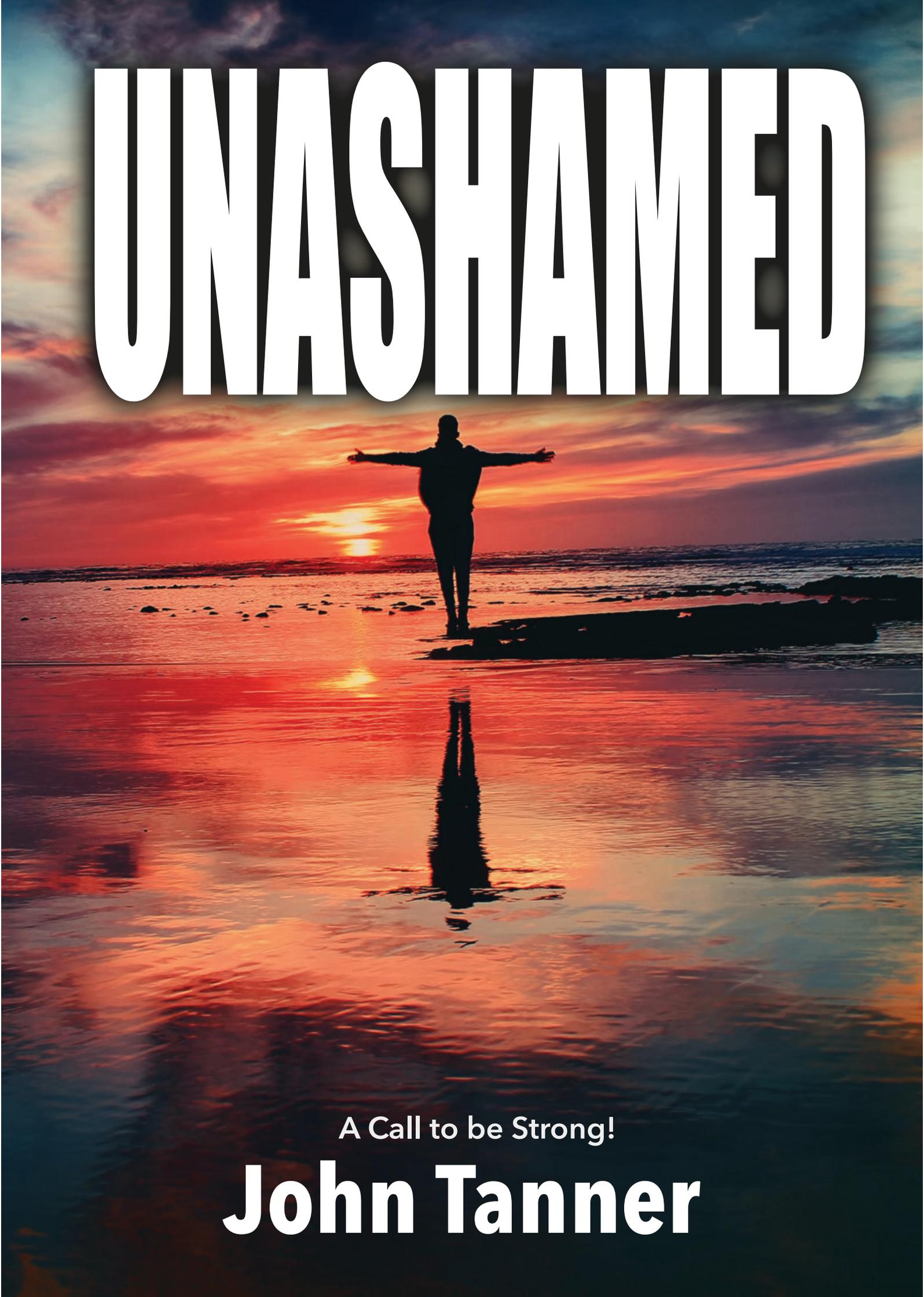


UNASHAMED



A Call to be Strong!

John Tanner

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Introduction:

In my lifetime, Australian society has changed in many ways. Most Australians have enjoyed the benefits of developments in medicine, technology, social welfare and education. But not all changes have been beneficial to all Australians. The marginalised in our communities still struggle for the basic necessities of life. Justice is more for the rich than the poor. And along with the benefits have come the dark side! In the early decades of the Twentieth century Christianity was very influential in both the public and private lives of most Australian families. Less than one hundred years later, Australia has been declared to be a secular country and aggressive secularism has driven Christianity out of the public square and now has its heel on the throat of Christianity in many areas of public life. As I have prayed and reflected on this situation, I have felt that we are witnessing a determined attack, not only on Christianity, but also on Jesus Christ Himself. What happens when people turn their backs on God? What will God do? And what should I as a follower of Christ do to help turn my culture back towards God? I felt drawn to the first chapters of Paul's letter to the Church in Rome. As I studied Paul's words I realised that he addressed similar challenges to those which we face today. Paul provides answers for the questions that I have posed.

I applaud the efforts of those Christians who are seeking to call the Church back to concerted prayer for revival in our land and our time. Surely, we must now come together across the Churches to ask God to do what none of us can do. **But as we pray, we must firstly "understand the times" (1 Chronicles 12:32) in order to pray effectively. And, secondly, we must come out of our seclusion and boldly let the light of Christ shine from our lives by both actions and words.**

In the following pages, I have tried to show how Paul helps us to understand the times and what he would encourage us to do in faithfulness to Christ.

1. Life in Australia in second half of Twentieth century

The world that I grew up in was a safe and happy place. World War II had concluded and, despite the fact that there were families who had suffered the loss of fathers and brothers in the terrible war, life for most of us children was getting back to normal. My parents struggled in the early years after the war. Dad worked hard and long to earn a living. The basic necessities of life were difficult to find even if you had the money. My first memories consist of living in the back room of a shed on a block of land my parents had purchased. In a few years there was enough income to support a mortgage and a small brick house was built on the land. My early years in a post-war, white, working class family seemed to be untroubled. More recently all Australians have become aware of the sufferings of many in our country at that time through parental and clergy abuse, the "Stolen Generation of indigenous children and the lack of essential rights for Aborigines and women. In addition, families lost husbands, fathers and sons in the war and many who returned home struggled to cope with the nightmares caused by the horrors they had witnessed. I was unaware of any of this. My parents were both Christians and we went to Church and Sunday School every week. I realise now that I was very privileged to have Christian parents. Many parents were Church attenders then; so they were influenced by the ethics and values of the Bible, but not all were true Christians.

