

James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of PETER I

Notes on the first epistle of Peter have been issued on three occasions over the years, the first in 1960, which were repeated without further revision in 1969 and in 1983. The epistle has also been the subject of extended treatment in the pulpit in April 1958 at the Evening Service and again in the Morning Services of 1970 and 1980, and most recently in 1995/96, when the 'fruit' of the pulpit ministry over the years was gathered together in the latest series of expositions which finished in the spring of this year. The following Notes are based on that series and are issued now in the hope that a wider constituency than those who heard the series may find them profitable.

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There is a certain fitness in having turned to this epistle, for in our studies in the later chapters of Luke's Gospel, which immediately preceded our series in 1 Peter, we had Simon Peter very much in the forefront of our minds, in the story of his denial of Jesus and his experience of forgiveness after the Resurrection. And one of the first things we will need to do in this new study is to say something of the man who wrote this epistle. We begin therefore, not so much with a character study of Simon Peter, as to look at the man who was able to write like this, giving a message so full of grace and encouragement to hard pressed saints, and a message so thirled to, and filled with, the reality of the message of the Cross. We pointed out in our studies in Luke that the whole trouble with Peter was that during the days of our Lord's earthly ministry he habitually balked at that message. He did not want Jesus to go to the death of the Cross, and he did not, as a disciple, want to take up the cross either. It was this, of course, that made his ultimate denial of our Lord not only predictable but also inevitable. We shall continue in this vein in the next note.

1:1

The dramatic encounter Peter had with our Lord on the shores of Galilee after His resurrection, confronting him with the threefold question 'Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me?' was undoubtedly a watershed in Peter's experience - and indeed, it bore a fundamental relation to the events of the day of Pentecost. All the same, we need to beware of being too simplistic in our understanding and interpretation of his story, and of dividing it too simply into 'before' and 'after', as if everything for Peter after Pentecost was plain sailing for him. All the available evidence in Scripture goes to show that even in the context of that tremendous Pentecostal outpouring, Peter found sustained goodness very uphill work for him - as witness the very real problem and difficulty he had with the thought that the Gentiles should also be admitted into the blessings of the gospel, as well as the Jews. Furthermore - and this is even more significant - he showed a marked tendency, even after he had become enlightened about the Gentiles reception into the covenant of grace, to 'dissemble' (that is the word Paul uses in Gal 2:12, 13) for fear of the Jews, for the same reason as he yielded to the temptation to deny Jesus in Caiaphas' palace. True, there were crises in Peter's experience, but these were 'ongoing' problems for him, that had to be faced again and again throughout his Christian life. We do well to remember this: there is no once-for-all experience that can deliver us for good and all from our problems as believers.

1:1-7

One does not need to read very far or very closely into the epistle to discover two things: one is that it is immensely rich in doctrinal teaching; and the other is that there is a considerable emphasis throughout it on trial and testing, suffering and persecution. This twofold emphasis is one of the keys to an understanding of the epistle and its message. The name 'Babylon', from which the epistle is said to have been written, is likely to refer to Rome, and is a kind of 'code' word. Peter was probably writing about the time of the Neronian persecution just after the martyrdom of the Apostle Paul, c. 64 A.D. And what he writes is meant to be an encouragement to other communities faced with similar testing. Now, it is clear from the New Testament in general that tribulation is an inevitable fact of Christian experience, and sometimes the pressures are very great indeed and in such a context, Peter's concern is, 'What can I say to encourage hard-pressed believers, to help them in the midst of their trials to stand firm, and not go down under them?'

Such is the purpose of the epistle and its theme; and it is significant and heartening that Peter was able to write like this, in words so full of grace and encouragement for hard-pressed saints. For we see in this epistle what the Lord did with this man and what he made of him, weaknesses, failures and all. It is surely an enormous encouragement to realise that what we read here was written by a man who knew all about what it was to fall and to fail, and who was at last able to relate the truth of the gospel to the practical business of living truly and victoriously for God. Here is a man who knew all about natural weakness and failure, and he has a secret to share with his readers that enabled him weak as he was, to stand firm even to the end.

1:1-7

The pressures in Peter's time are not of course the pressures today: we do not - as yet - face the kind of discrimination, persecution and even martyrdom that became the lot of many early believers, although many of our fellow Christians in other parts of the world do. But today's pressures are no less great and no less dangerous, indeed, they may be even more dangerous and sinister, just because they are not so obvious and evident, but rather indirect and hidden, and therefore more insidious. One thinks, for example, of the influences to which our generation has been subjected, particularly our young folk. For one thing, we live in a manipulated age, in which the influence of the media is widespread and comprehensive. We are told what to believe and even how we are to think; for another thing, the young generation are particularly vulnerable, at school, at college, at university, confronted as they are all the time with the presuppositions of modern thinking - the undermining of moral absolutes and the challenge to absolute values, the assumptions that are made which underlie attitudes to the great moral issues of the day in public life, in education, in social work - issues such as abortion, euthanasia, the disposable society, the depersonalisation of humanity, the revolutionary trends, the permissive attitudes, - as if any alternative to these were unthinkable, absurd and contemptible. Anything therefore designed to help and encourage believers in such situations and to introduce them to resources sufficient to make them steadfast and unmovable should be a first priority of study. And this is what Peter gives us in this epistle.

1:1-12

Look then at the perspective of the opening section of the chapter. We have twelve enriching verses, then in 13 an exhortation to stand firm and hope to the end. This perspective is very important, and we must note something about it at the outset: it is the balance that is so significant. The saints to whom Peter is writing are under pressure, but it could hardly be said that the pressures are a total preoccupation - indeed the opposite, for the pressures are set over against, and in the context of, the bounty of the Divine provision. The predominant emphasis in the passage is on the indicatives of grace, rather than on the exhortations to stand firm. This is important psychologically as well as spiritually. It is possible, after all, to be too preoccupied with the pressures and problems that beset us - we can become man-centred and problem-orientated, and that can be serious and even critical for spiritual health and well-being. We need to lift our eyes and our sights to the Divine provision.

In this connection, one important point we need to see in the opening two verses - and one which a little study will reveal - is that Peter's mind and writing are simply saturated in Old Testament Scripture and Old Testament thought - and indeed filled with biblical thinking. This is one great and decisive safeguard for the believer. The word *eklektoi*, the elect, is an Old Testament term applied originally to the Old Testament people of God. The word *parapidemioi*, strangers, is again an Old Testament term referring to the 'Diaspora', the Dispersion, used by the Jews to describe those who lived in exile from their homeland. The New Testament use of these terms is the recognition that Christians belong to a new order, the coming kingdom, the city that has foundations, and that this world is not their home. We are strangers and pilgrims on the earth (as Peter is to say later), and our citizenship is in heaven. Indeed we are citizens of two worlds - 'in Christ' on the one hand, and 'in Pontus', or 'Cappadocia', or 'Edinburgh', or wherever, and we are to live in the old world, drawing our resources from the new. More on this theme in the next note

1:1-12

To continue on Peter's use of Old Testament thought we may also note that words like 'obedience' and 'sprinkling' also belong to the Old Testament background. 'Obedience' takes us back to the words in Exod 24:3-8, "all that the Lord hath said we will do", while 'sprinkling' comes from the Passover narrative and the Levitical cultus, and refers to the sealing of the covenant to the people. If this is what Peter is implying what a source of strength and encouragement to hard-pressed believers, for the reality of the covenant and the covenant God is the one decisive and overwhelming circumstance in the experience of His people. The effect of biblical thinking is, and must be, to call in question the assumptions made in today's world in matters of practical daily living, as - to take for example one theme dealt with in chapter 3, where Peter speaks of husbands and wives as being "heirs together of the grace of life". What need there is today for biblical thinking in this area, to challenge the easy assumptions of our modern permissive society - our modern permissive clergymen too! The need, indeed, is not merely for Bible study and Bible knowledge but for getting in to the heart of biblical thinking and applying it right across the board, and allowing it to form and shape our attitudes. This is one of the lessons that a study of Peter's epistle is designed to impart.

1:1-12

It will be seen that the central thought of these verses lies in 6, in the words in heaviness, through manifold temptations (trials)" but we do need to see that this central thought is embedded and set in the context of great and massive spiritual realities, as if Peter were saying "I do not dispute the reality of the severity of the trial you are passing through, but I beg you to see them in their proper context, that is, in the context of what is yours in Christ, to enable you to brest the storms and ride them triumphantly". The trials that they were at that point facing were in fact hedged in on all sides by realities of grace, which are no less realities for us also, and for any kind of trials. The trials may vary, but the provision for them does not vary - not ever! And therefore, the saints may be kept by the power of God through faith. This is the real issue, and the glorious possibility, which the writing of this epistle was designed to fulfil. What Peter does in these verses is to exercise what we have sometimes called an illuminative ministry, as he unfolds the greatness of what it means to be a Christian, for he opens up, in terms of Paul's words in Romans 6:3 ('know ye not....?') something of the magnitude of the biblical concept of salvation. How important and vital it is to grasp this. J.B. Phillips' book title 'Your God is Too Small' is a charge that could often be laid against believers today, for their concept of salvation is too small and niggardly for them to be really kept by the power of God in time of trial arid tribulation. This is why Paul prays, in Ephesians 1, that "the eyes of our understanding might be opened....to know the immeasurable greatness of the power that worketh in us", and why also we are told in Acts 19 of the way in which the disciples in Ephesus were brought into their true destiny as believers: "So mightily", we are told there, "grew the word of God and prevailed". This is our need that the Word might grow and become a bigger, grander, more glorious reality in our lives. This is what Peter is after in this epistle.

1:1-12

What was said at the end of the previous note explains why Peter underlines in his opening doxology in 3 ff the greatness of our salvation, and explains why he begins with a paeon of praise and thanksgiving as he blesses God. The word 'blessed' (Gk *eulogetos*) means to 'speak well of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' -an idea well expressed in the words of the well known hymn 'Praise my soul the King of heaven'. There is an important point for us to note here. Sometimes, if the truth were told, we do not feel inclined to 'speak well of God'. We may even speak ill of Him, at least in the secret of our hearts, when He allows pressures in all their fierceness to come upon us. Do you sometimes feel, in your heart of hearts, that God has done ill by you, that He has been a disappointment to you that He has let you down? - a secret feeling within you, that you would hardly dare articulate, that He had not worked in the way you expected Him to, and hoped He would? This is by no means as uncommon as one might think. It is what, for example, lies behind the story of the book of Jonah when God asked him, 'Doest thou well to be angry?', it was precisely this kind of attitude that was exposed in his secret heart. He was disappointed that God had shown mercy to Nineveh, and he did not at that moment feel like 'speaking well' of Him. What we need to learn here is that a spirit of praise in a man is a right spirit, because God is so utterly praiseworthy. We are more likely to have a right attitude to the trials and pressures that beset us when we praise Him and speak well of Him, than at any other time. As C.S. Lewis says, "Praise almost seems to be inner health made audible", and that "It is in the process of being worshipped (or praised) that God communicates His presence to men". Is this what is meant in 2 Chron 20:22 when it says that "when they began to sing and to praise, the Lord set ambushments against the children of Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir...and they were smitten"?

