can put them right!”

Of course, the functions of counsellor, educator, social worker, religious worker, reliever of the oppressed and practical helper aren’t necessarily a means of godlessly grasping at personal significance and status; and even if they are, it doesn’t mean that such endeavours are bereft of a natural human concern and compassion. But, more than this, all these can also be wonderful ways of truly contributing to a *godly fulfillment* of other’s needs—in joyous fellowship with the Father and clear-spirited participation in His actions of love. Within such endeavour there is, then, no descent into self-absorbed despair or angry reaction when our efforts are not successful or appreciated.

self-esteem at the expense of others

In the outline at the beginning of this section it was said that in desperately seeking to establish our personal and vocational significance there is often the need to ‘deal with the competition’. How quickly we find ourselves ready to criticize, or expose as inadequate, foolish or perverse those who intrude into our realm of personal significance—whose presence threatens to ‘rob’ us of the approval, recognition or admiration we are seeking. And how relationally destructive, self-degrading and God-dishonouring is such unfortunate behaviour!¹⁰

The apostle John spoke of a fellow named Diotrephes who claimed to know God but consistently sought to assert himself before others. For him to be less than ‘number one’ was an intolerable thought.

3 John 9b

Diotrephes ... loves to be first.

A competitive and dominating spirit is always evidence of personal insecurity—just one of the relationally unhealthy results of our dark and foolish rebellion.

needing our Maker’s way

As we have said, godlessly gained self-esteem is extremely fragile, demanding high maintenance. When the strategies that are adopted fail, the effect is often personally devastating, and the anger that results embittering.

¹⁰ It could be said that our ‘other-person-dispatching’ attitudes and actions can often take the shape of ‘demonizing others’ in order to defend the ‘false worth-ship’ we have established for our own sense of identity. And, of course, in this, in effect, we are defending our own ‘self-deification’ / ‘self-divinization’. As we’ve seen, such driven-ness to ‘be as God’ was behind humankind’s descent into self-exaltation in the beginning. So, this is very much a part of fleshly, personal motivation in the face of identity-threatening, relational situations.

Human beings need to have a deep sense of personal calling, purpose, status, significance and nobility. Without this there is unbearable personal pain. But such a rich identity is only truly gained through joyous knowledge of the Father's love and esteem, together with a full-hearted acceptance of the calling He has given. In later studies it will be shown just how this may be the case—and how liberating it is personally, relationally and vocationally!

In addition to the matter of PERSONHOOD, God also, in the wrath of His love, personally gives us over to despair-producing:

INSECURITY

in regard to CIRCUMSTANCES—having to bear with
a dark-spirited sense of **uneasiness and vulnerability**
*wrath-averting strategy: desperately seeking to gain physical,
financial, material, vocational, relational and political security*

Yes, insecurity is suffered not only personally but also *circumstantially*. The reason for this is that there is an unsettling sense of judgment hanging over the life of one who has guilt before God. In this, the 'people, situations and things' of the Study 3 diagram—which are looked to for *life*—become the context of an un-nerving, inner disturbance. All is potentially under threat.

a nagging sense of impending trouble

The uneasiness and vulnerability that is felt within the circumstances of life is often quite irrational. For no good reason we may sense that something horrible could happen at any time! God's word confirms that this is precisely how the wicked will feel.

Deuteronomy 28:65b–66

The LORD will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart. You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life.

Notice that it is the LORD—our faithful Creator—who is responsible for this trauma. It is not merely the natural consequence of human rebellion against His way; it is what He Himself—the Holy One—personally gives us over to in our unthinkable rebellion against Him.

Leviticus 26:36b

[The LORD says], I will make their hearts so fearful ... that the sound of a wind-blown leaf will put them to flight.

Proverbs 28:1a

The wicked flee though no one pursues.

Psalms 53:5a

There they are, overwhelmed with dread, where there was nothing to dread.

Genesis 4:14b

—one rebel's fearful cry

"I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me."

In our rebellion many of us like to project a carefree, life-loving image. The truth is, though, that in our hostility towards our Maker we are often inwardly fearful and

disturbed. There is a sense of dread and even terror that can rise up so quickly within us.

Unfortunately, the circumstantial insecurity we know is consistently expressed in a relational way. Relationships can suffer horribly through the fear and suspicion that arise.

setting up our ‘security-systems’

Those whose sins have been freely acknowledged and forgiven—and who delight in the Father’s presence, good and loving purposes and faithful provision—have no need to be fearful in the circumstances of life.