I can also remember when many of life's necessities were delivered directly to our door. In my early school years the milk was delivered to our house every morning in bottles. It must have arrived very early because to this day I have no idea how it was transported to our house. A man with a horse and cart delivered fresh bread every day. If no one was home, a loaf of hot, fresh bread was always left on the letterbox to be paid for the next day. There were also weekly visits by the rubbish collecting truck and another service which we rudely called the can-bearer where a man came into our yard with an empty can filled with sawdust and took away another can filled with something smelly from the outside toilet. As kids, we found all this action quite fascinating and informative in terms of future career selection.

Perhaps it was not true for everyone, but it seemed to me that every kid belonged to either the Catholic Church and school system or the other Churches and State Education. The Churches were an accepted part of every community and most people attended either Mass or a Church service regularly. In the State school, our day began with the whole of school "parade" where we often recited the Lord's Prayer and sang a hymn. The local ministers came to the school on a given day each week and conducted

religious instruction in every grade. There was almost 100 percent attendance in these classes. Most of the children were also taken or “sent” to Sunday school so, as kids, we all had a good knowledge of the main teachings of the Bible.

Even though there was a divide in the community between Catholics and Protestant families, when school was out all of us kids played safely for hours together in someone’s back yard or on the street. From my first day at school, I always walked the 1.5 kms to school. I was bare foot and usually alone. Kids were safe then and family life was strong. Not many families suffered the pain of divorce. Men mainly did their drinking at the hotel after work on Fridays so most homes were not troubled by the problems caused by over indulgence in alcohol. The kinds of drugs that are around today were unheard of then.

I think that this era when Christianity was pervasive in our society probably reached its highest point in the years that the Churches invited the Billy Graham team to send evangelists to Australia to hold evangelistic crusades. There were quite a few famous evangelists who visited every few years. I remember hearing Dr Leighton Ford preach in two or three crusades. We also hosted Dr Abdul Akbar Haqq and Dr John Wesley White. I vividly remember going to the Exhibition grounds to hear Dr Billy Graham. The presence of God was profound in that public space and I was amazed at how many people literally ran to respond to the invitation for people to receive Christ as their Saviour.

Somehow this period of evangelism helped many Protestant Churches and Pastors to focus their efforts more on reaching Australians who were not yet followers of Jesus. For more than a decade the influence of the evangelists in Australia continued. During this period and the 1950s and 1960s many people came to faith in Christ from all walks of life.

As I reflect on these years I realise that whilst a much higher percentage of Australians attended Church and told the Census collectors that they believed in God, heaven and hell, not all of them would have been true Christians. Nevertheless, the Churches were regarded as worthy contributors to their communities; the clergy were respected; God was acknowledged in the public spheres of life and the influence of Christianity made for wholesome, happy and safe communities. Australia was known worldwide as a Christian country.

So why was it that as a young pastor at the end of the 1960s I found myself explaining to visitors from the Solomon Islands that not everyone in Australia was a Christian (like the missionaries that they knew), and that there were many customs and habits that they would experience in Australia that were far from Christian? At that time, an Islander Church leader said jokingly to a

Church gathering, "When your missionaries came to our country they told us to get dressed and go to Church. Now that I have visited your country and seen your beaches I feel I can say to you, get dressed and go to Church!"

Already, by the end of the 1960s there were signs that the Christian influence in Australia was waning significantly.

2. Australia has changed

Fast-forward another thirty-five years. The Australian Government has announced that Australia is now recognised as a secular State. Census figures have shown that the number of believers with even notional belief in God has diminished significantly. Church leaders lament the fact that their best people only attend Church twice a month (down from twice a week!) The number of Immigrants bringing Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism into the country indicates that other religions are growing. I mention this fact, not as a negative, but as another indicator of how society has changed. I personally regard it as a positive. Census figures also indicate the growth in numbers of people who have no belief whatsoever or declare themselves to be atheists.

When you add to these factors, the publicity given in the media to the failures of some parts of the Church to protect innocents from abuse, especially in Institutions like orphanages and schools, it is not surprising that the man in the street looks at the Church with some level of suspicion, or at the least, disinterest.

Australia today is no longer a safe and happy place for kids, or anyone else for that matter. Every day there are media reports of murders, robberies, home invasions and domestic violence. The drug trade seems to be at the root of a lot of the violent shootings and robberies. We have lost respect for authority whether that is for the senior citizens, the police, the judiciary or most elected officials. Churches are not seen in a positive light anymore. The role of the family as the essential "glue" in our societal structure is being undermined both intentionally and unintentionally. An aggressive secular agenda is being driven by an elite group of individuals (sometimes calling themselves "progressives,") in politics, education and business. Whilst not all ideas and changes are bad, this group's agenda is harmful. They are determined to rid Australia of any influence of Christianity (the past) and to make their ideology of secular humanism universally enforced. Through their role in the secular Universities that "educate" each succeeding generation, ideologues have the power to both influence and change Australia's future more than anyone else can.

Consider this quote from Oz Guinness taken from A Case for Civility.

The salience of religion in our times is a massive stumbling block to much educated opinion in Europe, the United States and the Western world at large...For one of the cardinal assumptions of intellectual orthodoxy since the Enlightenment, expressed canonically in the secularisation theory, is that modernisation means secularisation...which means religion will slowly disappear from sight as the world modernises... p31.

This presumption translates practically into three attitudes that are widely prevalent in educated circles in the West:

- 1. That religion in the modern world is irrational, archaic, retrograde and on the way out:*
- 2. That what remains of religion is the leading source of evil and conflict today:*
- 3. That a central task of politics is to curb the illiberal power of religion, above all, in the public square.*

(For any thoughtful student of world affairs who understands the role of religion in American and Western History, or in international affairs today, this view is preposterous, and it rests on premises that are unexamined as well as secularist. What is out of step is not the religiosity of the world but the secularity of the observers.) p31

Note the following comments re religion and human life which underline the fact that religion seems to be built in to the human race.

Thomas Aquinas - "unbelief is contrary to human nature."

Edmund Burke - "Man is by constitution a religious animal."

Berger - "Religion is a perennial feature of humanity."

Max Weber - "the tone deafness of certain elites: they do not hear or appreciate the music by which most people have, do, and always will orchestrate their lives...Whatever the source of the prejudice, the tone deafness has to be taken seriously because it affects public life and the freedom of many citizens whom those who are prejudiced simply do not take into account. P32

It is clear that the secularists are hard at work to cement Australia's role as a secular society. However, the process of secularisation is far more pervasive and dangerous than we have realised.

