

The Unsatisfied

There are three things that are never satisfied, four that never say, 'Enough!': the grave, the barren womb, land, which is never satisfied with water, and fire, which never says, Enough! – Proverbs 30:15-16

The Grave

Meditations

Oblivion?

The grave is the last thing we want an introduction to; but we are supposed to be Christians, and so we are supposed to be able to face death, because we believe in eternal life. For us, death is an illusion, isn't it?

I am not sure how much it really helps. The idea of eternal life isn't that attractive, truly – certainly not the idea of this life going on for ever. It's almost a cliché: the man waking up in an apparently perfect world just like the one he's just left and believing he's in heaven. Only to realise after a year or so of mounting boredom that he's actually in hell. Oblivion is a far better prospect than an everlasting version of earthly boredom.

If eternal life is going to be better than oblivion, it has to be totally different from the life we know. It has to be a total change, a total step upwards, a total abandonment of the life we were born into here. The only way we can grasp such a life is by beginning to experience a little – a very little – just the barest shadow of it now, here. And if we do that, we shall have to admit that death is not an illusion; death is real; death is a real loss of the life that we know; death is a real separation from all that we know and love – all whom we know and love – here in this life.

A Christian should be able to face the grave, because we believe in eternal life. For us, death is not an illusion. And nor is life, present or eternal.

Prayers

This is one point at which I fear denominational differences cause trouble. I have no real idea why we Protestants are paranoid about the idea of prayers for the dead, but there it is. In any case, prayers for the dead and prayers about death are not difficult to find, so you can easily pad out or replace these with others closer to your particular denominational slant.

Thanksgiving (1)

O Lord our God and Father, we thank you that, when we had fallen into endless, hopeless failure through the sin we embraced, you did not leave us trapped in interminable life, but opened the door of death, that we might escape to the realm you appointed for us, and which we choose for ourselves. These thanks we offer you through your Son, Jesus Christ, who himself passed through that door and returned to us and to you. Amen

Thanksgiving (2)

Lord God and Father
After day you appointed night
After work, rest
After love, union
After dark, dawn
After labour, birth
After rain, glory
After life, death
After sleep, morning.
After wonder, thankfulness.
Amen

For Fear

O Lord Jesus Christ, who sweated blood in terror in the Garden of Gethsemane, give us the strength to face the fear of our own death. We acknowledge that our fear is good and useful to us, as our death is good and useful to us, but we need your power within to reach through our fear to your love and to your grace. We ask in your own name, Jesus Christ, who died and rose again from death. Amen

For Doubt

You say you are my God
So why will you have me die?
You say you love me
So why will you not stop me from dying?
You say you forgive me
So why condemn me to death?
You say you died in my place
So why must I die as well?
You say you died that I might live
So why must I still die?
You say that death has no dominion
So why has death dominion over me?
You say we shall not all die
So why must I?

A Few More Thoughts on the Grave

Why does God allow it? Why didn't God stop it? Why didn't God intervene?

Good questions. If they *are* questions. Though usually when people ask them in earnest, they aren't interested in the calm, logical, biblical, Christian, reasoned explanation. They just want to shout at God.

But just in case you are expecting an answer, here it is.

The thing to understand is that there isn't a hard line between nasty-but-tolerable and nasty-but-intolerable. The only logical line is right at the top: between right and wrong. God could have said that *nothing* wrong would be allowed to happen – nothing with the slightest trace of evil would be allowed. No one would ever know both good and evil; only good. In fact, he did do. He gave that as an option to us, as a preferred, recommended option – but we said No. We chose to know good and evil – to know them in our own experience, in our own actions. And we were willing to eat the fruit of our choice.

But even so, God would not allow evil to grow without limit. God said that evil had to be finite, had to be bounded. First, the world we would live in would be finite; the earth is a sphere, a finite sphere, and the universe it is set in is a hypersphere, is finite too. Finite in time as well; now instead of a timeless idyll in a garden, the world would come to an end at a finite time.

Similarly for the individual. From now on, whatever pain or suffering we go through is ours alone. Other people may sympathise, may understand, but they can't actually experience my pain. Evil is bounded, closed within my body: however bad my toothache is, and however bad yours, we don't feel two toothaches, only one each. And in time: our bodies now have only the sketchiest ability to mend, to heal; hardly enough to keep them operational even at the outset. They will wear out. Evil can and may destroy them; time certainly will. And when our bodies are destroyed, God takes us to a place where evil can never touch us; through a barrier that only perfect goodness can pass. So the worst that evil can do is to send us out of evil's reach.