1:1-12

The reasons for Peter's outburst of praise and doxology are manifold. For one thing, we get some idea of the greatness of our salvation from the realisation that the Holy Trinity, in Three Persons, is involved in it - God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit and this Trinitarian statement is spelt out in the verses that follow. This is how great our salvation is: it is a movement of eternity for our sakes, and all the resources of the Triune Godhead are behind us. There is the knowledge of the Father (3), and the wonder and mystery of God setting His love upon us. This is something that takes us back to the pre-temporal state, before all worlds, into the vast and unimagined counsels of the Trinity and the Divine electing grace, predestinating mortals as yet unborn to everlasting glory. Eric Sauer, in his book 'The Dawn of World Redemption', says,

"Even before all the ages of time the Highest concerned Himself with your glory and with mine. Before the sea raged and swelled, before the earth was built or its foundations sunk, yea, before those morning stars exulted and those sons of God shouted for joy, God, the Almighty, even then had thoughts on me. On me, the worm of the earth, who have given Him so much trouble and labour with all my sins; on me, He Who is God, the Ancient of days. Truly, these are depths not to be fathomed, and which the heart of every man despairs of being able to describe in words. Here we can only bow and worship, and lay our life at the feet of Him, the All-loving."

Wonder and mystery indeed! But what inexpressible comfort and assurance also. We do not even stand alone in our trials.

1:1-12

Then there is the work of the Son, in His death and resurrection, the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow - underlined again and again throughout the epistle. Then there is the energy of the Spirit, witnessing to the truth as it is in Jesus, inspiring those who proclaim the gospel, and sanctifying those who hear it unto God. And then there is the everlasting mercy, called here very feelingly by Peter the 'abundant mercy', an evidence surely of his own heartsore experience in his denial of Jesus, giving expression to the feeling that a mercy that could restore him from his terrible denial was full and abundant indeed! Mercy and grace are often associated together in both Old and New Testaments. 'Grace', as in Denney's famous definition, 'is the love of God, spontaneous, beautiful, unearned, at work in Christ for the salvation of souls'. This could with equal truth be said of mercy also, but with this distinction:

"While 'grace' has reference to the sins of men, and is that glorious attribute of God which these sins call out and display, His free gift in their forgiveness, 'mercy' has special and immediate regard to the misery which is the consequence of these sins, being the tender sense of this misery displaying itself in the effort to assuage and entirely remove it" (Trench).

Think of Peter! God met him there, and misery was turned to amazed and incredulous hope and peace. That is the Divine mercy. Do we see what Peter is doing in all this? He simply speaks about the greatness of God's salvation, and the inherent virtue and power of the gospel compels attention, arrests thought, and draws the mind upwards to God, away from the trials and pressures, enabling us to draw fully upon the Divine resources. This is what Peter means when he says that we are 'kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation'.

1:1-12

Peter speaks in 7 of the trial of faith. Merely to speak like this is to bring illumination and light into the whole situation, putting a new complexion upon it. For it gives the experience of trial some meaning, and so then as it has meaning, all is not darkness, and we can therefore bear it, knowing that it is fulfilling a Divine purpose in us. We sometimes say, for example, of pressures and trials that 'these things are sent to try us'. And this is so. But we must be careful what we mean. Faith is being tried, yes; but from whose point of view, and by whom? Who does the trying? It is God Who tries us, although the shape of the trial may be very varied and activated by different forces. It is He Who has the initiative. This may be deduced from a consideration of two things: on the one hand we should note Peter's words in 6, 'if need be'. This does not mean merely that trial is a possibility, in the sense that circumstances may make it inevitable. Rather, it is the use of the word 'need' which has the force of a Divine necessity (in the same way in which we are told in John 4:4 that Jesus 'must needs' go through Samaria). It is all part of the Divine plan. It is necessary! On the other hand the temptation or trial is set in the context of the Divine foreknowledge and election. It is not merely that God allows or permits the trial, but that He ordains it. This, paradoxically, is a source of comfort and encouragement to believers more than anything else, since it means that the trial and its entire course are in God's hands. This is the setting Peter gives to the whole concept of trial. One sees this very clearly, for example, in Paul's experience, as he wrote from prison in Rome to the Philippian church. "I would that ye should understand, brethren, that the things that happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel". He could see that God's sovereign hand was in control of all the circumstances that beset him, and that He 'called the tune'. This, we may think, is implied in the well known statement in 1 Cor 10:13, "God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able...."

1:1-12

What was said in the previous note teaches us a lesson of considerable importance, namely that we are not always the best judge of the situation or of just how much we are able to endure in any particular trial. We can hardly doubt, for example, that there were times in Paul's hazardous experiences during his missionary journeyings, when he must have been tempted to feel "I can't stand any more of this" (cf 2 Cor 1:8, 'Pressed out of measure, above strength'); but God would say to him "O yes, you can", and He dared to leave him in the trial until all the Divine purpose for it was fulfilled and brought to fruition, as Peter describes here in 7. Part of that purpose is to put steel and temper into our faith so as to make it a massive and substantial reality that will bring glory and praise to God. C.S. Lewis, in his book *A Grief Observed* makes this very perceptive comment:

"God has not been trying an experiment on my faith or love in order to find out their quality. He knew it already. It was I who didn't. In this trial He makes us occupy the dock, the witness box, and the bench all at once. He always knew that my temple was a house of cards. His only way of making me realize the fact was to knock it down."

This is a very telling thought - putting us to the test to let us see what we are made of! This means that part of the function of trial is to expose all that is unreal in us and that cannot stand the test, to strip away every false thing in us in order that true character may be built into our lives. Not that we can always see the meaning and purpose of our testing, even in retrospect; for there are some trials that are not explained to us. The answer lies with God, and we may not demand that He explain Himself to us. This may be hard, but it is something we must accept. 'He giveth not account of any of His matters (Job 33:13).

1:1-12

What was said in the previous note leads us to consider what could be called the resoluteness of God. There sometimes seems to be almost grimness about the Divine love. God does not spare His children. He is strong enough to resist pity when we cry out in pain, strong enough to resist it until pain has done its gracious work in us, strong enough to seem to turn a deaf ear to our cry, "O God, why are you doing this to me?" But this is the point: the testing and the trial produce utter trust in God. This is what is meant by 'resoluteness'. He knows what He is after, and will not let up until He is satisfied with the end product. By the same token we can speak also of the daring of God. How utterly daring He is in the things He does with, and to, His people. He is not afraid to thrust us into the fire and to leave us there until we feel we have passed endurance point. Sometimes the thought that comes into our hearts, and perhaps even on our lips, in such a situation are "How dare you do this to me!" The answer is that He is a daring God. And God is daring because He is so big and great; there is nothing little about Him. And if He is such a God - big and daring, and incredibly alive with Divine energy and virtue, creative and transforming - it is hardly surprising that sparks should fly when that energy comes into contact with our lives. It is just not possible but that we should feel it in some way and that He should leave His mark upon us! The story of Jacob wrestling with the angel was a case in point; the patriarch was never the same again: the angel touched his thigh and the sinew of his thigh shrank, and he was crippled for life. Do we really think that wrestling with God would be fun? It was a terrifying experience for Jacob, but it made him a prince with God. And his faith was 'found unto praise and honour and glory'.

1:8-9

The words that follow the reference to the trial of faith, in 8, 9, "whom having not seen ye love...." have a profound significance. Their message is that testing brings us closer to Christ. We are pressed, says the Apostle, into fellowship and communion with the Son of God. And this, he means to indicate, is also a means of strengthening and stabilising in times of pressure, and if the trial of our faith leads to this, it is indeed of rare value. But these are important verses from several points of view. We should note the four verbs that Peter uses: 'love.... believe.... rejoice.... receive'. The parallelism makes it clear that the 'loving' and the 'rejoicing' flow from, and are the consequence of the 'believing'. We may ask whether there may not be a hidden echo in these words from Peter's own experience, in John 21:15 ff, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me?" Is Peter saying to us, 'what Jesus called in question was not my faith, but my love to Him. It was there that I failed". Also, is there an echo of John 20:29, blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed', in the words 'whom having not seen ye love"? One can almost imagine Peter shaking his head in wonderment and admiration at such faith: "I have seen Him, yet I did not love Him as I should; you have not seen Him, but you love Him. How wonderful!" It is important to realise that faith has several different, though related, aspects - intellectual, moral, spiritual, and emotional or affective. It is not possible to have faith as a mere intellectual exercise, without it becoming also a thing of the heart, without our coming to love Christ. More of this in the next note.

1:8-9

With reference to what was said at the close of the previous note we must realise that one of the characteristics of the true believer is that love to Christ is inevitably involved. Paul, in fact, describes believers, in Rom 8:28, as 'them that love God'. When the gospel claims a man and lays hold upon him, it will claim his heart's devotion for the Christ Who died to save him. As Peter says in 2:7 (a parallel to his statement here), 'unto you that believe He is precious'. This is the central marvel and mystery of the Christian faith: that a man should be able to say, simply and humbly, and with the greatest sincerity, 'I love Him', that is the miracle of grace. And there comes awe, almost, upon the soul in the realisation that this is the simple truth of the matter so far as we are concerned. One thinks of the delighted awareness, on the human and natural level, that comes to a girl's heart in the consciousness of what has happened to her is that she has fallen in love, and is loved in return. It is a secret at which she drinks and is refreshed and satisfied day by day. And is not the 'joy unspeakable and full of glory' in the spiritual life, a bulwark, in the same way, against pressure, and a hidden resource, an invisible means of support - which means that, even before His appearing we have the sweet foretaste and earnest of the spirit and the enjoyment in the present (9) of the salvation that will be consummated at His appearing.

That is one side of the issue, but there is the other side also. It is true that believing is no mere formality, no mere intellectual exercise; but we have to recognise that there is an intellectual content to faith. And this opens up a further consideration, which will be discussed in the next note.

1:8-9

We have to recognise that there are two qualities present in faith. There is what is sometimes called 'propositional faith', and there is faith as 'trust'. By propositional faith is meant faith which involves certain truths about God and Christ and salvation; while faith as trust has to do with a personal relationship with God through Christ. A great deal of stress is placed on the idea of 'encounter' in modern theology, and it is the fashion to speak of propositional faith and propositional revelation with some contempt, as if it were some survival from a primitive and obscurantist age. This has the effect of disturbing people until they turn to the Scriptures, to be met by such statements as Hebrews 11:6, "He that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him". This is propositional faith; and the touchstone of Scripture is a valuable corrective to what is sometimes called scholarship in the realm of theology. The truth is that propositional faith is a necessary part of biblical faith, and is the framework in which faith as trust comes into its own and flourishes and flourishes and grows. It is of course true that faith as trust is deeply emphasised in both Old and New Testaments. Indeed, the characteristic words for 'belief' and 'faith' are generally rendered 'trust' in the Old Testament. Most of them are inclusive of the idea of committing oneself personally to God. Thus, 'believing in Christ' is never a formality or an intellectual exercise, but something involving the whole man and particularly the heart's affections being engaged to love the Lord. Having said that, however, we have to emphasise that loving Christ is not something merely mystical; it is loving someone we have got to know through the Word. And getting to know Him through the Word implies and involves the exercise of the mind; and since a whole Christ is mediated only by the whole Word, clearly the more we grapple and wrestle with the Scriptures, and with the deep truths of Divine grace, the more of Christ we shall perceive, and the more we shall love Him. And unless our faith has this intellectual content, the love for Him which is the heart of all will be weak, feckless and superficial. Passion for Christ is not only not incompatible with an intellectual grasp of the gospel but on the contrary is best fed by a true understanding of the truths of the Word.