Secularism and Secularisation

The sharpest challenge to the Church is not secularism but secularisation. Secularism is a philosophy; secularisation is a process. Whereas the philosophy is hostile and touches only a few, the process is largely invisible and touches many. Being openly hostile, secularism rarely deceives Christians. Being much more subtle, secularisation often deceives Christians before they are aware of it. Dining with the Devil - Os Guinness

The process of secularisation operates in a similar way to the yeast placed in the flour to make bread in Jesus' illustration in The Gospels.

Modernity - Four main steps in compromise

1. **Assumption.** *Some small aspect is thought to be worthy of acknowledgment.*
2. **Abandonment.** *Everything that does not fit in with the new assumption is discounted or cut out. (What is involved is not altering tactics but altering truth.)*
3. **Adaptation.** *New is assumed, old is abandoned; what remains of beliefs and practices is altered to fit with the new assumption.*
4. **Assimilation.** *All is translated into the language of the new assumption - the new controlling assumption. Guinness Ch 4*

Guinness warns that modernity is unavoidable for all of us, but we must exercise discernment all the time in dealing with its influences. We need to be clear that secularisation is not a passing fad and that whilst it may be called "progressive" in our day; this ideology has caused massive disruption in the past century. In The Case for Civility and why our future depends on it. Os Guinness reminds us -

Nearer our own time, close to a hundred million people were slaughtered in the Twentieth Century by secularist regimes, led by secularist intellectuals, in the name of secularist ideologies - far more than the deaths from all the religious persecutions and repressions in Western history combined. P2

I have noticed that whenever a terror related incident occurs in the Western world, soon after the event, an elected leader comes on to the media and says, "We must be alert, but NOT alarmed." No doubt, this strategy is designed to have a good result - a calming effect on a frightened populace. But in regard to the secularist's assault on Christianity in Australia I want to say that it is time to be both alert and alarmed. If we are not stirred to action, the battle will be lost. We need to wake up! This is NOT a call to go back to a "safe" past but to become a part of shaping a better future God's way. In order to achieve this goal, we need to be properly informed about what is happening. There is a very real danger that Christians will be intimidated into saying nothing and doing nothing. The Secularists' strategy lies in doing something more than limiting the influence of Christians by silencing their voice, and in doing more than pushing the Churches to the sidelines of society where they will be seen as an irrelevance. The main thrust of this strategy is to attack Christ and remove Him from having any role in the future

of Australia. Not every secularist will agree with this statement but many fail to see the Powers that are at work driving their movement - powers that are enemies of Christ. (Ephesians 6:12)

3. So what are we as Christians to do?

Some Christian leaders already have a role to play and they need and deserve support from all of us. Let's get behind the leaders battling for the Biblical family structure, for preservation of life for the unborn and for treasuring the sanctity of life. They seem vulnerable in the media when they stand alone, so we must stand up with them in every possible way.

Love for Jesus is key

Henri Nouwen said, "There is only one real question. The question is not how many people take you seriously? How much are you going to accomplish? Can you show some results? But: Are you in love with Jesus?" If we are truly in love with Jesus, then we must do what Jesus would do, irrespective of the consequences. "A servant is not greater than his Lord!"- Jesus.

Henri Nouwen also said, "I am deeply convinced that the Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant...that is the way Jesus came to reveal God's love." For those of us committed to building redemptive relationships with people in our culture these words may seem to be irrelevant to today and the product of a past century. But consider this, Jesus stood out because He represented by His words and lifestyle a Kingdom that was in some ways the exact opposite of the world He lived in.

- A Kingdom where self was not autonomous but totally submissive to God.
- A Kingdom where love motivated every word and action.
- And most importantly, where God's will was done on earth.

We would do well to be irrelevant in the same way that Jesus was.

If Christians are to be God's alternative force to the forces of secularism what can we do?

Does the Bible speak to our situation today? What does it say and what can we say? Is there a message that we can deliver to our society today that will be relevant and helpful?

For almost a year I have been praying about these issues. I have felt drawn to a passage the Apostle Paul wrote to the Roman Church in his day. I have spent the last three months reading all the background to this passage and collecting the writings of respected scholars in order to gain an accurate understanding of what the Holy Spirit caused to be written there. I am convinced that it is relevant to our times. I invite you to explore its message

with me.

As we study Romans Chapter One we can see three interwoven themes running through the Chapter. It is essential that every Christian has a clear understanding of each of these themes so that we can give a bold witness that honours Jesus Christ. The three themes found in Romans Chapter One are:

- 1.The Revelation of the **Knowledge** of God
- 2.The Revelation of the **Wrath** of God, and
- 3.The Revelation of the **Power** of God

We will look at each theme in turn to discover the incredible ways of God.

Theme 1. The Revelation of the Knowledge of God

Paul intended to visit the Church in Rome in order to gain their support and perhaps also their participation in his next missionary outreach to the Western Mediterranean countries. His letter called "Romans" in the New Testament represents Paul's plea to the Roman Christians for them to see the world as God sees it - as lost and very needy. Paul patiently explained why the whole world was in need of God's salvation and how only the Gospel had the power to bring humanity back into a proper relationship with their Creator. In the process, Paul provides Christians with great in-depth teaching about how to live the Christian life successfully. But that must wait for another time.

This is a call for Christians today to be strong- not to be heroes, but just to be strong. Strong in the same way that Paul was strong. Paul stood up for God through all kinds of opposition - religious leaders, occult practitioners, upset business people, unjust imprisonments, shipwrecks, beatings, riots and much more. Paul stood strong! What did Paul believe that made him strong? What did he know? What did God reveal to him that can inform and strengthen us today?

The key verses in the first three chapters of Romans are found in Chapter 1:16,17.

I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes; first the Jew, then the Gentiles. For in the Gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

In the following passage, Paul states that righteousness is urgently needed because the wrath of God is being revealed from Heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men. Wrath is being revealed and the Gospel is the only solution to humanity's problems!

The passage has a number of themes that take us back to the key verses in Ch 1:16,17. The themes deal with cause, effect and consequences.

For our first pass through the passage let us take a special note of the key thoughts that follow **the theme of God's righteousness revealed.**

God's Righteousness Revealed

As we follow this theme there are several important verses to note or underline.