So when you hear of disaster, and many dead, many hundreds dead, many thousands dead, and you shout out to God to demand why he didn't intervene, remember – the fact that people died is proof that he did.

The Barren Womb

Meditations

Acceptance

Where the forest grows no corn ripens
Where the heat burns no cherries redden
Where the snows melt no date palms fruit
Where the river tumbles no peace sleeps
Where the bilberry swells no beech trees spread
Where the samphire thrives no house stands
Where the desert drifts no fish swim
I am a desert; therefore I am not a river.

Selfpity

I walk down the street, and they mill around me, the ordinary people. Why am I not ordinary? Did I ever want more than that – to be ordinary? Did I ever ask to be special, to be different, to be alone here in the street? Did I beg for wisdom, for riches, for power, that I should be punished in this prison? All I have ever wanted is to be free, free to be ordinary, free to be accepted without question or pity, free to be just one more in the crowd milling in the street.

Free. Free to pity myself, and free from pity for others.

Nowhere

He's a real nowhere man, sang the Beatles in their yellow submarine. Yet the nowhere man had produced; he had ideas, papers, books, all ready to demonstrate that he was not a nowhere man at all. But he hadn't understood: what makes you a nowhere man is not that you don't produce anything, but that you don't tell anyone. It's not where you are that makes you a nowhere man; it's that nobody knows where you are.

Is that what we are like, as Christians? Are we nowhere Christians? We are saved; we have sung many hymns, prayed many prayers, read many scriptures; But have we understood that what makes us nowhere Christians is none of these; what makes us nowhere Christians is that we don't tell anyone. It's not whether you are saved that makes you a nowhere Christian; it's that nobody knows you are.

Christian is not a name that we chose; it was a label stuck on us by outsiders. If outsiders see no reason to stick a label on us, are we Christians?

Prayers

Pity

Lord Jesus have pity.
So many things I could have been,
So many things I could have had,
So many things I could have done,
Lord Jesus have pity.

Help

Teach me the joy for what I am,
Heal me the pain for what I am not
Cleanse me the guilt for what I could have been.

For Fertility

Lord, teach us that, as our bodies can not bring forth without bodily contact, so our spirits can not bring forth without spiritual contact. May we find the selfconfidence, the security and the love to seek and to allow that spiritual contact and spiritual fertility, that our spirits may bring forth fruit sixty, eighty, a hundredfold. Amen.

A Few More Thoughts on the Barren Womb

The barren womb? Never satisfied? Now this one is just a little weird at first sight. The pain of childlessness is massive and deep; akin in some ways to bereavement – you are continually grieving for the child you never had – but bereavement isn't on this list. And how can something like childlessness never cry 'Enough!'?

I am sure that the womb is not barren on purpose; I can't believe that this is a picture of the sexually amoral woman skating from man to man and using contraception to avoid inconvenient pregnancies, if only because I doubt that the technology was available. Male contraceptives may have been invented, if there was a demand; but female contraception is in the nature of things much harder to achieve.

No, surely here we have a woman who can not bear children however hard she and her husband try - a burden hard to bear in our society; doubly hard in a society in which much of a woman's – and man's – status rested on having many children. The pain, the deep deep pain which no barrel of drink or whirl of pleasure can quite suppress; the scurrying from quack remedy to quack remedy, each new false hope creating another wound; the endless recriminations – 'if you were a real man' – 'if you were a real woman'; perhaps those are the ways in which the barren womb is never satisfied, never cries 'Enough!'.

The Dry Land

Meditations

The Dry Land

In your mind, wander down to your nearest river. You might walk down busy city streets to stone embankments, or over green fields to a line of willows, but in the end you will find yourself there, standing or leaning quietly, watching the water flowing deceptively slowly out past your sight to the sea. Just look at it for a while. Think yourself into it, but do it with pity... For this water, this flowing river, this strong deep water may look big and important, but consider: this is water that has been rejected. Cast aside. Thrown away. This is the water the dry land didn't want. The dry land is never satisfied, not like a starving child scrabbling in the dust for a few crumbs, but like a fat spoiled brat, who if she doesn't get what she wants NOW will 'thcweam and thcweam and thcweam until I am thick!' And then when she does get it she flings most of it away in disgust – and screams anyway. Even when it is parched and cracked for thirst, when the rain does come the dry land will reject most of it, will allow most of it to run off, to drain away down to the local stream, and so to the river and the sea.