1:10-16

These verses bring us to some intriguing as well as important statements that Peter makes - intriguing in respect of what he says about God's angels at the end of 12, and important in the implications of his words about the Old Testament, providing an enriching understanding of the things of God. For what he says here, and what is implied in what he says, leads us into some very profound considerations indeed and - rightly understood - will surely give our faith a deeper dimension and foundation. One might well entitle these verses as speaking of 'the gospel and the Old Testament', for this is what the Apostle is really dealing with. And there is one sense in which what he says on this serves as an encouragement in particular to hard-pressed faith. It is often the experience of believers when under pressure, and especially if the pressure has continued for a longish time, suddenly to find oneself confronted with a frightening temptation to doubt, and to call in question the reality of the whole business of the Christian gospel and of Christian experience itself. This is a very frightening and indeed devastating thing to happen, and so very real. And to this feeling Peter gives us the assurance that this salvation of ours is not something that was done in a corner; it has roots in old and ancient history. It is not something new, but has an honourable and unassailable lineage. In other words, Peter sets the whole Christian experience in the perspective of history and of the whole biblical revelation. And the very assertion that our faith is thus rooted is something that is designed to enrich that faith immeasurably and to give it a deeper dimension, and to kindle an even greater love in us.

1:10-16

The first lesson we learn on the theme of 'the gospel and the Old Testament' is that of the essential unity that exists between the Old Testament and the New. What Paul is underlining here very clearly is that the gospel of God's salvation in Christ has its roots in the Old Testament revelation - an insight shared with other New Testament writers (cf Mark 1:1,2; Rom 1:2; 3:21; 16:26; John 5:39). The implication of this is that the whole of the biblical revelation has to do with the gospel, not merely the New Testament, and that this was its intention from the beginning. This provides a great key to an understanding of the Scriptures as 'the history of the promise'. The gospel is not a new thing, but something foretold from the beginning, and worked for from the beginning. That is the first thing; and the second is this: we must notice the reference to Christ in 11. To speak of Christ in Old Testament times may seem to be strange and fanciful to some; but the basic Christian position, which is Trinitarian in essence, commits us to this. The Westminster Confession says,

"In the unity of the Godhead there are three Persons, of one power, substance and eternity, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Ghost. The Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son."

The eternal Sonship of Christ is therefore a cardinal doctrine of the Faith. And this must mean, if it means anything, His pre-existence in relation to Bethlehem and the Incarnation. If therefore He is the eternal Christ He is as likely to have been operating in history before the Incarnation as after it. This is a supernatural concept, it is true; but then so is the idea of a living Christ operating in history now a supernatural concept.

1:10-16

Peter is obviously implying very clearly that Christ was present with His people in olden times and in these ancient days, companying with them and ministering to them and supplying all their needs. There is therefore a necessary continuity as between Old Testament times and New Testament times - i.e. they were the same kind of times in principle, from the standpoint of the life of faith; and therefore there is a necessary and essential unity between the Old Testament and the New. This in turn has also two implications: the first is that there is but one people of God, gathered out from both dispensations, the old and the new, namely the Church of God in Christ Jesus. The other is that the experience of Old Testament saints was, essentially, a spiritual one; they were inheritors of spiritual blessings, not merely material blessings. And what is more they were saved by faith, as New Testament saints were.

But what are we to say about the Spirit of Christ in the prophets? Here, we may say, is a Pentecostal experience centuries before Pentecost. The fact is, there is only one Spirit in whatever age, and it is ever His work to testify of Christ, to take of the things that are Christ's and show them to us, in whatever age or dispensation. Therefore, spiritual experience in old time could not have been essentially different from that in the New Testament age. This is the point made in the famous eleventh chapter of Hebrews: 'by faith Abraham.... Moses.... David....' We may speak of the Old Testament era as the time before the sunrise. As someone has said:

"The first streak of light in the darkness of the night of sin came with the promise given in Gen 3:15 of One to come who would bruise the head of the serpent. With the passing of the ages, that light gradually and imperceptibly increased, and the prophets were enabled to see more and more of what was to come, albeit only dimly, and - as it were - through a glass darkly. But to them the vision was essentially for an 'appointed time', and what they had of hope was in the promise, and in the God-appointed symbols, types and shadows of things to come".

1:10-16

The Westminster Confession of Faith makes it clear that the Old Testament symbols had no inherent worth and were only shadows cast on the course of history by the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. Nevertheless, they were for that time sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by Whom they had full remission of sin and eternal salvation'. It is in this context and connection that we must understand what is called 'the Messianic Hope'. The Old Testament age was an age of preparation and discipline, in which God was training and teaching His people, preparing them for the time when their Redeemer should come. This teaching went along two lines: on the one hand, God was intent on teaching them the nature of sin (and therefore their need of a Saviour), showing it in its blackness and perversity that only a Redeemer could deliver them from it; and on the other hand make them so sick of sin that they would long for a deliverer. Hence the emergence of the Messianic hope, hence the searching by the prophets - those most sensitive to God's purposes and intentions in the world - in their concern to know 'what or what manner of time the Spirit in them did signify in testifying beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow'. In this way he awakened interest, desire and longing to see 'the day of God'. This 'forward look' explains the phrase 'not unto themselves but unto us....' in 12 and links with the anticipatory character of the Old covenant (as we see also in Hebrews 11:39,40, "These all.... received not the promise, God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect", and also our Lord's own words in Matt 13:17, "many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them...."). The prophets were ministering these hopeful things for a privileged age to come - and were content with this knowledge, just as we in our day may well be ministering for the future, when we are seeking to lay the foundations of many generations that they may build more extensively for their day and generation.

1:10-16

Something must be said about the last words in 12, 'which things the angels desire to look into'. Matthew Henry, the Puritan expositor, points out with characteristic perceptiveness that these verses before us show us three sorts of students, or inquirers, into the great affair of, man's salvation - i) the prophets, who searched diligently into it; ii) the apostles, who consulted all the prophecies, and were witnesses of the accomplishment of them, and so reported what they knew to others in the preaching of the gospel; and iii) the angels, who most attentively pry into these matters. The angels are here represented as standing all amazed at the spectacle of the unfolding mystery of God's redeeming purposes, something so utterly beyond their comprehension that they can only bow down in abject worship and adoration. For redeeming grace - and this is what Peter presently goes on to speak of, in 18,19, in words that express a sense of awe and holy fear - is the biggest thing in all the universe, and all created beings will marvel at the astounding message of a God Who stoops so low to lay hold of fallen man. Few words can express more movingly or beautifully that wonder and awe than those of the Indian Christian, Narayan Waman Tilak, when the greatness of God's redeeming love laid hold upon him,

Thou dwellest in unshadowed light,
All sin and shame above
That Thou should bear our sin and shame,
How can I tell such love?

The wonder of the angels is underlined in other places in the New Testament, as for example in Luke 15:7, in the mention of the angels of God rejoicing over sinners repenting, and in Eph 3:10, where Paul speaks of the manifold wisdom of God being made known to the angels by the Church. It is in the light of this awesome reality that we are best able to understand and appreciate the exhortation Peter goes on to give, in 13 ff, to obedience and holiness of life. For in such a consciousness of the greatness of Divine grace we are surely best motivated toward all we should be for Christ and for the gospel.

1:17-21

These verses bring us to one of the most wonderful statements in all the New Testament, and to what the old hymn calls 'That wonderful redemption, God's remedy for sin', following on as it does from the great doxology of praise in the first half of the chapter, describing the reality of our fellowship with God through Christ and the heart of Christian experience as being love to Him. Peter now goes on to describe the way into that fellowship, in the experience of redemption through the precious blood of Christ as of a Lamb without blemish and without spot. The RSV rendering of 18 serves to bring out a thought that has tended to lurk in the background of the statement that Peter makes, when it renders it as 'ransomed from futile ways'. The AV phrase 'from your vain conversation' translates a Greek word which Paul uses in Rom 8:20 when he speaks of 'all creation being subject to futility (vanity)' through the sin and fall of man. This is the wider context in which Peter's statement needs to be understood. Peter says that this is something that men receive 'by tradition from their fathers'. This could be taken, of course, in a literal sense: it is true that man is a creature of habit; one generation follows another in patterns of behaviour, and very often what a man does, he does because his father and grandfather did it before him. But Peter surely has something more profound and fundamental in mind: it is our first parents that he is looking back to; and this futility that he speaks of is the result of the entail of sin and the grim consequences of the Fall of man. This, then, is the 'hand-down' from time immemorial; it is the fruit and the effect of the appalling disaster that overtook mankind and, through mankind, all creation, robbing us of all of the real purpose and intention of our having been made in the image of God.

1:17-21

One of the metaphors the Scriptures use to describe all this is that of buying and selling, and we need to look at this in some detail. It will be recalled how Satan tempted the Son of God in the wilderness on the threshold of His public ministry. Satan took Him up into a high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them, and said, 'All these will I give Thee, if thou shalt fall down and worship me'. Jesus resisted this temptation; but we should note the terms on which Satan sought his objective. The prize he offered Jesus was the kingdoms of this world: the price Jesus was to pay was the worship of His heart. Jesus refused to pay that price; but where Jesus resisted and refused, Adam, our first parent, yielded. He snatched at the prize and paid the price, and straightway entered into bondage. God had said to Adam, 'In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die'. And die he did - not in the sense of losing his existence, not in the sense of nothingness, but in the sense of separation from God, and therefore separation from all purpose in life: futility, meaninglessness. Now, one of the things we need to understand and appreciate in the story of the fall is that what happened to Adam was a judicial pronouncement passed upon him. It was a death sentence that he incurred. And sentences of this nature always mean imprisonment pending execution. That is to say, this is something from which there is no escape for man. He has sold himself into bondage.

1:17-21

What was said at the end of the previous note is man's story, as we see from Scripture and experience alike. We read, for example, in Gen 25:33 that Esau sold his birthright for a mess of potage, and in so doing sold himself out of the purposes of God for his life. We read of the prophet Jonah, who put down his money and bought a ticket to Tarshish, and in so doing very nearly made shipwreck of his life, getting out of the purposes of God into a sad, futile purposelessness. We read of the rich farmer in Jesus' parable in Luke 12 who sacrificed his soul on the altar of bigger barns. Life for him was always in the future - 'tomorrow', he would say, 'I will say to my soul...' and he frittered away his days without ever having lived even one of them. And God said, 'Thou fool, this night....' We read of the woman of Samaria in John 4 and see how she paid the price for the kind of life she wanted, and in so doing sold herself into a futility that nearly destroyed her. And Jesus said, 'What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?' Our futile ways! There are many kinds of futility in the world today and many kinds of purposelessness, and many expressions of that futility and its inescapableness. We are going to look at some of these, in the next note, before going on to the Divine answer to man's plight and predicament.