The verses are:

- In the Gospel a righteousness from God is revealed (1:17) How does this occur?
- What may be known about God is plain to humans because God has made it known to them (in all creation) so that people are without excuse (1:19,20)
- Gentiles who do not have the Law show that the requirements of the Law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness and judging them (2:14-16)
- If you call yourself a Jew. If you rely on the Law and brag about your relationship with God - do you dishonour God by breaking the Law? (2:17-23)

In the first two chapters of Romans, Paul gives an overview of history from the time of creation up to his own lifetime. He sets out to establish two important truths.

1. God is always right in what He does, even when He reveals His wrath from Heaven against wrong doers.
2. The Gospel is essential for all humanity.

In doing so, Paul reveals that people without faith in God are not merely neutral in their orientation toward life and God. In fact, they maintain a bias against God. They deny the evidence that God has already shown them. Therefore effective witness begins with God's existence and revelation. Effective witness appeals to people's memory and acceptance of this truth in dependence on the Holy Spirit to convict.

1. How has God revealed Himself and His righteousness to all humans?

Bible commentators point out that Paul chooses to use a philosophical approach here rather than a theological one. The reason for this approach may have something to do with the ethnic composition of the Church in Rome which was his immediate audience.

John the Apostle tells us, "God is light. In Him is no darkness at all." 1 John 1:5

The function of light is to shine; to reveal itself; to illuminate the darkness. God is light. Light cannot be hidden. God has made it plain that He exists beyond time and space. Paul refers to three aspects of this revelation.

General Revelation (all of creation) Ch 1:19,20

All people everywhere live in the midst of God's creation. No one can miss seeing it. Paul says "what can be known about God is plain to all because God has made it plain to them." Ch 1:19. What can all people learn about God from creation? Paul says we have learnt about God's eternal power and divine nature.

God's power

- What awesome power it must have taken to gather the oceans into their places and to build the mountains in a moment
- God's power sent all the Galaxies spinning into space and stopped them in a wonderful balance that sustains order and life to this day
- God's power created the seasons, the winds, tides and rain to sustain human life

God's nature

- God's incredible intelligence is seen in the detail, beauty and variety of animal and bird life around us. More recent studies into the DNA of all life reveal the incredible genius of God the Creator and Sustainer of everything.
- God's eye for detail is seen in the fact that no snowflake exactly replicates another
- God's faithfulness is seen in the rains in season, the rising of the sun each day, the growth of seeds into food and trees
- God's care and love for people is seen in the sustaining of the human race for thousands of years despite the ravages of disease, weather and wars.

When King David was just a humble shepherd boy spending the nights with his family's small flocks out on the hillside at night he had many hours to observe creation. No one can describe it better - listen to him in Psalm 19.

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands.

Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.

*There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.
Their voice goes out into all the earth. Their words to the ends of the world.*

Interestingly, David begins with God speaking to all the earth through creation and ends with a prayer, "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my

redeemer." Ps 19:1. Clearly, the message from creation is meant to bring people to a greater awareness of the Creator God and to a place of personal reflection in the light of God's existence.

I recall the words of two famous space travellers in the early days of space exploration. One was an American Christian who read Psalm 19 from space, "The heavens declare the glory of God." The other was a Soviet Cosmonaut – from an atheistic, secularist regime. He reported from space that he had orbited the earth and could not see God anywhere. Uri Gargarin, with all his education and technology could not see as accurately as a lonely shepherd boy on the hillside in Palestine.

God speaks powerfully through creation! Our knowledge gleaned about God from creation is not a personal salvation giving knowledge but an appetiser that invites all people everywhere to get to know God better.

Human Conscience Ch 2:15

Bible teachers point out that all people have been given an intuitive sense by which they can receive and process God's wonderful revelation via creation. Unlike the rest of creation, the human race has been created uniquely "in the image of God." Genesis 1:26,27. What does the Bible mean by "created in the image of God?"

In these few words in Genesis, the writer defines both the nature of humans and the relation between humans and God; on the one hand there is the fundamental distinction between humans and animals, but on the other hand it is demonstrated that humans do not have the same status as God, but are dependent on Him, and exist only because of the will of God. The New Bible Dictionary, Intersarsity Press.

This does not mean that humans look like God physically or that humans share in God's perfection. In fact, because of our Fall into disobedience, the image of God has become blurred in all of us, but not totally lost. James 3:9.

The image and likeness of God are expressed in all humans by:

- Human personality. Compared with the animals, we are self-conscious; we possess the power of abstract thought, and have a spiritual nature.
- Humans normally bear a moral resemblance to God. This may be seen in the laws that govern human relationships and human government at its best.
- Humans possess dominion of a limited type, over creation.
- Humans exhibit characteristics which indicate a hope of immortality.

(T.C. Hammond)

An integral part of this unique human ability is the human conscience. Through our conscience, we determine what is right and wrong and have the ability to feel guilty if we do something that is wrong.

So when human beings from all around the world witness the mighty acts of the Creator God they have the God given ability to reason and to judge between what is right and wrong guided by their own consciences.

Because there are so many different cultures and religions some people have asked, "Is there some common base line on which all conscience's operate?" Yes, there is! Paul gives us the answer in Ch 2 verses 14, 15. When gentiles who do not have the Law, do by nature the things required by the Law, they are a law for themselves even though they do not have the Law, since they show that the requirements of the Law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them (at the Judgment of Christ.) All consciences are designed to operate on the basis of the Ten Commandments.

In his book, Eternity in Their Hearts, Don Richardson produces evidence of all kinds of people from around the world who have never read a Bible. In every instance the people developed their own stories of a Creator and of moral implications that applied as a result in their own culture. One example of this phenomenon comes from the history of Korea. When the first Protestant missionaries went to Korea they had to choose a Korean language word to describe God. They chose the name Hananim despite the fact that Catholic missionaries had chosen a Chinese word for God. Now the Koreans quickly accepted Hananim because in their cultural knowledge, Hananim was not only a worthy supreme being, but he also had a son who had expressed his desire thousands of years before to come to visit the Koreans!

God has revealed Himself through both Creation and conscience. These revelations are universal. But there was another revelation that was specific to one People - the Jews.

The Law (or Commandments) Ch 2:17 & 23

The righteous standard required by God of all peoples that had previously been written on every human conscience became explicit in the Ten Commandments given by God to the Jews. God chose the Jews to be a missionary people who were to shine with His Light in the world. The Jews were left in no doubt about how God required people to live in order to have a relationship with Him. They were convinced because of the Law that they were to be a guide to the blind, a light to those in darkness, an instructor of the foolish and a teacher of infants. (Ch 2:19.) Along with this increase in revelation came an increased responsibility.