We of course are not like dry land. We are anxious to catch and absorb every drop of the Water of Life that falls on us; to suck every scrap of moisture out of our Bible readings, from sermons, from other Christians' experiences. Aren't we? We don't let the preacher's words flow off us like water off a duck's back, we don't read the Bible and let the words drain away. We don't live our lives rejecting every attempt at guidance from God except for the few that are sugary enough to rot our teeth. Do we?

Walk over the Fields

Walk over the fields after the harvest. See how cracked the ground is? The farmer had good weather for a change. Look, here's the rain. Big thundery autumnal drops, thumping onto the bare earth so hard they throw up dust. That'll wet it good and proper! But we'd better get indoors. So you've become a Christian, then? Bravo. And you really want to learn more, to drink every drop of the water of life. Of course you do. I remember...

Next week, walk over the fields again. There's no sign of the water but it's not all brown any more. Shoots are showing green round the old barley stems. But see, the ground is still cracked; one shower just wasn't enough. How's your Christianity holding up? Oh, that's good. But yes, there certainly still is a lot for you to learn.

Give it a few weeks, and walk out again. It's almost winter now; the fields have been ploughed and harrowed and sown, and a cold thin rain is falling on the hidden seeds. The soil is damp, but only for a few inches, not even as deep as the ploughshare cut. Still, maybe the winter rains will soak it. The idea of being a Christian has begun to shake down, hasn't it. Yes, naturally.

January follows Christmas as inevitably as diet follows binge. Walk off some of that pudding and go over the fields again. There is frost in the furrows, and lenses of ice are hidden in the ridges, but the soil itself is dry again, frost-dried. It needs more than a flake or two of snow to soak this land. Never mind, things could be worse – and they soon will be: February is coming. How did you find your first Christmas as a Christian? Different, isn't it? Oh, not as different as you'd expected? You'd expected more from the church? Yes, I see what you mean.

Ah, February. How fortunate for us all that it only has twenty eight days. Usually. If they must have leap years, why can't they put the extra day on a nice month, like July? At least we aren't tempted to go for a walk – the fields are under water! ? No, it is difficult to see the point of Lent at first. I'm not surprised you didn't get much out of it. Your Church didn't seem to value it?

Spring. Primroses, pussy willow and roast lamb. Perfect. And a lovely day for a walk. But where's the water gone? The topsoil crumbles like chocolate cake. Has it all been soaked up by those new green shoots, or is it all in those bogs that defend every single gate and stile. Easter, surely, that touched something. But... Well, yes, you did know about the Cross and the Resurrection, I suppose. You don't feel the Easter celebrations made it more real? There weren't any real celebrations? I see.

Summertime, roses and wine. June moon tune. And the barley up to our knees in the field. But the ground is almost dried out – see, if you push apart the stems, the first few cracks are just showing. It really could do with some water. Your Church treats you as quite an old Christian now? You get the impression there's not a lot more to it? Yes, I'm not surprised you feel a little – comfortable? Even blasé?

Walk over the fields after the harvest. See how cracked the ground is? The farmer had good weather for a change. There doesn't seem to be any rain on the horizon even. So you've realised Christianity is all about conversion and nothing else? You've learnt all there is to know? I can't say I'm surprised.

Farming the Soul

The dry land that is never satisfied. What does it cry for? Any farmer will tell you that – Work! There is no end to working the land, no point at which the farmer can say, "That's enough!" Oh, there are busy times and slack times, times when you work almost twenty four hours a day, times when you have a chance to sit back a little, times when you can even risk a week's holiday. But there is always something to be done, if not now, at least soon.

Does it sound familiar? We all have our patch of dry land. We all have our work, easy, heavy, short, long. In the sweat of our brow we eat our bread – or our gluten-free ciabatta with low-fat vegetarian crabsticks. We know this, and we accept it. It's part of life. Part of what makes us alive. However much we do, it will never be enough, not until our earthly work and our earthly lives end together.

But what about our spiritual work? Are we assuming that the dry land of our soul has called "Enough!"? That once we were converted, or when we could parrot half a dozen standard texts, or signed a Direct Debit to Tearfund, or knew exactly what Septuagesima is, that that is enough? Or are we listening to our dry souls, as they cry out for more, more, more? For us Christians, in the sweat of our brow we eat our bread of life.