1:17-21

Paul's teaching in Rom 8:19 ff is a useful parallel to Peter's thinking here, where he speaks (RSV) of 'creation waiting with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God'. The picture thus portrayed is one of the created order waiting with outstretched hands and straining forward, in the hope that mankind's deliverance will soon come to fruition in the Saviour's coming in glory, so that creation itself will at last share in the transformation and glory of that coming, and itself be delivered from its bondage and corruption. Thus Paul, like Peter, indicates that when man fell all creation was involved in the cataclysmic disaster in some organic way, and was brought down with man, in spite of itself, as it were, when God pronounced the ground cursed for man's sake - the sentence which fell upon man carrying consequences which extended to the whole realm intended originally for man's dominion but - as the sentence on man was not hopeless (as cf Gen 3:15, the promise that in the fulness of the time the seed of the woman would bruise the head of the serpent) - so neither was the sentence on creation, and it shared in man's hope of redemption. Thus nature, though subject to vanity (futility) was left with the hope of something better. But in the meantime creation sighs. As someone has said,

"Account for it as you may, a wail of sorrow pervades the universe. The wind coursing along moans in every tree, and mourns round every corner. Go to the seaside, and every wave dies with a groan. Listen to the blackbird: whilst there is unutterable sweetness in its whistle, yet underneath all its notes there is an undertone of sadness. There is not a bird in all the forest which does not touch a minor key. Hear the bleating of the lamb, and note therein a tremor of sorrow. Ascend to man, and suffering dominates his history; everything in nature seems abortive; nothing seems to realise its destiny, achieving the full purpose of its creation. When man fell, nature grew sick."

We shall continue this discussion in the next note.

1:17-21

The 'sickness' in nature spoken of in the quotation in the previous note also serves to explain something which is part and parcel of every thinking man's experience. How is it that, when viewing beautiful scenery, there is so often an unutterable beauty that somehow - mysteriously, paradoxically - becomes almost unbearable, filling us with such an inexplicable sadness that we are almost afraid to gaze upon it? Why should this be? It is deep calling unto deep, the deep of nature's inconsolable ache crying out to the deep of our heart's own yearning and longing for our full redemption.

The answer to this brings us once again to the 'buying and selling' metaphor mentioned already. A ransom has been provided that can liberate and deliver man from this humanly speaking impossible bondage. The word 'redeem' in 18 literally and originally means 'to deliver captives from robbers or enemies in war by the payment of a ransom price'. This is a very apposite word therefore for Peter to use, for mankind needs to be bought back from the bondage they have sold themselves into by their sin. And it is the glorious good news of the gospel that Christ has paid that price to set us free, buying us out of futility and futile ways into liberty and purpose in life, into a sense of direction and meaning. The nature of this ransom price and of the setting free is the subject of the next note.

1:17-21

In answering the question at the end of the previous note about the nature of our deliverance we have to ask ourselves what lies behind the awful futility and meaninglessness of life. It is the grim fact of the guilt and penalty of sin, of which the futility is simply the presenting symptom. Sin incriminates us, makes us guilty before God. This is the great and implacable verdict that Paul brings upon mankind in his seminal epistle to the Romans, where he concludes 'every mouth stopped and all the world guilty before God'. That is the price that has to be paid before there can be any question of release from what Peter calls futility being even considered. And it is paid, and paid in full in the death that Jesus died and that death is the penalty that was imposed on the first Adam in the Garden of Eden - 'in the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die'. It was our death that Jesus died, when He stood in as the second Adam.

When all was sin and shame,
A second Adam to the fight
And to the rescue came.

And it is this death that effects the release of the prisoners from the bondage of futility. In words from the hymn which James Denney once asserted was the greatest evangelical hymn in the English language,

Bearing shame and scoffing rude
In my place condemned He stood
Sealed my pardon with His blood
Hallelujah! What a Saviour!

And in that pardoning love the power of sin was broken, for when the penalty is paid there is nothing left to keep a man in prison. His chains fall off and his heart goes free and he enters into the glorious liberty of the children of God.

1:17-21

Nor is this all. What was accomplished in the Cross was a cosmic redemption, as Paul makes clear in Col 1:20, 21, when he speaks of Christ "having made peace through the blood of His cross, by Him to reconcile all things to himself....whether they be things on earth or things in heaven. And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight". The ancient church hymn says, speaking of the death that Jesus died, that

Earth and sea and stars and mankind
By that stream are cleansed all.

It is impressive to see how Paul speaks of man's reconciliation as part of, and included in, the greater reconciliation of 'all things', in that remarkable statement in the Colossian epistle; and this is surely implicit in Paul's teaching in Rom 8:18 ff. Well might Paul say, in another place, that 'this thing was not done in a corner'! It is the massiveness and indeed the majesty of Paul's thought that so impresses us. 'Cosmic' is the proper word to describe such a redemption.

1:22-25

The theme of these final verses of the chapter is spiritual rebirth, and they belong intrinsically to the earlier verses which we have been studying and cannot well be separated from them, in the sense that it is not possible in experience to be redeemed by the blood of Christ without being born again and knowing the mystery of regeneration as a reality in our hearts. We should note at the outset that there is a parallelism between these verses and those that precede them in the repetition of the words 'not with corruptible things...: in 18 and 'not of corruptible seed but of incorruptible' in 23. The contrast in both cases is between what is seen and temporal and what is unseen and eternal. There is something that inclines us to use the word 'grandeur to describe this awesome mystery of regeneration, but it is a grandeur that is full of comfort and reassurance. We referred in earlier readings about Peter's concern to write something to encourage hard-pressed believers to hold on in faith in the midst of trial, and here is something that must surely encourage us all. For here he tells us that if this miracle of grace has overtaken us, then something eternal has happened. There has been born in us something that will never die, something that all the changes and chances of this mortal life will be powerless to harm or destroy, compared with which the sufferings of this present time, great as they may be, are hardly worth mentioning (cf Rom 8:18, 2 Cor 4:17). This is the force of the quotation in 24, 'all flesh is as grass....' (cf Isa 40:6,8). This earthly life, Peter means, is the thing of a moment, but it conceals an imperishable and unutterable splendour. The suns and stars of space are finite; but what has been sown in our hearts will outlast them all. The eternal security of the people of God is august, majestic and magisterial!

1:22-25

Peter speaks here of regeneration by the Word, as the apostle James does in his epistle (1:18, 'by the word of truth'); whereas in John 3:3 our Lord speaks of rebirth by the Spirit. These are complimentary to one another as descriptions of the same reality. There are those indeed who would hold that both expressions are interchangeable, in much the same way as the phrases 'saved by grace', 'saved by the blood of Christ', 'justified by faith', and so on. All these are virtually interchangeable as terms for the one fundamental fact. Others, however, make a distinction and maintain that the Word is not in and of itself the begetting principle, but the vehicle by which the principle works. It is the Spirit that is life-giving, through the Word, and the Word conveys and communicates that life. This may be thought to be a distinction without a difference. Some other Scriptures emphasise that the Word itself is life-giving, as for example Heb 4:12, 'the Word of God is quick and powerful...' and Ps 19, 'the law of the Lord is perfect converting the soul'. And our Lord Himself in the parable of the sower speaks of the seed itself being the Word. There is a further complication also. It is true that Christ Himself is the Word of God but to substitute 'Christ' here for 'Word' is not very meaningful, and does not seem to be Peter's meaning here. Of course it is Christ the living Word Who regenerates us, but where and how does Christ the living Word operate but in the Scriptures? This, it seems to us, is what Peter is making plain here. We shall continue on this theme in the next note.

1:22-25

We said at the end of the previous note that Christ the living Word Who regenerates us by His Spirit operates in the Word of the Scriptures, and that this is what Peter is concerned to make plain to us. He uses, in fact, two words in the Greek for 'word' - logos and rema. In 23 'word of God' is logos; but 'word of the Lord' and 'word that is preached', both in 25, is rema. This seems to indicate that in Peter's mind the two are inseparable - not indeed identical, but inseparable in such a way that we can certainly speak of 'being born again by the Word of truth', meaning 'the word of the Scriptures', which the Lord uses as the vehicle of His grace, in which He comes to men in saving power. This, as we suggested in the previous note, is borne out and confirmed both by the use of the Word 'seed' in reference to the Word, and in our Lord's use of it in the parable of the sower. But here is a further thought. We need to see, and we do see from this passage, that regeneration by the Word (and/or Spirit) of God is not something separate and distinct from the experience of forgiveness on the one hand, or from the work of Christ on the Cross on the other. What we can - and must - say is that redemption in the blood of Christ issues in both forgiveness and new birth. And what we are concerned to emphasise here is the connection between the death of Christ and the work of regeneration. We shall continue this theme in the next note.

1:22-25

The Scriptures invite us, in thinking of regeneration, to take the idea of creation in the beginning in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth') as an illustration of the still greater mystery of re-creation or, as the New Testament speaks of it, regeneration, rebirth. In Genesis we see both the Word and the Spirit at work. On the one hand we read, 'And God said....' - that is the creative word of God; on the other hand, we read, 'The Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters'. When God created the world, He did so by the Word of His power: He spake, and it was done; and the energy of the Spirit of God went forth in creative power. But when God wanted to recreate, it cost Him the precious blood of His only begotten Son on the Cross to do so. All the mystery of the atonement is involved in the recreation of man, in the regeneration of souls that sin has slain. And it is by virtue of the appalling act of self-giving on the Cross and the victory of the Resurrection that God can and does send forth once again the (re)-creative Word that calls forth newness of life in the souls of men. As Paul puts it in 2 Cor 4:6: 'God Who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ'. This is the association of ideas here at the end of Peter's first chapter: spiritual rebirth, regeneration, newness of life - whatever we may like to call it - is rooted in the redeeming blood of Christ. We see this association of ideas also in John 3, where Jesus, in answer to Nicodemus' question 'How can these things be?' directs him to the Scriptures which foreshadowed the Cross and death of Christ (in the illustration of the brazen serpent in the wilderness that brought healing and life to the stricken Israelites); and likewise in Eph 2:4 ff, where the life giving power of God, quickening us together with Christ, is explicitly stated to be the power that wrought in Christ when God raised Him from the dead. In other words, it is in the word of the Cross that the creative command goes forth from on high bringing men and women into new life. The Word -or message - of the Cross, as Paul says, is the power of God.

1:22-25

Following on from Peter's emphasis on the association between the death of Christ and regeneration we now have to note three things that are associated with the new birth, all in 22. The first is 'obeying the truth through the Spirit'. This is the response of faith to the Word of the gospel. Faith is never purely an intellectual thing, or a mere grasping by the understanding of the truths of the gospel, but a moral submission to these truths, and to the claim they make upon the soul. Obedience is the only really satisfactory evidence that our faith is real in this fundamental sense, faith is obedience, nothing else. The second thing is the purification of the soul which is spoken of in relation to obedience, and is one of the fruits of it. One does not have to consider this thought for very long without recalling other references to the fruits of obedience, such as Rom 6:17,18, where Paul speaks of being 'made free from sin through obeying from the heart the form of doctrine to which we were delivered'; and Acts 5:32, where Peter tells us that God has given the Spirit to those that obey Him; and John 15:7, where our Lord's word in the Upper Room tell us that obedience moves the hand of God in prayer. These are wonderful thoughts held out to us as we seek to walk with the Lord and obey His voice. The third thing, as the fruit of the other two, is 'unfeigned love of the brethren'. This is the horizontal evidence that something real has happened to us. The new birth, as well as bringing us into a new relationship with Christ, brings us into a new relationship with our fellows. As Alan Stibbs puts it in his commentary on these verses, "God's quickening work gives us both a new nature to express, and new relatives - brethren in Christ -towards whom to express it." The fruit of the Spirit, Paul says - is love.