The Jews preached against stealing, but stole from others. They said that people should not commit adultery, but they committed adultery. They bragged proudly about having the Law but dishonoured God by breaking the Law.

Nevertheless, with the exception of the commandments detailing religious requirements, the Ten Commandments are the basis of Law for many countries worldwide.

God is a righteous God. He made people capable of living in a right relationship with Him for Eternity. He means us to know Him. By Creation, Conscience, and Commandment, God has revealed the "knowledge of God" to the human race. We have not been left in the dark at all!

Of course, this is not the end of the story of the revelation of God to the human race.

Today we have two even greater witnesses to the character and faithfulness of God that Paul did not mention.

Firstly, we have the Bible - the Word of God. We stand in a wonderfully privileged position in history. The complete Bible has now been translated into 636 languages and the New Testament into 1442 languages. This wonderful Book is the most read book in the world. It contains the story of God from the beginning to the end. Every word is true. Its message has transformed the lives of billions of people. Even though it contains a collection of writings of people across several thousand years, the Bible itself claims that no one person wrote by their own initiative, but everyone wrote under the inspiration of God's Holy Spirit. The Bible is therefore a much more reliable guide to life and relationship with God than either creation or conscience.

Then, finally, as if we have reached the highest peak, we have the Lord Jesus Himself. He is the greatest revelation of God and He demonstrated what it takes to live in relationship with God. He was with God in the beginning. He was God - through Him all things were created. John 1:1,2. When Jesus became a man and lived among us - *In Him was life, and that life was the light of men, the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not understood it.* V3.

It is as though God said, "I have constantly revealed myself to you through creation, through your consciences, and through the Law, but you remain in your darkness. You have not understood. So I have come Myself to show you how you can have a relationship with Me. Now follow me, and I will lead you to Eternal Life!"

Today, we are all confronted with the reality of God in Christ, the Saviour of

the world. What have we done with Him? Do we know Him? After God has taken so long and so much trouble to reveal Himself to us, are we still in the dark? We need not be.

Jesus said, *I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*" John 8:12

Theme 2. The Revelation of the Wrath of God

What a wonderful world it would be if all human beings accepted the revelation of God's Person, power and nature and lived in harmony with Him and each other. We can only try to imagine such a world because, unfortunately, it is far from us. Instead of a perfect dream, we have created a nightmare far more terrible than any of us knows. All of humanity has rejected the revelation of God.

Because all humanity has rejected the revelation of God, there is a second revelation - a revelation of the wrath of God. This is the second theme in Romans 1 and 2.

The Wrath of God

We often associate God's wrath with Hell. We think that somehow when someone displays their wrath they are lacking in love and righteousness. But this human thinking does not apply to God. Jesus acted out of love and righteousness when He drove out the corrupt moneychangers and traders from the Temple because they had changed "the House of prayer for all nations into a den of thieves."

The wrath of God revealed from Heaven to all people (Ch 1:16) is not some irrational passion within the Godhead. The wrath of God is the revelation of His hatred for sin that is continually revealed in God giving people over to their sinful foolishness. When we ask, "Why doesn't God do something about all the wickedness that is obvious in the world?" We are really expressing our human inability to know how God is acting sovereignly within or behind the scenes. God's wrath is revealed in the very fact that He seems to be doing nothing at all. Whereas in His wrath, God is allowing people to experience the full consequences of their rejection of Him.

Why would God allow people the freedom to reject Him and experience the full consequences of their sinfulness? Paul's answer is surprising. "Do you show contempt for the riches of His kindness, tolerance and patience, not realising that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?" Ch 2: 4.

God reveals His wrath to all people by allowing them to suffer the consequences of their rejection of Him in this life. God is not powerless to act. God is acting in kindness, patience and tolerance of our rebellious hearts, waiting for us to respond to our conscience in repentance. For those who turn back to God and seek Him, God will give Eternal life. Ch 2:7. But for all those who *because of their stubbornness and unrepentant hearts are stirring up wrath against themselves for the Day of God's wrath, when His*

righteous judgment will be revealed, a final day of wrath is certainly coming!
Ch 2:5.

Paul reminds us in this passage that people do not fall into sin and rebellion by accident. Because there are so many parallels between the disaster described in Chapter 1 of Romans and the events of our present day we, as Christians, should understand the process by which people fall further and further away from God.

What happens when God gives people over to their rebellious ways?

When people receive the revelation of the knowledge of God and choose to reject Him, they begin a process, either ignorantly or knowingly, that leads ultimately to their own destruction.

The first step away - Suppress the Knowledge of God Chapter 1:18.

Paul says that the wrath of God is revealed against people who suppress the truth by their wickedness. (1:18) In verse 28, Paul adds that *"people did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God."*

In both expressions it is clear that people have received the revelation of the knowledge of God but have chosen in the first case to suppress it and in the second case not to give it any value at all!

All the horrors that follow come as a direct result of this denial of the existence of God.

You cannot believe that God exists and worship idols. You cannot believe that God exists and give yourself to sexual impurity. You cannot believe that God exists and become filled with all kinds of wickedness such as depravity, murder, deceit, hatred or insolence.

The knowledge of God in our conscience operates like a brake to hold us back from the darker side of life.

That is why today, the atheists and those who are influenced by them, are so militant in proclaiming that God does not exist. You cannot accept that God exists and sink into the whirlpool of horrors described in Romans Chapter 1. C S Lewis wrote, " There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God 'Your will be done,' and those to whom God says, 'your will be done.' All people who are in Hell, choose it!

How do people suppress the truth of the knowledge of God?

Paul says that people do it by their wickedness. People practice sinful acts in the hope of hiding the truth from themselves! Nothing could be more futile than to think that we could destroy the truth by means of our own sin. Instead of destroying the truth, we confirm it!

The first step away is the suppression of the truth that God exists.

The second step away - Exchange the worship of God for the worship of idols Ch 1:23

The direct result of suppressing the knowledge of God is that people become "futile" in their thoughts. (Ch 1:21) The word "futile" that Paul used here is one that was connected to idolatry. People exchanged the worship of the God who was "everything" to give themselves to "nothing" - an idol. People made their own "gods" in images of snakes, birds, even human beings. While worshipping idols can reduce the demands of a guilty conscience, idols cannot save! (Isaiah 41:9,10) Idolatry is the replacement of God with any other object of worship.