However, all who will not receive God’s grace and will not walk with Him—trusting and obeying His word—will have to adopt other ways of feeling secure. This is done by giving attention to the areas of circumstantial vulnerability mentioned in the outline above: seeking to *gain* physical, financial, material, vocational, relational and political security. Or to demand that others provide this for us.

How many and varied are the incessant, self-securing efforts of God’s ‘jumpy rebels’! The Creator’s rebel creatures may, in fact, be very confident in and proud of their diligently constructed ‘security-systems’. Here are a couple of biblical examples:

Proverbs 18:11

—*imagined circumstantial security through money*

The wealth of the rich is their fortified city; they imagine it a wall too high to scale.

Isaiah 28:15

—*boasted circumstantial security through smart alliances with what appears to be strong and invincible*

You boast, “We have entered into a covenant with death, with the grave we have made an agreement. When an overwhelming scourge sweeps by, it cannot touch us, for we have made a lie our refuge and falsehood our hiding place.”

These various self-preserving efforts, however, never effectively remove the feelings of uneasiness and vulnerability. They may bring a temporary sense of circumstantial wellbeing, but the ‘old fears’ soon return.

Nevertheless, there is no stopping the desperate, fallen-human spirit from pursuing the security it was created to know. Again, such insistent labours are not only futile but are grievously offensive to the One whose love and faithfulness is stubbornly refused.

the wickedness and folly of self-securing creatures

To despise the loving care of a sovereign and faithful Creator is neither the way of righteousness nor wisdom. It will always evoke the displeasure of our Maker, and will certainly never bring the *inner rest* that is diligently sought.

Isaiah 30:1

“Woe to the obstinate children,” declares the LORD, “to those who carry out plans that are not Mine, forming an alliance, but not by My Spirit, heaping sin upon sin.”

As we’ve seen, the alliances we establish may be physical or financial. But they may also be philosophical or psychological: the careful alignment of our thinking with particular attitudes and responses in the face of life’s ‘circumstantial challenges’.

But no matter how seemingly strong or sophisticated these alliances may be (whether physical, financial, philosophical or psychological) they remain nothing other than idolatrous, God-refusing, God-dishonouring and God-grieving mechanisms—that will always be under His judgment, one way or another.

Job 8:14a

What [the godless] trust in is fragile.

Jonah 2:8

—*cut off from assurance of the Father's securing love*

"Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's [unfailing] love for them."

Job 31:24–25, 28

"If I have put my trust in gold or said to pure gold, "You are my security," if I have rejoiced over my great wealth, the fortune my hands have gained ... then these also would be sins to be judged, for I would have been unfaithful to God on high."

Ezekiel 7:19b, 25b

Their silver and gold will not be able to deliver them in the day of the LORD'S wrath ... They will seek peace in vain.

By contrast, in a later study we will see how the grace of God secures those who joyously embrace it—bringing a deep and abidingly authentic serenity and rest in the midst of all the circumstances of life!

Thirdly, in the wrath of His love God personally gives us over to despair-producing:

FRUSTRATION

in regard to HUMAN FULLNESS—having to bear with

a dark-spirited sense of **deadness and futility**

wrath-averting strategy: desperately seeking to secure each day a full & life-giving engagement in significant relationships & action, or just a perpetual feast of meaningless escape—but with an ever-lurking guilt-charged anger, vented or suppressed

Being created in the image of God, we are vocational beings with a high and noble purpose to fulfill. As such, we must be *fully engaged* in the fulfillment of our 'high human calling'. To refuse to be in such *life-giving action* brings a sense of deadness and futility, leaving us anxiously seeking some other means of being enlivened, revived and fulfilled.

whatever it takes

The drive to experience fullness of life is very powerful in every person. There is virtually no limit to the mental, emotional and physical energy—and material resources—that will be invested towards this end.

It was seen earlier how we attempt to godlessly establish our own *personal and vocational significance*. When it comes to the pursuit of *human fullness* it is precisely the same things that are looked to.

For example, if our sense of *identity* is found in what we do at work—or in any other sphere of special interest—then *that* will be where a major part of our personal

energies and material resources are expended. And in this the focus will be upon *full and life-giving engagement* in significant relationships and action within that area.