2:1-5

The 'Wherefore' in 1 makes it clear that what Peter goes on to say in this chapter is a necessary consequence of what has just been said at the end of the previous chapter. Because we have been born again into newness of life by the Word, therefore we are to grow in grace through that word. This is the theme before us now. The phrase in 2, 'as newborn babes' does not necessarily mean that Peter is addressing new converts, so much as to emphasise that a genuine experience of spiritual rebirth necessarily leads to a desire for the 'sincere milk of the Word'. Indeed, his words have the force of 'Desire the sincere milk of the Word as new-born babes desire their mother's milk' - that is to say the attitude of Peter's readers is to be like new-born babes in this sense, in seeking after the Word of life. Just as a new-born babe's preoccupation with its mother's milk is total and instinctive, so must the believer's be with the word of life, and this surely is an attitude that should not confine itself to spiritual infancy. That being established there is a great deal more for us in these verses. First of all, there is what may be called the 'stripping off' process. There are things that must be laid aside. The word in the Greek for 'laying aside' is one used of divesting oneself of one's clothes. This is similar to Paul's teaching in Col 3:8 ff, 'Put off.....put on'. It is a putting off of the old man and a putting on of the new. But for the putting on of the new man (cf Zech 3:34; Luke 15:22) the need is first of all to put off the old rags. And this is Peter's point here. But also in the next metaphor that Peter uses, in 5,6 - that of the building of a spiritual house - we need to realise that if gospel work is a work of rehabilitation - and it is - which comes to the ruin that sin has made in the life of man, to do a work of rebuilding, we have to recognise that in any work of rebuilding one of the first things that needs to be done is the demolition of the old ruin, that has become dangerous and impossible of merely shoring up. The old has to be taken down and dismantled, before new foundations can be laid and new structures erected.

2:1-5

In the new life, there is - one has to realise - so much to unlearn, wrong attitudes, wrong assumptions, wrong presuppositions. This is why the whole of life has to be brought under scrutiny, for so much that has become second nature to us has to be challenged. The question, 'What is wrong with that?' needs to be faced fairly and squarely, and honestly to be attended to, at whatever cost. It is salutary for us to recognise that there is this decisive 'negative' at the heart of genuine Christian experience, in face of the simplistic assertion that 'Christianity is not a negative thing, but something very positive'. The undoubted negative is too prominent and consistent in New Testament teaching for us ever to be content with such a sweeping generalisation, as for example, 1 Thess 4:3, 'This is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication', which J.B. Phillips renders as ' God's plan is to make you holy, and that entails first of all a clean cut with sexual immorality'. Peter begins in 1 with the phrase 'all malice'. This is a general word for wickedness and evil, and it includes all the wicked ways of the Christless world, and all the words that follow illustrate and elaborate this. A quiet consideration of these will surely convince us that there is much unlearning to be done! The word 'desire' in 2 is a strong one, it is the 'hungering and thirsting' after righteousness which Jesus speaks of in Matt 5:6, as the Psalmist also, in Ps 42:1. When a real work of grace has been wrought this desire will certainly be born. And God has matched the need it expresses with the supplies to meet it. This is the necessity for any true growth and development, and without it life will become stunted and withered, a caricature of true life. A newborn babe is a beautiful thing, but stunted growth is a tragedy.

2:1-5

The AV translation in 2 - 'desire the sincere milk of the word' is rendered somewhat differently in the modern versions: the NIV has 'crave pure spiritual milk', as also, similarly, the NEB, the RSV, the TEV and J.B. Phillips. But the AV is nevertheless right in its inclusion of 'the Word', for the Greek is *logikon*, which means etymologically 'pertaining to speech or words'. William Barclay takes it thus as meaning 'belonging to the word', and says that Peter has been thinking and talking about the word of God and that what he means here is that 'the Christian must desire with his whole heart the nourishment which comes from the Word of God, for by that nourishment he can thrive and grow up until he reaches salvation itself'. The word 'sincere' here is *dolos*, which is the opposite of *adolos*, the word used in 1 for guile. The suggestion is that "wrong relations with our fellow Christians may put us off our food. Only those Christians who cut out unworthy attitudes and activities towards their brethren can have a proper, healthy appetite for their necessary spiritual food. And only those who thus take such food will grow to Christian maturity and so experience full salvation (A Stibbs)". But there is another association of ideas also in 3, 4, in relation to what we have seen in 2: 'desire....taste....to whom coming'. Coming to the Word means, and is equivalent to, coming to Christ. How other should Peter have used the words 'to whom coming....', unless he actually meant that in coming to and tasting the Word, we come in contact with the living Christ. We should not fear lest we should be substituting the printed page for the living Christ. The biblical writers knew perfectly well the difference between the written word and the Christ within it, and so must we recognise this distinction, without any sense of embarrassment or confusion. For it is ever in the Word that we find the living Christ, and not anywhere else indeed but there. It is in this sense that we can say that His Word is as good as His presence. Indeed, when the Word is living, it is He that we meet and feed upon. This is the mystery, but it is a glorious reality, as we know and experience.

2:1-5

Peter's word in 4 about our coming to Christ 'as unto a living stone' reminds us of the Apostle Paul's similar kind of statement in 1 Cor 10 where he speaks of the Israelites in the wilderness drinking 'spiritual water', when Moses smote the rock - 'and that rock was Christ'. Peter's thought here is identical. This is how we are built up in the faith. Nor is the metaphor as mixed as it might seem! And it makes the words in 3 very graphic: Peter is surely quoting from Psalm 34, 'O taste and see that the Lord is good, blessed is the man that trusteth in him'. What follows in 5 is likewise significant: we are given a place and a part in the purposes of God. A stone by itself is of little use; it is only when it is built into the building that it functions and has a real purpose. We should note in 4,5 the words 'living stone/ lively stones'. In the Greek the words are identical but the AV uses different words to translate them. Christ is called 'living stone', but we are spoken of as 'lively stones'. It may well be that the AV translators are making a point, implying that our 'living-ness' is a derived 'living-ness', whereas our Lord's is unconditioned. It is the same kind of contrast as that suggested in Paul's words in 1 Tim 6:16, 'Who only hath immortality' clearly implying that ours is a 'derived' immortality, dependent moment by moment on Him. As to the ultimate purpose of being incorporated into the building of God, we see the 'end-product' - if we may anticipate and look ahead to 10 - in the statement that whereas we were once, before conversion and rebirth, 'not a people', but now are become 'the people of God'. We may recall what was said in an earlier note about the fact that if God has planted the seed of His Word in us something eternal has been done to us and in us, for God will have a people for Himself for all eternity, and we shall be there among them, in the great multitude that no man can number, singing praises without ceasing to Him Who is worthy of all our adoration and homage and love. This is the force of the words 'to whom coming'.

2:1-5

Peter uses a different word for 'stone' in these verses than is ordinarily used. In John 1:42, for example, in our Lord's initial encounter with Peter the word is petros, which has reference to a rough-hewn stone or rock taken from the quarry. The word used by Peter here, however, is not petros, but lithos, which has reference to a dressed, polished stone, prepared and made ready for a building. What Peter has in mind is the coming of a life steadily under the gracious discipline of the Word, allowing that Word to deal with all that is rough and unsubdued, all that is 'undressed' and therefore unsuitable for use in the building of a proper edifice satisfying to public scrutiny. And, in any true fellowship of God's people, there are many lives that, over a period of years, have been stabilised, changed, deepened, enriched, made steadfast by the power and influence of the Word of life. What an encouragement this is, especially to new, young believers who may be only beginning in the Christian way. Rome was not built in a day, as they say, and it can hardly be expected that we could ever be ready for all God has in mind for us in our newly begun discipleship. But be encouraged, new believer: He that hath begun a good work in you shall perform it until the day of Jesus Christ. The other metaphor Peter uses is that of building a house. And, as we have already indicated, there is so often a preliminary work of demolition that first needs to take place, when an old, derelict building is taken over for reconstruction purposes. When this is the case the process of the rebuilding and reconstruction may for long enough look shambolic, with veritable chaos in the entire building site, before the emergence of the new edifice. But even in the interim, it is often possible to see 'the shape of things to come', which gives real promise of the ultimate purpose in the mind of the architect. This is how it is also in the building of God.

2:6-10

Peter goes on in these verses to draw a contrast between those who believe, and those who do not believe, in Christ. There is much for us to learn from this. Interestingly, we should see how close to the Apostle Paul's theology Peter's words here are. The 'spiritual house' that Peter refers to in 5 is paralleled by an habitation of God through the Spirit' in Eph 2:21, 22; and both apostles take Old Testament ideas and apply them to the Church. In Exod 19:5,6, the words 'ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto Me....a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation', and Hos 1: 6-10 and 2:23, 'not My people....thou art My people' are clearly the source of Peter's language here, and it is just as clear that Peter regards the New Testament Church as heirs of the promise given to God's people of old, and that all the privileges enjoyed by Israel are now made over to those who believe in Christ. What is typically and prophetically anticipated in Old Testament history finds its fulfilment in the Christian community. This is all very wonderful, and passages such as Deut 7:6-9 convey something of the marvel of all this as it applies to us who believe in Christ. But we must not forget that there is a dark side to this also, and it is this: within the framework of the sovereignty of God, and Divine electing grace notwithstanding, responsibility for salvation lies fairly and squarely on man's shoulders. The gospel presents a moral challenge for man's will, and summons him to repent and believe the gospel and not all do so; and Peter distinguishes sharply between those who believe and those who do not the contrast in 7 is very stark, in this regard, and we will say more of it in the next note.

2:6-10

It should be noted that the word Peter uses of those who do not believe, in 7, is 'disobedient', they stumble at the word, being disobedient. The implication here is very clear and unambiguous: unbelief is not an unfortunate failing, that men cannot help, but a moral issue. If men do not believe, it is because they will not believe. In speaking of 'the stone which the builders disallowed' Peter is quoting from the Old Testament references already mentioned, and also from Ps 118:22, 23. These words play quite a significant part in the New Testament, where they are quoted in three places in particular, each with its own distinctive reference and meaning. In Luke 20:17, in the parable of the vineyard and the husbandman, the reference is to the rejection of Christ as a way of salvation. The Pharisees and Sadducees of our Lord's day were deliberately and of set purpose refusing, and had refused, Him and our Lord told this parable to challenge them in their refusal. In Acts 4:11, these same words are spoken by Peter, in the early days of the Pentecostal outpouring that brought into being the New Testament Church, with reference to the healing of the lame man at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple. The man who was healed had availed himself of the Stone, but the Pharisees were rejecting: and Peter is saying, in effect, 'this is what you are rejecting when you reject Christ - healing, wholeness, restoration, newness of life. In 1 Pet 2:7, the reference is still further developed - to the Christian life and growth in grace - growth that continues on and on, changing from glory into glory 'till at last we see His face'. And when a man rejects the grace of God in Christ, he is refusing his eternal destiny of glory and joy. And to come to that end-time, still having refused that stone of which Peter speaks, and still to be in a state of disobedience, is to pass into a darkness in which there is no light at all, and to incur at the last an infinite and irreparable loss. It is to pass into a night in which no morning dawns.