Ironically, when people rejected the knowledge of God, they claimed to be wise but became fools who had their hearts darkened. Ch 1:22

The second step away exchanges the worship of God for the worship of nothing!

The third step away- Live life without any constraints Ch 1:24,26,28.

Most people think that it is a good thing to be able to be free - to live without fear of any consequences, but this is not true! When God gives you over to experience the consequences of your sins it is a terrible thing! In this passage we read three times that because of the progression of the human race into sin that "God gave them over." We have already learnt that this does not mean that God gave up on us. He simply revealed His wrath and waited patiently for our sin to become putrid to our taste so we would learn to value the knowledge of God.

Bible teachers point out that people slide downwards from idolatry into unrestrained lust and other evil. It may be that idolatry provides the key to the door to doom. Is there historical evidence for Paul's assertion?

Paul refers to idolatry in verses 22 and 23 of Chapter 1. It is well documented that homosexuality was rampant and honoured in the Greco-Roman culture of his day.

In addition, Paul was trained well in Judaism. By his own confession he knew that throughout the history of the Jews the worship of foreign gods was forbidden. In a note on this passage in Eerdmans Bible Commentary, I found this comment.

It is notorious that idolatrous worship was not uncommonly accompanied by debauchery; notably that of the Phoenician Astarte, and of Aphrodite and Dionysius.

It seems that Paul's comments in Romans relate not only to the Greco-Roman culture of his day, but also to the entire middle-eastern countries for many

centuries before Christ.

The goddess Astarte (and Astoreth) was a major goddess throughout the entire Semitic region, closely related to Ishtar in Mesopotamian texts. The New World Encyclopaedia says –

Astarte was connected with the fertility of crops and cattle, sexuality, and war. Her symbols were the lion, the horse, the sphinx, the dove and a star within a circle representing the planet Venus. Pictorial representations often show her naked. In the Ugaretic texts, she is closely associated with Baal, the chief deity of the Canaanites during the time of Israel's kings. In the Bible she is frequently called Astoreth, a Canaanite goddess whom the Israelites were much tempted to worship instead of God. Astarte was adopted by the Egyptians and later by the Greeks. Her worship was widespread in Israel. She may have been viewed as a female counterpart of Yahweh and of Baal.

In some cases Astarte was associated with sacred prostitution.

Biblical references include: Judges 2:12-14, 1 Samuel 31:10, 1 Kings 11:4-6, Jeremiah 44:18 and 2 Kings 23:13-14.

When I discovered the link between idolatry, depravity and the activity of false gods like Astarte, I became convinced that there were other fallen spirits who were actively involved in extending the rebellion against God. This was true for Israel's history so why would it not be a worldwide phenomenon?

Is there a spiritual dimension that may be influencing the drive to social change today, especially in relation to sexuality, morality and gender issues? This topic needs to be more carefully researched but a brief paper on Wikipedia points in this direction. Under the heading "LGBT themes in classical mythology" (Dec.2017) the article says,

Greco-Roman mythology features male homosexuality in many of its constituent myths. In addition, there are instances of cross-dressing, and of androgyny which in post-1990s gender terminology has been grouped under the acronym LGBT...These myths have been described as being crucially influential on Western LGBT literature, with the original myths being constantly re-published and re-written, and the relationships and characters serving as icons. Other gods are sometimes considered patrons of homosexual love between males, such as the love goddess Aphrodite and gods in her retinue, such as Eroses.(by Robert C. Ferrari in the 2002 Encyclopaedia of Gay,

lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Culture.)

Note that both Aphrodite and Dionysus were mentioned in the previous quote from Eerdman's commentary.

I mention this insight, not to condemn any people, but rather to illustrate that according to Biblical records, spiritual forces that were operative in the Middle East prior to Elijah's day and were still operative in Paul's day may still be operating in our cultures today.

The invisible world is always at work in the visible world!

We must always keep in mind that the horrific catalogue of sins listed in Romans is far more extensive than simply sexual sins - they encompass us all. Paul makes it clear that we have all done wrong and that "we have no excuse." (Ch 1:20 and 2:1)

The third step away from God allows humanity to live life without any constraints.

The Secularist Agenda

Romans 1 and 2 provide an insight into where the secularist agenda is leading us. The aim is to create a world based on the belief that there is no God!

It is relatively easy for us to say, "Well, I am not that person. I believe in God. I try to live a good moral life. I am not someone who can be easily seduced by the spirit of the age."

Then let us look briefly at some of secularism's false values to make sure that we really are following Christ today. (Thoughts derived from Christianity: Counterculture or Subculture? By Allan Turner.)

Narcissism

Narcissism's key false value is "Me First!" Narcissists are in love with themselves. Other people matter only if they fulfil and satisfy their needs. This thinking applies to their rights as citizens, but also their privileges and personal happiness. All other people, including family, must take the second seat to narcissists. Narcissists love modern day pop-psychology with its self-esteem, self-love, and keys to personal success workshops.

When Christians become infected with this disease they begin to talk about "doing something for themselves." They are tired of doing what God wants. The sermons are not relevant to their needs; the worship is out of date/too long/ tiring and perhaps they need something fresh. Before long Church life, family values, ethics at work and care for the community begin to play second fiddle to the real "star" of the show - Me!

By contrast Jesus teaches us to “crucify self” and put others first. See also Matthew 16:24,25, and Philippians 2:3.

Hedonism

Closely related to Narcissism is Hedonism that says that life is to be lived only for pleasure. “If it feels good, do it!” Hedonism fans the flames of sensuality and debauchery. Responsible living is replaced by a “thrill at any cost.” Lust replaces love, and life is reduced to an animal level. Promiscuous behaviour becomes the norm and sexually transmitted diseases become prevalent. Drug taking to get a higher kick often enhances “the thrill”. This attitude destroys many marriages and families and leaves people broken, lonely and sad.

Sadly, there is ample evidence of Christians being seduced into the hedonistic lifestyle through promiscuous behaviour, pornography, and breaking the promises made before God in the marriage ceremony.