Here again we may refer to the Study 3 diagram. There, in that portrayal of ‘life by the flesh’, we saw the total investment of our energies and resources in *people, situations and things*—all expended in order to *gain* from *them* what has been refused from the Father. The unhappy outcome of all this is often a personally, relationally and vocationally *unhealthy driven-ness, obsessive-ness* and, frequently, *a need to have control* in particular situations.¹¹

Where there is no *significant relationship or action* to be engaged in, the option is then usually mere ‘meaningless escape’. That is, spending hours fully absorbed in (feasting upon) things that achieve nothing except to provide some sense of immediate, personal enlivenment.

Whether seemingly significant or meaningless, these are the things to which we *give* ourselves in order to hopefully find the fullness our humanity demands.

the ‘belly business’

In relation to all of the expressions of human despair in this study, a common way of ‘self-medication’ is ‘comfort eating’. Particularly in the pursuit of human fullness a person may be driven to find relief from a sense of personal deadness, loneliness, emptiness, futility and frustration by gluttonous or intensely focused *food consumption*—a quest for life-enhancing ‘sensory experience’. Here it is a case of despairing and, often, angry hearts (or those attempting to keep such states at bay) grasping at emotional pleasure through stimulation of the sense of taste.

Philippians 3:19b

—*those who look for life in food*

Their god is their stomach.

This is expressed today not only in overeating but also in a seemingly, ever-increasing obsession with tantalizingly, exotic cooking techniques. Such fascination with food and taste sensation is so often evidence of a humanity that feels the pain of deep, guilt-charged personal frustration.

The joys of taste and flavour, of course, are not wrong in themselves. They are good gifts of a blessed Creator, who loves to see His children have pleasure in the abundance of His provision. It is only when these good gifts are pursued without gratitude to Him, and as a means of godless, personal comfort and enlivenment, that they become objects of idolatrous worship.

frustration’s inevitable return

The same diversionary failure experienced in other areas is also known here. Although the stimulation arising from our efforts produces a sense of being truly alive for a time, the cry soon returns: “What’s missing? Why do I feel so dead, lonely, empty and frustrated?” “Why is life so hard, and, in the end, futile!”

Zealous, God-refusing strategies are unfailingly set in place, but such efforts will never truly bring the desired reward. Any sense of personal fullness always has the seeds of frustration in it—the fruit of which inevitably appears before too long.

¹¹ Other extremely relevant personal, relational and vocational outcomes of ‘life by the flesh’ will be spoken of in later studies—all with a view to our liberation from them and their dysfunctional outcomes.

This, of course, keeps the old, guilt-charged hostility towards our Creator smoldering—and, at times, fanned into full flame! Anger towards others is merely a symptom of this. BITTER ANGER, AS WELL AS FRETFULNESS AND ANXIETY, ARE CLEAR INDICATIONS THAT WE HAVE IDOLATROUS *PURSUIITS* THAT ARE EITHER UNDER THREAT OR HAVE ALREADY FAILED!

Recurring frustration is often expressed through ‘venting’. We are not all venters. Some of us just ‘bottle things up’ inside ourselves—im-ploders rather than ex-ploders. But whether the inner rage is outwardly or inwardly expressed, there are always personal and relational consequences. Those around us are either personally abused through ‘explosion’ or relationally deprived through ‘implosion’.

Thankfully, we also will see in future studies how we may—in the grace of God—live freely, truly and joyously in the midst of *any kind* of relational difficulty!

As Study 2 has shown, we’ve been created to participate in the fullness of our Maker’s own life and vocational action. Nothing else will ultimately fulfill our deepest need. In this light the matter of personal frustration—with its sense of deadness and futility—is certainly a painful aspect of our fallen-human dilemma. Again, the Scriptures graphically describe this situation:

Jeremiah 2:13

[The LORD says,] “My people have committed two sins: they have forsaken Me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.”

Haggai 1:9a

—*the frequent experience of godlessly engaged livers*

“You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little.”

Isaiah 44:24b–25b

—*frustrated ‘life strategies’*

“I am the LORD who has made all things ... who overthrows the learning of the wise and turns it into nonsense.”

Ecclesiastes 1:8b

—*apart from true sight and hearing, nothing is ever enough*

The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing.

The Father loves to fill the spiritual senses of His children in His presence. When this is not known, no amount of physical, sensory stimulation will truly satisfy.

Ecclesiastes 1:15

What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted.

We may engage in all kinds of innovative programs to ‘straighten out’ or ‘fill up’ our personal situations. But it is only free-spirited, joyously full and active engagement in ‘the high human calling’ that will produce the desired result. Only this can bring the level of human fullness we were created for.