2:6-10

But there is also another kind of stumbling in the Christian life. There are those who stumble at the gospel and turn from it - for the simple reason that they are ignorant of the vast and tremendous resources that are offered them in Christ. It is ever true that a small, poverty-stricken conception of Christ and His salvation will result in a corresponding shrunken and poverty-stricken mind-set that makes the whole offer of salvation seem paltry and unattractive. What would we think - to use a simple illustration - of a child that spent its time playing in the squalor of a city slum, content with making mud-pies, if he refused an offer of a holiday by the sea? 'No', he says, 'a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. I don't know what you are offering me. I have at least got my mud pies here. What are you going to give me in their place?' What pity and compassion we would feel for such ignorance. Yet there are many in a far worse predicament, fooling around with things that can never give real life and fulfilment, while unimagined pleasures and activities await them just inside the gates of God. Sometimes a man's view of the glory of the new life is limited and unimaginative, and when this obtains it is hardly surprising that the real splendour is missed, the reality of unimagined incredible energy and vibrant power and virtue enough to make thought reel and stagger by its very immensity. But to have one's spiritual roots in that glorious unseen world is to be drawing virtue and power for living and serving victoriously and fruitfully in a way that makes the life of the unbeliever a very dull and empty thing indeed. As the hymn says,

'O who with earth would grudge to part
when called with angels to be blessed?'

2.6-10

The sheer glory of that calling is underlined in glowing terms in 9 in phrases full of majesty and awe. The mystery of the Divine calling has already been underlined in the opening verses of the epistle, but here it is more the corporate unity of the 'chosen generation' that Peter has in view. Let men despise the Church of God as they will, beleaguer, persecute, deride or pity it. It is nevertheless the Church of the living God, chosen from eternity to eternity, and nothing will ever pluck her from His hand. A chosen generation indeed and chosen for purposes splendid beyond all our imagining. The 'royal priesthood' concept comes from Exod 19:6, where the idea of a kingdom as well as a priesthood is expressed. What is most probably meant is that Christians share with Christ in kingship or sovereignty as well as in priesthood. They are called to reign as well as to serve. We are as believers 'a nation of kings', with kingly descent and lineage. This theme of spiritual royalty is one that can be soul-transforming when understood and grasped. Remember what was said of Jacob, 'As a prince thou hast power with God and with men'. Furthermore, Peter calls us 'a holy nation'. This is a term filled with particular meaning, expressive of the covenant relationship between God and Israel, and we as believers inherit all the blessings of the covenant, and our God is a faithful covenanting God. All that He was to the patriarchs He will be to us. Further still, Peter calls us 'a peculiar people', a people for God's own possession, the object of His personal love, tender and fierce and unbelievably intense. and, says Peter, we are all these things that we might show forth the praises of Him Who hath called us out of darkness into His marvellous light'. What an utterance is this! Well might we sing, 'Tell out my soul, the greatness of the Lord'.

2:11 12

The emphasis on 'strangers and pilgrims' in these verses follows upon Peter's glowing and moving description of the privileges that believers enjoy in the dignity that God has bestowed upon them in their calling in Christ. We begin with a quotation from J.B. Phillips, in the Preface to his translation of the New Testament Epistles, entitled Letters to Young Churches. He says:

'To the writers of these letters this present life was only an incident. It was lived, with a due sense of responsibility, as a preface to sharing the timeless life of God Himself. To these men this world was only a part, and because of the cumulative result of human sin a highly infected and infectious part, of God's vast created universe, seen and unseen. They trained themselves therefore, and attempted to train others, not to be 'taken in' by this world, not to give their hearts to it, not to conform to its values, but to remember constantly that they were only temporary residents, and that their rights of citizenship were in the unseen world of Reality. Today when all the emphasis is thrown upon making the most of this life, and even Christianity is only seriously considered in many quarters because of its social implications, this point of view is comparatively rarely held. Yet as we read what they have to say we may perhaps find ourselves saying a little wistfully, 'perhaps these men were right!''

It could hardly be controverted that the above is a valid and true description of the New Testament Church and it has a great deal to say to us in our thinking about the real meaning of Peter's descriptive phrase 'strangers and pilgrims', and we shall endeavour to be guided by what it says in the Notes which follow.

2:11-12

The three traditional enemies of the Christian are 'the world, the flesh, and the devil'. One of these - 'the world' is our concern here - we shall have opportunity at a later stage in our studies to say something about 'the devil' when we come to chapter 5. As for 'the flesh', it is always there, warring against the soul, as Peter says here. It is not always easy to disentangle or isolate these three 'enemies' from one another either in our thinking or in our experience, but we shall endeavour to do this as best we may. The Scriptures have a good deal to say about the world and the Christian's relation to it, as the following related statements in the New Testament make clear: Rom 12:2; 1 Cor 6:12, 7:29 ff; Gal 1:4, 6:14; Jas 4:4; 2 Pet 1:4; 1 Jn 2:15. These references, among others, are worthy of careful thought and examination. The New Testament makes it abundantly clear, in unfolding the majestic and magisterial concept of the believer's position in Christ and what he has been made in Him - a new creature, for whom old things have passed away (2 Cor 5:17) - that we are called to live out that new life in the old order. This is where all the problems lie, of course; but it is possible to sum up the teaching in three ways, defining the Christian attitude in relation to a) things that are forbidden, b) things that are doubtful, and c) things that are legitimate. As to a) - the things that are forbidden - what we need to recognise is that the Scriptures emphasise and underline the moral absolutes, that do not change from age to age, but remain unaltered and inviolate. In our present day, post-modern climate, - in which the 'in' way of thinking is that there are no absolutes, but only 'that which is 'true for you' and that which is 'true for me', which ultimately makes a nonsense of any kind of true moral values - there is a crying need to assert and to hold fast to 'the things that cannot be shaken', the values that were built into the very structure of the universe at the beginning by God Himself.

2:11-12

In relation to b) 'the things that are doubtful'. It will be helpful in clarifying our thinking on this to include a comment by James Denney on the words in 2 Cor 6:14, 'Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers....', in which he speaks of the assumption on which the demand not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers is based:

"It is that there are two ethical or spiritual interests in the world, and that these are fundamentally inconsistent with each other. This implies that in choosing the one, the other has to be rejected. But it implies more: it implies that at bottom there are only two kinds of people in the world - those who identify themselves with the one of these interests, and those who identify themselves with the other....

And there is an instinct in those who are perfecting holiness in the fear of God which tells them, without in the least making them Pharisaical, not only what things, but what persons - not only what ideas and practices, but what individual characters - are not to be made friends of. It is no pride, or scorn, or censoriousness, which speaks thus, but the voice of all Christian experience."

C.S. Lewis says something similar in one of his letters:

"I am inclined to think a Christian would be wise to avoid, where he decently can, any meeting with people who are bullies, lascivious, cruel, dishonest, spiteful and so forth. Not because we are too good for them. In a sense because we are not good enough. We are not good enough to cope with all the temptations, nor clever enough to cope with all the problems, which an evening spent in such society produces. The temptation is to condone, to connive at; by our words, looks and laughter, to 'consent'?"

These statements, by such distinguished scholars, are worth pondering, are they not?

2.11 12

But now we must say something about c) The things that are legitimate in the world, things about which there need not be much disagreement. Our Lord's words 'in the world but not of the world' have just as much relevance and application to this aspect as to the others and it is here in particular that we see how misleading it is to limit our definition of 'the world' and 'worldliness' to a few specific issues, for taken at its most comprehensive, 'the world' embraces all that is 'of this life', all that is 'seen and temporal', as distinct from what is 'unseen and eternal', and 'of the world to come'. Our daily work, for example, our careers, our professions, - all these things belong to the 'seen and temporal', and therefore in the widest and most general sense 'of the world'. But they are not thereby wrong. The realm of culture, music and the arts is 'seen and temporal', and therefore, rightly understood, 'of the world'. But these things are not therefore wrong in themselves, but part of the structure and fabric 'of the world'. Take the question of wealth. This is 'of the world' and 'worldly'; but even when we concede that our Lord had some very sharp and devastating things to say about this world's goods, He did not condemn them as wrong in themselves. Once we understand 'the world' in this wider and more general sense it will be seen to be of wide application in several other directions, and we shall look at some of them in the next note.

2:11-12

Following on what was said at the end of the previous note we can consider the question of human friendships and relationships. This also is something that belongs 'to the world'. Deep and precious human relationships are of the stuff of this world - but they are not thereby, in and of themselves, wrong. All these things - and we mention only some, as illustrative of the point that is being made - are the legitimate gifts of God, included in the 'all things' that God has given us richly to enjoy (1 Tim 6:17). But - and this is important for us to realise - they can all become wrong, dangerously and disastrously wrong, and fatal to the Christian life. Music can lead a man disastrously astray, by taking firm hold of his life and becoming an idolatry for him. Money can become a God to the Christian, and it is quite certain that many believers have allowed it to qualify and sometimes compromise their effectiveness in Christian service. And human relationships - not only romantic attachments that are unwise, but also loves that have originally been sanctioned by God, as also God-given friendships - these can all be corrupted by inordinate affection. Adelaide Anne Proctor's words of warning about 'earth's bliss' being 'our guide and not our chain' need to be remembered again and again.

2:11-12

What we said at the end of the previous note is the real point that the apostle Paul makes in the controversial 'marriage' chapter in 1 Cor 7. It is irresponsible of liberals and radicals - and feminists - to take the view that that chapter represents a woman-hater blowing off about his pet hobby-horse. On the contrary, what Paul is doing is to unfold an attitude of true pastoral counselling in a particular situation of distress or crisis. There are a number of illustrations we could use to underline and elucidate this, for example, particular times of crisis such as the exigencies of war, when uncertainties about the future, might make it seem unwise or inexpedient to enter into a marriage relationship, or, the mission field, when a missionary is faced with a choice between continuing missionary work in a highly difficult and hazardous situation and marriage to a fine Christian partner. There are, in fact, some situations in which marriage would preclude some forms of service. Or, to take a further example, a time of emotional upheaval, or psychological maladjustment, which would make marriage a highly questionable and unwise procedure. No; Paul in 1 Cor 7 is not saying marriage is sinful - how could he, knowing - as he did - that it belonged to the order of creation, but rather, that it could be undesirable or unwise in any number of such circumstances as we have indicated. His concern was that nothing - marriage, sorrow, joy, business and commerce, or the world - should be allowed to detract from a man's usefulness or serviceability to God. These are but some of the legitimate 'worldly' things that are our concern in these verses.

2:11-12

What, then, does the New Testament say about these legitimate things? In the first place, we are certainly told that God has given us richly all things to enjoy (1 Tim 6:17). His good gifts are munificent and often prodigal. As the Psalmist puts it, 'No good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly'. In the second place, we are enjoined to use the world, but not abuse it (1 Cor 7:31), and therefore to be 'without carefulness' (or anxiety) concerning these things. There is a proper use of the good things of God, and there is an improper use of them. In the third place, we are not to allow ourselves to be brought under the power of any of these things, as Paul puts it in 1 Cor 6:12, however good they may be in themselves. And in the fourth place, in order to make sure that we are not under their power, it is well to put ourselves to the test from time to time, and do without them (fast from them), until we prove to our own satisfaction that these things are in their proper place, and not exercising an undue influence or power in our lives. This is one of the things that the New Testament principle of fasting means. The athlete who cannot, or is unwilling to, deny himself the sweet, rich delicacies is not likely to win the race. His indiscipline in that area of life will disqualify him from the prize. And it is so also with the believer. Paul says in 1 Cor 9:27, "I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection, lest having preached to others I myself might become a castaway (disqualified)". In point of fact, the phrase 'crucified unto the world' (Gal 6:14) is just as applicable here as anywhere else. We are to die to music and culture, die to wealth, die to human loves, for nothing that refuses to die can ever be resurrected. And the only 'safe' enjoyment of those gifts of God lies on the other side of the Cross. It is when we no longer need them, and when we have learned to live without them, that we can both be safely given them, and also that we can most enjoy and appreciate them. We have only to look at Paul himself (cf Phil 4:11 ff) to see the truth of this. In that passage we see him in utter contentment and peace - in prison! And it was because the secret of his life lay neither in having nor in not having things, but in having Christ! 'To me to live is Christ' he said; and to know that in Him we have everything is to be content. Detachment - through attachment to Christ. That is the only real freedom. 'Strangers and pilgrims'? Is this how we live our Christian lives?