Christians who follow God’s Word will find true happiness and satisfaction in living in a loving and permanent marriage relationship as planned by God for husbands and wives. 2 Cor. 5:9

Materialism

Materialism teaches us “life consists of the abundance of possessions that we have!” It is a total denial of the real nature of our humanity – “and man became a living soul!” (Gen.2: 7)

Instead of concentrating on spiritual and eternal things, materialism seeks after those things that can be seen, touched, tasted, smelled and possessed. Everyone and everything takes a second place to the accumulation of things. In modern societies, the advertisers constantly tell people that they must have the latest, greatest, most advanced products. As Christians, we are easily seduced into this wrong thinking. We must have the latest model phone, computer, TV or car. We are often surprised when we meet people from other “poorer” countries who have few possessions but are much happier than we are. Why is this so?

It is because Jesus teaches us that the truly valuable treasures exist in Heaven where they cannot be corrupted or lost. We are to set our hearts on things valued by Heaven. Life on earth is all about seeking Christ’s Kingdom whatever the cost. Then and only then, will we have true treasure in Heaven.

Pluralism

We have been told that we live in a pluralist society. Pluralism provides the subtlest trap. Pluralism is modern culture’s mantra that there are many different right ways to live and believe. Whatever is right for you, believe it! After all, there are many ways to God aren’t there? There is no truth except

your own truth. Everything is relative. In this context, if Christians were to claim that only Jesus was the “way, the truth and the Life,” they would be seen as unloving, dogmatic and unwilling to accept other people’s truth as equal to their own.

Pluralism adversely affects the witness of the Church in so far as we battle to have the truth accepted by unbelievers. In fact, they are not unbelievers, but believers in a lie of their own making. God’s revelation proves that there is absolute truth beyond all our laws and knowledge and that there are consequences for rejecting God’s truth. In Acts 4:12 Paul said, “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under Heaven given among men, by which we must be saved.”

Christ calls us to love all people and to be tolerant and respectful of their beliefs and values. We should try to learn from others who do not have the same cultural “blinkers” on that we wear. And in a spirit of true humility, we should build bridges of love and friendship that will enable us, on the basis of credible relationships, to share the Good News of Jesus with people who have possibly never heard the truth about Him.

As we have followed this second theme through Romans 1 and 2 we have discovered a number of important truths.

1. In response to God’s revelation through creation, conscience and commandments the entire human race chose to suppress the truth of the knowledge of God, hiding it behind their own wickedness. The first step down is always to deny the existence of God.
2. The human race has turned from the worship of the God who is everything to the worship of idols that are nothing. Worshipping idols is the beginning of a slippery slope that leads deeper and deeper into the swamp of debauchery.
3. God’s response to this suppression of the knowledge of God was to provide a second revelation – a revelation of the wrath of God. God is not absent or inactive in the face of such a rebellion. He has released His wrath continuously by allowing humans to sink into the lowest forms of degradation. His wrath allows us to have what we want however bad that might be.
4. God is patient and tolerant of our wickedness because He knows that when we reach the depths of human sinfulness, many of us will realise that we have been wrong and will return to His love in genuine repentance.

In one way or another, all of us have been a part of this horrible suppression of the knowledge of God. Twice Paul accuses his readers, “so that mankind is without excuse,” (Ch 1:20), and, “You therefore have no excuse!” (Ch 2:1)

It is time to own up! Time to be honest! Read 2 Timothy 3:1-5 to see the Holy Spirit's warning against the attitudes and practices that dishonour God! There are two appropriate responses available to us.

Repent

Paul wrote, "Do you show contempt for the riches of His kindness, tolerance and patience, not realising that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?" Ch 2:4.

God has been patient with you because He loves you. His patience is the proof of His love because you have deserved His wrath! Now is the time for you to respond to that patient love. He calls you to love Him in return and to tell Him about how you have dishonoured Him up until this time. You must be honest because He knows all about you. Come out from the mob! Be strong! Ask for God's help to serve Him for however long you have left.

Renew

How long have you been a Christian? Do you remember how you used to love Him because He saved you? Do you remember how keen you were to pray, to worship and to serve the Lord? Where are you now?

Have you guarded your integrity? Have you always kept your promises? Who comes first now - Christ? Family? Business? Self? Do you still have time to pray regularly? How is your relationship with Christ - stronger than at first or weaker?

Jesus challenged the Christians in Ephesus with these words, "I know your hard work and your perseverance. You have endured hardships in my Name and not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you. You have forsaken your first love! Remember from where you have fallen and repent!" Rev. 2:1-5

This is a call from your loving Father to renew your first love for Him. Remember, repent, renew! And He will restore you. Then - be strong!

Theme 3. The Revelation of the Power of God

Paul has taught us that part of God's agenda in creation was to provide evidence for all people everywhere of His existence and nature. The fact that everyone has been made "in the image of God" has made it possible for all people to process the implications of the message of creation and respond to it according to the guidance of their consciences. Creation and conscience provide us all with the primary evidence of the existence of a God who wants to be in relationship with all people everywhere.

However, the human race has "suppressed the truth" about God. We have substituted the worship of the God who is everything with the worship of man-made objects which are nothing. We have exchanged the ability to have God's wisdom for thinking that is futile. In giving ourselves over to worshipping our idols, we have opened the door to all kinds of destructive behaviour.

God continues to reveal His knowledge to all people but at the same time He also reveals His wrath against all evildoers. God's wrath or punishment against evildoers is to allow them to reap the harvest of their evil thoughts and deeds in this present life.

No one can make any excuse and "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." (Rom.3:23) Paul concludes, "There is no one righteous, not even one." Rom.3:10.

But there is a shining hope for everyone. The God who is always righteous (or right in nature, motive and action) has revealed a way out. God says, "You have all been wrong, but there is a way I can make you right." **The key is faith!** Rom.1:17. A voice deep within us cries out, "Tell me what I must do and I will do it - anything!"

God answers, "You can do nothing - Jesus has already done everything as your representative. Your part is to put your absolute trust in Him." This simple message is called, "The Gospel," which simply means, "good news."

I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God for everyone who believes! Ch 1:16.

Paul was en-route to Rome, the political and power capital of the Greco Roman world. Both the Greeks and the Romans despised Christians. They were regarded as a small troublesome sect in society. Idolatry and the worship of other gods was the norm in those days. Yet here was Paul - one man - coming to the seat of worldly power. The powerful forces arrayed against him and his mission did not intimidate him. He refused to be

ashamed of his message because he knew that it contained the power of God!

God is calling us today to stand up and be strong as Paul was strong; in the same way that Christ was strong! This strength will be found in the **message**, the **messenger** and the **mission**.

1. A strong Message - the Gospel. (Ch 1:16, Ch 3:22-24)

The message that we have to share is not new. It has been available since the time of Christ. Billions of people have heard it and their lives have been transformed by its power. God's power is in the message. There is no hope for the world apart from God's good news.