Isaiah 28:20

—*a graphic picture of frustrated pursuit of personal rest*

The bed is too short to stretch out on, the blanket too narrow to wrap around you.

Proverbs 4:19

—*the perplexing nature of a rebel’s frustration*

The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble.

Proverbs 13:15b

The way of the unfaithful is hard.

Those who are unfaithful to their Maker—refusing to find their delight in Him and His way—sooner or later taste the toughness of life.

Isaiah 31:1a, c

Woe to those who ... do not look to the Holy One.

Psalms 146:9a, c

The LORD ... frustrates the ways of the wicked.

Ezekiel 20:25

[The LORD said] "I ... gave them [over to] other statutes that were not good and laws they could not live by."

How much frustration our self-created laws produce! In the areas of vocational activity, marriage and family life, and rest and recreation, only the wisely purposeful law and way of God is truly 'functionally good'.

Jeremiah 17:5a, c–6a

This is what the LORD says: "Cursed are those ... whose hearts turn away from the LORD. They will be like a bush in the wastelands."

When we live against the way of God, we are actually living against ourselves!

Proverbs 19:3

—*inevitable, guilt-charged hostility towards the Holy One*

One's own folly leads [to] ruin, yet [the] heart rages against the LORD.

Ecclesiastes 10:19

—*the philosophy of some who are without true joy*

A feast is made for laughter, wine makes life merry, and money is the answer to everything.

How much hope is poured into such objects of personal enlivenment! But with the limited return these actually bring they cannot possibly satisfy the deepest cry of the human heart.

Ecclesiastes 7:6a

—*the meaningless noise of empty relationships*

Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools.

Ecclesiastes 7:4b

The heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.

God-refusing 'fools' must spend all the time they can seeking after personal freedom and fullness in the 'house of pleasure'—with the many and varied shapes that such a desperately entered abode takes.

Isaiah 55:2

—*a message from our Maker*

"Why spend money on what [does not sustain], and your labour on what does not satisfy?"

Ecclesiastes 2:1–11

—*the testimony of one who gave mere 'horizontal-ism' his best effort, pursuing emotional pleasure and human fullness through sensory stimulation, magnificent possession and personal elevation*

[Pleasure] proved to be meaningless. "Laughter," I said, "is madness. And what does pleasure accomplish?" I tried cheering myself with wine; ... I undertook great projects; ... I amassed silver and gold for myself; ... I became greater by far than anyone in [my city] before me. ... I denied myself nothing

my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labour, and this was the reward for my toil. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, [a mere breath], a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.

substance abuse: an empty promise of personal fullness

The frustration of which we are speaking often drives a person to alcohol or drug abuse. But these bring neither the fullness of joy nor personal peace that our spirit demands.

Isaiah 56:12

—*alcohol used as a false promise of life*

“Come,” each one cries, “let me get wine! Let us drink our fill of beer! And tomorrow will be like today, or even far better.”

Although alcohol may be received as a good gift of the Creator—to be enjoyed with dignity—it is no ‘cure for our ills’ or ‘a giver of life’. No matter how frantically personal relief and fullness is sought through substance consumption, the old enemy—guilt-charged frustration—is never far away.

Proverbs 23:29a–30a

Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaints? ...
Those who linger over wine.

Isaiah 28:7b

—*the demeaning nature of alcohol abuse*

They stagger from beer and are befuddled by wine.

Drunkenness—which ‘knocks out’ the higher centres of the brain—leaves its victims without either human dignity or true enlivenment.

The Scriptures don’t speak of *drug abuse* specifically. But it is clearly covered by the statements regarding alcohol. Both have to do with chemically altered mental and emotional states.¹²

In a future study more will be said regarding substance abuse, when we look at the matter of addictive behaviours and the freedom God gives from them by his grace.

the confident claims of some

As mentioned previously, there are, of course, those whose diversional strategies seem to work very well, and who insist that their experience of life is all that could be desired. The reality is that such people have—at best—settled for what is so far short of the ‘human freedom and fullness’ for which they were created. This will become very evident as we continue through the series.

¹² Here we are not speaking of professionally prescribed medications. There may be times when these are necessary due to conditions that cause chemical imbalances etc.