2:13-20

There is a fitness in our having spent a good deal of time looking at the meaning and implications of the Christian's pilgrim status in the world, for it is a true understanding of that status that informs all that Peter goes on to discuss in the verses that follow 11 and 12. Peter indicates that the Christian's pilgrim status is to express itself in the world in a certain and unmistakable way. Since the believer is one who is yielded in all things to God - and this is implicit in Peter's understanding of faith and commitment as being an attitude of obedience and submission to His good and acceptable and perfect will - then obedience and submission have a horizontal as well as a vertical dimension, not only Godward but also manward. And this means submitting to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, as an expression of his obedience to Him - for, as Paul teaches very plainly, the powers that be are ordained by God and we owe them our obedience as law-abiding citizens. After a general statement, then, about the need for good ethical living in the world, Peter speaks first of all, in 13-17, of the Christian's attitude to secular power; then, in 18-21a, the attitude of Christian slaves to their masters; this is followed in 21b-25 by a parenthesis, on the example of Christ; next, in 3:1-7, it is the Christian attitude as between husbands and wives; and finally in 3:8-12 we have some general principles concluding the section.

2:13-20

It should be noted that Peter is not alone in writing in this vein (underlined in the previous note) for in fact the Apostle Paul gives a very similar outline in both Ephesians and Colossians. This is clearly an example of what is called in Acts 2:42 'the Apostles' Doctrine', which the early disciples are said to have continued in after Pentecost. It is evident that from the outset of the New Testament Church there was an apostolic corpus of belief - what is called elsewhere, in Jude, 'the faith once delivered to the saints', which is well defined and easily identifiable in the pages of the New Testament. There is really no question but that there was a basic and fundamental 'gospel' which was common to the whole New Testament Church. This is a basic and central lesson that emerges here at the outset. And it should not be forgotten, for a great deal depends upon it, for any true and coherent understanding of the Christian message and position. It is all very well for liberals and radicals to speak disparagingly and with contempt of evangelicals' insistence on a back to the Bible' position and brand this as fundamentalist obscurantism, but the stubborn fact remains that the phrase 'to the law and to the testimony' (Isa 8:20) is itself a biblical criterion by which to assess truth and error, and it will not do to substitute for this objective - and safe - standard the subjective and dubious criterion of 'the assured results of modern scholarship' which as many students of theology are increasingly discovering are frequently neither assured or - sometimes - very scholarly.

2:13-20

(For a summary of the pattern of Peter's unfolding argument beginning with these verses, see previous notes). The apostle has, as we have seen, been emphasising that an honourable walk among the Gentiles is not likely to be a fruitful possibility unless there is underlying it a secret, inner discipline of abstinence. We are to abstain from everything that is out of character with our calling as strangers and pilgrims. And we begin, in 13 ff, with specific injunctions. One of the things that is clear in every part of this section of the epistle stretching to 3:7 is the emphasis on submission. 'Honest conversation' (12), translated in some modern versions as 'seemly behaviour', means an attitude of submission in those areas of life which the Apostle mentions. A.M. Stibbs, in his Tyndale Commentary, says:

"The general emphasis throughout is on active and patient submission, on loyal and disciplined devotion, freely rendered, constrained by reverence for God, inspired by confidence in Him. For Christians should acknowledge the sovereignty of the divine providence in ordering and over ruling human institutions and relations for men's good. The way, therefore, to please God, to seek His will, and to experience His blessing is for Christians not to be rebels against the prevailing order of society, but rather positively, submissively and dutifully to discharge the various responsibilities which the common relations of life put upon them"

We could hardly hope to find a more balanced and perceptive introduction to this subject than this paragraph.

2:13-20

There are two reasons why Peter brings up this question of our attitude to authority. One is that the Jews as a people (with whom Christians are closely associated in the Roman mind) were, in Calvin's words, "especially hated and notorious for the reason that they were regarded as ungovernable because of their perverseness. As the commotions they raised up in the provinces were the cause of great calamities, everyone of a quiet and peaceable disposition dreaded them like the plague". The trouble with such an attitude is that once adopted as a principle, it tends to spill over into all sorts of other areas of life. This may be seen, for example, in the attitude of James and John in Luke 9:51-56, when the reaction to something that they thought was unjust was to resort to violence. They were not zealots, but they were influenced by a man who was, Simon the Zealot. You only need one zealot in a disciple band to influence and sway quite a number of others. We should not miss the fact that Jesus administered a rebuke to them and repudiated the whole concept of violence as a weapon in His programme. That will bear some thinking about.

The other reason why Peter brings up the question of submission is this: the gospel was, and is, a proclamation of liberty to the captives. In spiritual life the Christians had been brought into the glorious liberty of the children of God; why could they not be free also as to daily life? Why not revolt against their masters and overthrow unjust governments? Well, Peter says, "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake". 'Ordinance of man' here is rendered 'human institution'. In classical Greek the word is used of the founding of a city, and the phrase here may well refer to the common social institutions of ordered society - state, local government, industrial groups, families and households. The message is plain -these institutions are God ordained, and therefore for man's good. We rise against them at our peril. We shall continue our discussion of this in the next note.

2:13-20

It will not do for us to contend that what was said at the end of the previous note can only refer to just government and just institutions, and not to forms of injustice that abound in the world today. For (i) government in Peter's day was very far from being just; so often it was very unjust; and (ii) we can hardly imagine that Peter would be unaware of this kind of objection. The fact that he still says what he does in his particular situation is surely very significant. Calvin observes, "Some kind of government, however deformed and corrupt it may be, is still better and more beneficial than anarchy". Better than anarchy! This is the operative word and the key to understanding here. We had better be clear on this: the alternatives we are being offered today by violent protest are not: 'continued injustice', or 'a better deal for all', but 'continued injustice' or 'anarchy'. And for this reason: When law and order are violated they remain violated in the new regime that is set up. They do not suddenly become rehabilitated. Authoritarianism of the right is usually replaced by authoritarianism of the left. Civil war wipes out some old inequalities, but soon produces a whole crop of new ones. Communist totalitarianism is the proof of that. Those who agitate for, and indulge in, lawless violence in support of their position make one basically wrong and fatal mistake. They assume as a matter of course that if and when they succeed in their campaign, all that has been changed is the particular thing they have been fighting against. They assume that if they turn parts of society they do not like upside down, the parts they do like will stay the right way up. They don't, and they won't, for an attack has been made on the structure of society itself, that which holds it all together. Undermine that, and it will all come down. This is why the ideology of the left is much more attractive as an ideal and as a utopian dream, than as a reality. The reality is terrible. The cure is infinitely worse than the disease.

2:13-20

In view of all that has been said Christians surely need to examine very carefully the plausible arguments that suggest that the real prophets and apostles of the Kingdom of God are those who advocate defiance of the law, and not Peter and Paul after all. It is very difficult to get round Peter's plain and unequivocal teaching in these verses. There are three things to be said in conclusion of our discussion. First of all, the doctrine of submission is not necessarily to be construed as a negative, passive thing. Peter speaks of 'well-doing' in this connection and this points to positive alternatives to resistance - the introduction into society of a quality of life that is honouring to God and showing forth His praises. In the second place, the quality of this life is supremely that of love. Paul makes this point very plainly in Rom 13, where his similar teaching on submission to the powers that be is wedged in between two passages stressing the supremacy of love (Rom 12:3 ff and 13:8 ff). This is the need. The infiltration of love into society, not protest but suffering love is the need today. It is the lack of this 'salt' that has let the body of society go bad. Christians are the only ones who can be salt' in society, and they can be this only by being obedient to the Word - and this includes submission. In the third place, love is the weakness that lets God into society today. 'Submission' is not a quietist, pietistic curiosity, but belongs to the essence of the principle by which God has chosen to reveal Himself to man (cf 1 Cor 1:25, 27). Significantly, the same objections are being made against this today as are made against 'the foolishness of preaching'. 'Words, words, words, - it is action we need not words'. This is what men say and have said for so long. And we have had in the Church, less and less words, and look at our predicament today. Let us pay heed to the principle unfolded here: The 'weakness' of Christ's submission led to world redemption And His people are called to follow His example.

2:21-25

The idea of Christ as our example, underlined in these verses, has often been misunderstood in the Church and it is essential to be quite clear what the New Testament means by the phrase. When theological liberalism was in the ascendant, great stress was laid on the necessity to get away from dry, dusty theology, and to recover what was called the 'gospel of Jesus'. 'Leave Paul to his theology', it was said, 'and get back to the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, and take Him as our example, for this is what the gospel is about'. But this is a major misunderstanding of what the gospel is, and it leads - and it did lead, in the heyday of liberalism - to spiritual bankruptcy and despair. For to take Christ as an example and make a gospel of that is indeed a counsel of despair. The reaction of the evangelical faith won the day on this issue, and the liberal idea is now largely outmoded. But in its reaction sometimes the evangelical faith became very suspicious of the very idea of Christ as an example and tended to steer clear of it altogether. Nevertheless, the idea of Christ as our example is, as we see in Peter's words here, a thoroughly biblical idea, and - rightly understood - the whole gospel is bound up in it and with it, although 'taking Christ as an example' is not in itself the gospel. We should note the words 'rightly understood', for there is a right understanding of the phrase 'Christ our example', and there is a distorted and wrong understanding of it, and it is our first duty therefore to get our ideas straight about it at the outset.

2:21-25

The swing of the pendulum away from the 'example' idea is similar to the antithesis between 'faith' and 'works'. The possibility of 'salvation by works' by being earnest, and doing the best you can, is of course a seriously erroneous idea, and has led countless people astray and into despair. We have only to mention the name of Martin Luther to realise this. But in their concern to refute this error evangelicals have sometimes gone to the opposite extreme, saying something like this: "Good works are useless, they do not matter. It is not what you do but what you believe that matters. They meant well, but this is nevertheless misleading and dangerous talk. Good works are not useless, but extremely important. The Apostle Paul says, "Be careful to maintain good works", and "We are created in Christ Jesus unto good works". The truth is that it is only correct to say that good works are useless as a way of salvation. As the Westminster Confession says "We cannot by our best works merit pardon for sin". But it is in fact a critical misunderstanding to think that it is not the first duty of a Christian to follow the example of Jesus. But note well what is being said: a Christian's duty. It is meaningless for an unbeliever; indeed it is an impossibility for him. But when anyone receives the gospel, receives Christ as Saviour, it is essential that he should follow the example of Christ. He has become a Christian, and he asks 'How am I, as a Christian, to live? And the answer is: look at Christ, be like Him'. Clearly, there is a vast difference between trying to follow the example of Christ before receiving Him as Saviour and doing so after the work of grace has been wrought in the soul. For in the economy of God, the whole purpose of redemption is that we might be conformed to the image of His Son, that the example of Christ might be wrought in us by the Holy Spirit.