If we are to share the Good News as Christ has commanded us then we must first understand what it is. The Good news contains several of God's unchanging truths.

- Only God is "right." Every human being is "wrong" because we have not responded to the revelation of God, as we should have done. We are under God's wrath right now! Rom. 3:23 says, *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* We cannot save ourselves!
- Jesus Christ, the long promised Son of God was born miraculously as a human child. He lived His life in Palestine where He grew up. Even though He was tempted in every way as we are, He never once disappointed His Father by sinning against Him.
- God allowed Jesus to be crucified on a cross as a representative of all human beings, taking our punishment so we could live. His death was the price to be paid so that God could rightly "buy back" people who had become slaves to sin and death. Rom. Ch 3:24,25.
- God raised Jesus back to life after three days to prove that Jesus' sacrifice was pleasing to God and part of His divine plan. History records that many witnesses saw and heard Jesus after His resurrection.
- Jesus went back to Heaven after seven weeks where He was awarded the highest honours. He then sent the Holy Spirit into the world to strengthen those who would put their faith in Him and work to complete His mission. Acts 2:32,33.

This message not only describes the awesome power of God in acting to save human beings from death and sin, but it also has the power within it to convert a person who chooses to put their faith in Christ as their Lord and Saviour. This power is the power of God, the Holy Spirit.

Roger Greenway explained how the power of God works when we tell the Good News. He called witnessing, "co-witnessing with the Holy Spirit." This

idea is based on Peter's words in Acts 5:32. *We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him.* Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment. Witness without this conviction is ineffective.

How does the power of God work when we tell the Good News?

Firstly, believers convey an external witness through words and actions. The Spirit cooperates with the believer's witness in the sense that He motivates and empowers their testimony.

Secondly, the Spirit produces an internal witness in the recesses of the mind and heart. This is far beyond anything believers can do alone. Our witness can never go beyond the eyes and ears of the physical body. Only the Spirit can speak with a voice that carries all the way to the soul and heart.

Thirdly, people can speak of the great truths of salvation in a way that the Spirit cannot duplicate or replace because it is from experience. We speak as redeemed sinners speaking of an experience of God's love. In God's plan, believers are the Spirit's instruments - His co-witnesses of God's amazing grace.

There is nothing stronger in this world than the message of the Gospel. We should never be ashamed to proclaim it at every opportunity. People may oppose us or even mock us as they did Jesus, but the Gospel remains the power of God for salvation for all those who believe.

There is nothing stronger on this earth than the Good News!

2. A Strong Messenger (Ephesians 3:16 - 21)

The forces of secularisation are powerful and determined. Powerful ideologies and spirits are driving them. They confront us everywhere we go, even in our homes. They are agenda driven.

How can we win against such determined forces? We need to be strong - much stronger than we have ever been. In Australia those who have stood strong against secularists have been publicly mocked. Some have been threatened and a few have had their properties attacked violently.

Elsewhere in the world, it is much worse. Christians are being taken to court for refusing to act against their conscience. Christian organisations have lost the right to operate because they hold Biblical views. In Egypt, Pakistan and India, Churches have been burned and Christians martyred. We must grow stronger! How will this happen.

I believe that Paul's prayer for believers recorded in Ephesians Ch 3:16 - 21 contains the answer. Read it for yourself. Take note of:

- He may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being v16
- Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith v17
- Grasp how wide, long and deep is the love of Christ and to know this love v19
- Be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God v19

Notice that this was a prayer for the whole Church in Ephesus but it applies to each of us individually as well.

In order to be strong, we need to ask God to answer this prayer in each of us every day! In God's strength alone we can successfully co-witness with the Holy Spirit each day. To be entrusted with this role is a wonderful privilege - one in which we work hand in hand with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit-

With the Father - **Co-labouring:** *For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's building... As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. 1 Cor. 3:9, 2 Cor. 6:1.*

With the Son - **Co-suffering:** *Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of His Body which is the Church. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present you the Word of God in its fullness. Col.1: 24,25*

With the Holy Spirit - **Co-witnessing:** *When the Counsellor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, He will testify about Me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning. John 15:26,27.*

If we were called to stand alone, we would all need to act like heroes. But we do not stand alone. We stand and co-minister with all of God on our side. We can be strong, every day, in every location, in His strength.

If God is for us, who can stand against us?

3. A Strong sense of Mission (Romans 10:14,15)

What is it that we are to do in following the plan of God?

Arthur T. Pierson was a great missions advocate in the Nineteenth Century. He once spoke of four "links" of the chain of reconciliation between a Holy God and rebellious humanity.

First there was the **link supplied by the cross**, that replaced the broken link of the Law.

(The broken "Old Covenant" replaced by "The New Covenant in my blood - Jesus.")

Second, was **the link the resurrection supplied**, replacing the broken link of the righteous life.

(We have moved from "There is no one righteous" Rom.3:10, to "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ." Rom. 3:22)

Third, the **Holy Spirit supplied the broken link of love.**

(We have moved from a position of not loving God in 1 Jn 4:10, to being filled with God's love by the ministry of the Holy Spirit in Romans.5:5)

Every one of these three links were essential, yet one link was missing. Paul mentions the fourth link when he asks in Romans 10 how lost people will ever be saved if no one is sent to tell them. **The fourth link is lips anointed by the Spirit and speaking the message of Christ.**

The Apostle Paul was determined not to rely on human persuasion. *"...my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.*

(1 Cor.2:4,5)

Anointed lips are the indispensable link! THE STORY OF THE CROSS AND THE EMPTY TOMB MUST BE TOLD. THE ANOINTING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT MUST FALL ON THE LIPS OF OBEDIENT SERVANTS IF GOD'S PLAN FOR WORLD RECONCILIATION IS TO BE COMPLETED.

All of us have friends and family members whom we love very much. We want each of them to experience the forgiveness and love of Jesus. We relate to them with the love of Christ and we are waiting for them to turn to Jesus as we have done. We pray for them often.

But do they know the Gospel? Have they heard the story from anointed lips? Have they heard from your experience how Jesus has saved you and what He means to you, or have you left them guessing?

If Christ has sent you to them, when will they hear the Gospel from you in a way filled with love and humility?

This is your mission. God has already forged three links in the chain; you must forge the final one!

Be strong!

*Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be people of courage; BE STRONG.
Do everything in love. (Paul in 1 Cor. 16:13,14.)*