Fourthly, in the wrath of His love God personally gives us over to despair-producing:

FEAR OF DEATH

in regard to ETERNITY—having to bear with a dark-spirited sense of **dread and doom**

wrath-averting strategy: desperately seeking to dismiss the fact of final judgment, through belief-systems, guilt-relief & ‘life now!’

Apart from the absurd thought of the image of God descending into an eternal nothingness, there is a more basic element to the fear of death. It is, in fact, the fear of *judgment*. It has been rightly said that people are not afraid to die because they *must* die but because they *deserve* to die.

In this way fear of death is really the same as ‘insecurity in regard to circumstances’: the one being fear of judgment in time, the other in eternity. We could also say that ‘circumstantial insecurity’ ultimately—in some of the areas mentioned in that part of the outline—involves the fear of death as well.

Fear of death always lies just below the surface of fallen-human consciousness. It may be denied but is there all the same. Life can be filled with busyness (‘godless activism’) and the mind grimly convinced of either eternal nothingness or cheerily grasping hold of certain theories of an afterlife. But until the conscience is forever cleansed and calmed, death will always be, at core, a dark foe to be feared—despite attempts to maintain a noble and even boldly, bright and cheerful spirit regarding the whole matter.

Sadly, sometimes the pain of a godless life can make death a morbidly longed for alternative. The sullen, brooding cry being, “Any kind of afterlife or a despair-ending nothingness would be better than what I am experiencing now!” Such a sad frame of mind, of course, doesn’t make death a less daunting prospect. It just means that, tragically, living is less desirable.

Where the grace of God is not greatly delighted in, fear of death is deeply embedded in the human heart—frustrating the presence of an authentic, personal serenity and tranquility. We can never erase the fact that we were magnificently created to live forever in nothing less than the blessedness that belongs to the image of God!

moral bondage through the fear of death

A frequently intruding fear of death, actually, keeps rebellious human creatures in constant personal enslavement.

Hebrews 2:15b

All their lives [they] were [satanically] held in slavery by their fear of death.

What is the slavery referred to here? It is our compulsive given-ness to the *wrath-averting strategies* we’ve been describing, coming out of the *idolatrous passions* of Study 3, and then, with these passions desperately pursued in the light of a final accountability to our Creator. Although not something that is necessarily to the fore of one’s thinking, the sense of an ultimate reckoning—however expressed—is always stirring within the innermost being of rebellious humanity.

A dark shadow of *guilt* and its eternal forebodings is persistently cast over the fallen-human spirit—pressing us to overcome its damning power and the insecurity and frustration it produces. Nothing drives us more forcefully to establish our own self-

righteousness and to fulfill our self-extending, self-securing and self-enlivening passions.

Thankfully, once again it may be said that future studies will show how *the thrilling realities of God's grace* are able to liberate us in this regard. The proclaimed implications of a *total acquittal* of our sins, *intimate communion* with the Father and the assurance of an endless *blessédness* in His eternal Home—together with other equally wonderful treasures—will make all slavish, *wrath-averting strategies* to be absolutely irrelevant!

the declared fact of a coming judgment

Final accountability to our Maker is a not a pleasant prospect for those who live in rebellion against Him. But it is, nevertheless, what every person will ultimately be confronted with.

Hebrews 9:27

People are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.

The final Day of Judgment is a reality that always looms on the horizon of fallen-human history. That such a Day should come to moral creatures made in the image of God is totally *right* and *fitting*. All other creatures have their particular glory as the handiwork of God. But the unique glory of human beings is such that they will ultimately stand before the throne of their Creator to give an account of their lives. Although this is, in fact, the highest expression of their human dignity, for the unrepentant it is their greatest terror.

Romans 2:5

Because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when His righteous judgment will be revealed.

Many may feel that their moral performance will be sufficient to avoid condemnation before God. But on this basis, anything less than a *total fulfillment of their creational calling* will see them in a desperate state before their Judge on that Day. Only a prior, authentic faith in His declared grace, with a God-enabled, responsive given-ness to His way, will save anyone from condemnation.

2 Thessalonians 2:12b

All will be condemned who have not believed in the truth but have delighted in wickedness.

Romans 2:16b (NRSV)

God ... will judge the secret thoughts of all.

To face this final judgment apart from the grace of God would be the ultimate personal tragedy. Each one will see, totally, the vileness of their heart and the enormity of their offense against the Holy One. There will be no more self-deceit or proud assertion of righteousness, for then they will feel themselves to be the most loathsome of all creatures.