Prayers

A Confession of Dryness

Lord,
you pour grace on me, and my closed hands brush it off
you pour light on me, and my closed eyes quench it
you pour hope on me, and my closed mind explains it away
you pour love on me, and my closed heart freezes it
you pour blood on me, and my closed mouth keeps it out
you pour yourself on me, and my closed soul dare not touch you

To a Dry Heaven

There is no one listening
No one to pray to
The sky is empty
The ground is dust
The sun a cheap torch
The houses cardboard
The world a stage set
There is no one listening
No one in my mask
No one to help me
No one to love me
Therefore I pray
To that no one

A Few More Thoughts on the Dry Land

For the dwellers around the Mediterranean, of course, the force of the image is obvious. For those of us who live in a well watered land, the image of dry land as never satisfied with rain is somehow unconvincing!

One approach for us may be to look at the way in which, however much water is dropped onto it, the land soon dries again, and other ideas related to that.

Another is to consider the land as hungry not for water but for work. This means too that the image becomes appropriate to the town as well as the country dweller. We all seem to work non-stop, and our work never seems to cry 'Enough!'

Fire

Meditations

The pictures are usually taken from a helicopter. If it's daylight, you see the curtain of smoke, rippling and waving, reddened here and there with a dull glow. It stretches across the forests, across the hillside, devouring the green, the solid smoke seeming to laugh as some particularly beautiful or rich patch is eaten up. Behind it, all is black, the dead trunks still carrying the stumps of burned-off boughs. As you look, one trunk snaps off, shattering another as it crashes down into the ashes.

At night, the fire is what you see, a glowing band of red heat, illuminating the smoke from underneath, occasionally throwing out a few flames when a tree crashes down or the wind gusts.

The picture widens, pans, tightens again. Suddenly the fire has roared high, throwing out huge arms of delight, wrapping them round a house. The life that was lived there is eaten up in a few seconds, all the memories, the joys, the sins, the prayers, the curses, the hopes, the loves. The family is miles away now, packed in a school hall with a thousand others, the children weeping as they watch their home devoured on the giant TV screen. The parents aren't weeping – they're hurting too much for tears.

Because somebody was careless with a match.

How careful are we with matches? Or with anything that can catch fire – put-downs, labels, slogans, judgements, dogmas. How careful are we?

Prayers

For Water

Lord Jesus
I burn with fire for you
I burn with desire for you
I burn with love for you
Lord Jesus
I burn for your word
I burn for your kingdom
I burn for your honour
Lord Jesus
Quench my fire with your water
Quench my fire with your blood
Quench my fire with your tears
Lest I burn those you love
Amen

For More Water

Lord Jesus Christ, who healed the wounds of Peter's sword, take the swords from our hands, the word from our lips, the fire from our hearts, lest we hurt those whom you love and harm those whom you would save. This we ask in your blessed name. Amen

A Few More Thoughts on Fire

We modern Christians are more used to thinking of fire as a positive image than a negative one. We are brought up on images of Pentecostal tongues of fire, of the flames licking up Elijah's sacrifice, of the Burning Bush.

Fire as a negative, a destructive force is just as Biblical, but it is more difficult. The issue is Hellfire. Not whether or not hell fire is real, but rather, which pictures of destructive fire are actually about hell, and which aren't? Most people over the last couple of hundred years (further back I don't know) seem to regard almost all of them as images of hell. I'm not at all happy with that. It seems to me that a great deal of richness of teaching is lost if they are all bundled together as hell.

Yet the image of destructive fire in Malachi chapter 3 was not seen as describing hell – it was always seen as a prophecy of the coming of Jesus Christ – as in Handel's 'Messiah', for instance. Yet this is one example which could easily be taken as hell, or at any rate Satan; the Lord who is like a refiner's fire is the Lord whom the indolent priests are seeking, the messenger that the irreverent desire. Perhaps Malachi is being deliberately ironic, playing on their fears, on their superstitions, with words that cut two ways. Or perhaps not. Either way, it shows how tricky some of these interpretations can be, and how easy it is to see the words through the filter of traditional ideas without thoroughly checking.

Perhaps I shouldn't have said that. People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.

Some Final Thoughts on the Unsatisfied

Strange, these four. Strange that such a set of four should be noted at all; strange that they are in our Bible; strange that they matter at all. Strange and cold the four; even the fire has no heat, only empty greed and chill devouring mindlessness.

Strange and cold the four.