2 Thessalonians 1:9

They will be punished with everlasting [ruin] and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from [the majesty of His transforming power].

All who have refused to seek the 'Living and True God' and do His will shall have no part in the glorious, eternal future of His people—forever *shut-out* from the blessedness they may have known.

It was said earlier in this study that in life before the Living God there are *only two substantial and enduring possibilities*: either *delight in Him*, out of a clear conscience and a free spirit; or the *despair* that is an inevitable result of living against Him and His way. The reality is that both of these—indicated by an unbroken line in the diagram—will endure into eternity.

And for those who die still in unrepentant rebellion—without the divine forgiveness they may have known—it will be the second of these that stands eternally before them: an *unrelenting experience of despair*. Although forever loved by their Maker, they will be without the human magnificence they were created for, bearing within themselves the torment of their, now fully realized, guilt, with the awful sense of shame, lostness, inferiority, deadness and futility it brings.

Such eternal consequences may sound so horrible—even crass and against all human sensibility. But it is, in fact, the necessary establishment of justice in God's universe. As was said in Study 1: "If He did not pursue the revelation of His glory in all the earth, nor finally judge those who despise it, that would be *great unrighteousness!*"

None of us would believe that horrendous crimes should not be brought under judgment. And yet it must be understood that the most horrendous thing that takes place in our world every day, is any person's *dark-spirited hostility* towards the Living and True God—the One who loves them and who every moment gives them 'life and breath and everything else'! For such unspeakable evil not to be finally brought under judgment would leave us existing in a universe that has no true moral substance or integrity.¹³

We must conclude this section by affirming again that *rightful exclusion* from a glorious, eternal destiny truly is the ultimate human tragedy. And that all who face such a future certainly do have good cause to feel an innate sense of dread and doom in the face of physical death—regardless of how it may be rationalized.

But, again, let us be assured that we can look forward to what is to come in later studies. It will be seen that death does not need to be a *dark foe* to be feared. Rather—by God's great grace—it may be a *dear friend* to be eagerly and authentically anticipated! We will be told of an indescribably joyous reality beyond the grave: one that may wonderfully enrich our lives every day, regardless of present difficulties.

CONCLUSION

Our good and faithful Creator has intended each of us to be:

- free from GUILT in our CONSCIENCE—not having to endlessly and restlessly struggle with a sense of *condemnation* and *shame*;
- free from INSECURITY as a PERSON—not having to endlessly and restlessly struggle with a sense of *lostness* and *inferiority*;
- free from INSECURITY in the CIRCUMSTANCES of life—not having to endlessly and restlessly struggle with a sense of *uneasiness* and *vulnerability*;
- free from FRUSTRATION in our pursuit of HUMAN FULLNESS—not having to endlessly and restlessly struggle with a sense of *deadness* and *futility*;

¹³ For some there will no doubt be questions in regard to the nature of this final judgment that have not been addressed here. A later study will bring further clarity.

- free from FEAR OF DEATH in the face of ETERNITY—not having to endlessly and restlessly struggle with a sense of *dread* and *doom*.

But if we persist in rebellion against our dear and awesome Maker—the Holy One—such freedom can never be ours. We are, in fact, given over to the oppressive and dark dominion of the world, the flesh and the devil.

The world will of course—with its brilliant counsel, self-help systems, philosophies, vocational pursuits and entertainments—continue to equip its people to godlessly set up their personal, wrath-averting strategies. The flesh will pursue these, and the devil with his vast army of demonic powers will incessantly inspire them. But the dilemma of a fallen humanity will never be resolved on that basis—and the endless, restless struggle will continue, even into eternity.

Having come to this point, we are definitely now ready to proceed towards the *good news* part of the series!

These first four studies have been basically ‘doctrinal’. That is, they have established foundational principles that enable a biblical basis for belief in *the nature of God, humanity* and *the creation*. In them we have received an indispensable exposure to the truth of who God is, what we were created to be, what we have become and the *impact* this has upon us.

Such revelation may have been rather confronting and—as said already—even deeply disturbing. If that’s the case it is a good thing. The *reality* that we all so desperately need is beginning to dawn!

Now the studies that follow will bring an increasingly wonderful revelation of God’s incredible goodness, mercy and grace towards us. We will see all that He has done to put away our guilt, condemnation and shame forever, and to *set us free* to walk with Him as His dearly loved children. And this, in the blessedness of the high calling He has given, and in glad expectation of an eternal future that is beyond our imagining!

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