2:21-25

The fact, however, that God alone by His Spirit that can make us Christlike does not absolve us from the personal responsibility of following Christ as our example for living. We may not ever say, 'Why ask me to follow His example, if it is only God who can make me like Him?' The answer to that is, 'Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure (Phil 2:13). Indeed, the whole discipline of the life of sanctification lies just here, for it is on the basis of what Christ has wrought for us, and by His Spirit wrought in us, that we can be, and must be, like Him. We must, in fact, be the persons God has made us in the death and resurrection of His Son. And in the business of being that, our great Example is Christ. Therefore, all that can be, and is to be said, about Christ our Example, presupposes having come to terms with the atoning and reconciling work of Christ in His death and resurrection (which is what Peter himself indicates in the verses that follow 21).

2:21-25

All that we have said about the example of Christ is equally true when we consider our Lord's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (which is another fruitful area of misunderstanding for many). For the Sermon, which so many take as the heart of the gospel, was never meant to be a way of salvation, and when it is so taken, it is completely misunderstood. Taken by itself, as a gospel, it simply leads men to despair. This is Paul's point in Rom 8:3, in the words "What the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God (has done), in sending His Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, to condemn sin in the flesh that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit". The significance of this makes it clear that it is hopeless to take Christ as an example, simply as an ethical inspiration - this is a work of law - and the law cannot do it. But once receive the Christ to Whom the law leads us, once be touched by the infinite virtue of His death and resurrection, then the fulfilling of the righteousness of the law in us - that is, the outworking of the example of Christ in our lives - becomes gloriously and increasingly possible. Indeed, this is the whole purpose of redemption. But there is one further consideration that needs to be looked at to complete the picture, and it comes into focus when we ask the question: what is the precise relation between the law and the example of Christ?" We sometimes speak of 'living by law', living by the example of Christ', 'living by conscience'. What do we mean by these terms? We shall turn to these issues in the next note.

2:21-25

The answer to the questions asked at the end of the previous note is as follows. Since God made man in His own image, and for fellowship with Him, that image in man would in ordinary circumstances have been sufficient to guide him in all matters of conduct. Man would have 'lived by conscience', and lived truly and adequately, for conscience is God's monitor in the soul. But sin entered the world, and man fell, and that fall affected every aspect of his existence, including conscience. And since in the fall the image of God in man was defaced, which meant that conscience was no longer an infallible guide, God gave the Law. And, once again, it was the character of God that was expressed in the Law as it was in the image in which he had originally made man. This is what He is like - holy, wise, true, and pure - and this is what men are to be. But since - as Paul says in Rom 8:3 - the law cannot save in that it is weak through the flesh; God revealed Himself supremely in Christ. And again, in Christ, the character of God is expressed ('He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father') - this is what He is like, and this is what He wants us to be like. Finally, therefore, in the gospel, and in the establishment of the new covenant in Christ, God undertakes to write His laws in our minds and hearts - again the expression of His character, and of what He wants us to be like - but now He does it Himself through the mystery of the indwelling Christ - 'Christ in you, the hope of glory'.

To sum up. This much is clear: measuring up to the example of Christ is not a possibility for the natural man at all, but only to the new man in Christ, when we 'walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit' (Rom 8:4). and this means saying 'No' to the old man, and 'Yes' to God; it means to die to sin and live unto God. And here is the fundamentally important sense in which Christ is our example: He is our example in death, before He is our example in life. It is there first that we must follow Him, and not until we take this seriously will the example of Christ have any real meaning for us. For this is what it means to be His.

3:1-7

As we continue our studies in 1Peter it is important for us to realise - and this is the point of the 'Likewise' in 1 - that in what the Apostle says now in these verses continues the theme of submission which he began in 2:13, and which he has applied as a general principle to mark the lives of believers. First of all, this is applied to our attitude to lawfully appointed authority over us (in 13-17), then to the relationship between servants and masters (in 18ff), pointing out in the course of his teaching that Christ is our Example in this, submitting Himself totally and without reserve to the good and perfect will of God for His life. It was this latter reference that led Peter into the wonderful unfolding of the principle of submission that lies at the heart of our Lord's giving of Himself for our sins (21 ff). He was, as Paul so beautifully puts it in Phil 2:5 ff, 'obedient unto death even the death of the cross'. It is important for us, therefore, to realise the flow of Peter's teaching at this point, and to see that the submission of wives to their husbands is a further example of the grace of submission that he lays so thoroughly and fundamentally at the heart of true Christian behaviour. We could go so far as to say that unless we do realise this, we will be at a loss to understand the force of Peter's teaching, which is that this principle of submission has to apply to every aspect of Christian living and is to be at the heart of every department of our lives. Now, in the earlier verses on submission, Peter has maintained that obedience to the whole will and purpose of God for mankind represents His true way of living, and that in so living we attain our true stature in His sight. It is clear that this has important and critical implications for believers, and we will continue to discuss this in the next note.

3:1-7

The apostle has said that submission to lawfully constituted authority, whether in society in general or in the case of servants to masters, is an injunction of God, and that it applies to good and bad alike. This injunction stands, and is valid without modification. When controversy arises about oppressive rulers and cruel masters, what we have to say is that an injunction of God is an injunction of God, but it is not the only injunction of God. There are others, as for example Acts 5:29, which makes Peter say "We ought to obey God rather than men". And when we cannot, for Christian conscience' sake obey authority, then it is not only more important to obey God rather than men, it is infinitely more important. This is valid in other realms of human activity also, in the case of servants and masters and also in that of home and personal relationships and marriage. It requires to be recognised that it is in the fulfilment of this obedience and submission that we become ourselves in the best and truest sense, for in so doing we become, and attain, our truest humanity, and the truest realisation of personality. The bit in the horse's mouth is what enables it to become itself in the truest sense, with all its powers channelled and disciplined so as to enable it to be the best that it can be. To be sure, this is an emotive subject, especially in today's climate, when it has become the fashion to lampoon the apostle Paul as the originator of the chauvinistic attitude (expressed in 1 Corinthians and in the Pastoral epistles), and brand him as a woman hater and therefore scarcely a reliable teacher on this subject. But this will not do, for Peter also says such things, and this should make thoughtful people pause before invalidating the apostolic teaching on such grounds. We should bear in mind Peter's purpose in writing this epistle - to encourage believers under pressure to stand firm and not stumble and fall. And this means that obedience and submission to the Word of God is one of the ways in which that steadfastness can be established.

3.1-7

We turn now to the subject of relationships within marriage, in relation to the problem of husband and wife unequally yoked together -a Christian woman married to a man who is an unbeliever. But we need to recognise that Peter is speaking of a situation in which both parties were originally heathen, and then after marriage the wife hears the gospel and is brought to Christ (it is not a situation in which a believing woman knowingly marries an unbeliever. Scripture is elsewhere clear about this: it is forbidden, 'be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers', as Paul says in 2 Cor 6:14. The Scriptures do not hold out any assurance that the unbelieving husband, in this latter circumstance will be brought to faith. Many Christian believers have come to grief in this way, and have lived through years of distress and pain because they have assumed that somehow it would all work out in the end). The situation envisaged, then, is the same as in 2:13 ff and 2:18. Even with unjust rulers and with froward masters the Christian duty is submission, and here also, even with a difficult partner, wifely submission is enjoined. What Peter is asking for is obedience to the Divinely ordained order and arrangement as between husband and wife. The natural and spiritual order is that the husband is the head of the wife, and this is undoubtedly the teaching of Scripture. Equality of the sexes is not a biblical conception; but to say this is not to imply inferiority of women to men, and this is not what either Peter or Paul has in view. There is equality of dignity, and in dignity between the sexes, and in this sense Paul can say "there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, bond nor free". But there is differentiation in function between men and women. Marriage is a partnership, it is true, but in any partnership, decisions have to be made, and inevitably, where they may be a difference of opinion whose opinion is to be authoritative? Scripture says, the man's. Now, not to spend too much time on this subject, we may content ourselves with saying that, according to Peter, the more the Holy Spirit is at work, the more womanly and feminine she will be, and the more naturally she will not only be, but also want to be submissive to man in the sense that Peter means here.

3:1-7

The situation envisaged in 1 ff is that of a woman who has come to Christ and become a believer after she has married an unbeliever, being before marriage an unbeliever herself. She is now, naturally, concerned for his salvation; but he reacts against the gospel and refuses to come to church. What then is she to do? God's will is to bless both partners in a marriage in the 'one flesh' that He has made, so she is encouraged to believe for his salvation. He can, Peter says, be saved 'without the Word' - that is, without coming under its sound in a church service, but rather by her showing forth in her life the grace of Christ, by her 'meek and quiet spirit', which is in the sight of God 'of great price'. Peter's emphasis in 3-6 on what may be called 'decorum in dress and deportment' must not be misunderstood. It is the principle involved, not any particular expression of it that needs to be grasped. As Calvin says, "Peter did not intend to condemn every sort of ornament, but the evil of vanity. Fashions change, but principles do not'. Becoming and modest dress is not the same as dowdy dress. Elegance and smartness are quite compatible with modesty and seemliness. As often as not it is not the garment, but the person who wears it, that is the problem. That is sufficient thought for one day!

3:1-7

Before we leave this passage we need to look at what is said in 7 about men folk. Men are enjoined to dwell with womankind 'according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife'. This should be taken along with Paul's words in Eph 5, "Husbands love your wives as Christ also loved the Church". It is safe to say that words have seldom been more substantially misunderstood than these, both by husbands and by wives. What we need to recognise is that the 'obedience' that wives give is something that is given to the Lord, rather than to their husbands, as the expression of their submission to Him and not to them, and as an offering of love to Him; and husbands had better not forget this, for when they take it as their right, they are prostituting Scripture, and robbing God of what is rightfully His. They need to remember the apostolic injunction, "Husbands love your wives as Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself for it" This means to treat them as Christ treats all who are His children - in tenderness, compassion and love. As C.S. Lewis says,

"The husband is the head of the wife just in so far as he is to her what Christ is to the Church. He is to love her as Christ loved the Church - read on - and gave his life for her (Eph 5:25). This headship, then, is most fully embodied not in the husband we should all wish to be but in him whose marriage is most like a crucifixion; whose wife receives most and gives least, is most unworthy of him, is - in her own mere nature - least lovable. For the Church has no beauty but what the Bridegroom gives her; he does not find, but makes her, lovely. The chrism of this terrible coronation is to be seen not in the joys of any man's marriage but in its sorrows, in the sickness and sufferings of a good wife or the faults of a bad one, in his unwearying care of his inexhaustible forgiveness."

3:7

Peter's words, 'heirs together of the grace of life' invite us to pause at this point in the epistle to say something about 'boy-girl' relationships. We should note well how Peter describes such relationships: there is a sense in which, if we cannot honestly think of such a relationship in terms of being 'heirs', and 'of the grace of life' it is questionable whether it is right at all for a Christian. There is a great need today to use the touchstone of Scripture to challenge a whole range of assumptions that are taken as self-evident and impossible of contradiction, but which are nevertheless simply false, cutting right across the whole concept of absolute values that do not change. We need to begin where our Lord invites us to begin in these matters. In an important passage in Mark's Gospel (10:1 ff) we find our Lord dealing with a question on marriage and divorce that He was asked by the Pharisees. Jesus began His answer by asking them a question, "What did Moses command you?" There is great significance in this for in effect He asked them, 'What saith the Scripture?' This is the touchstone for us all: "What is the scriptural position in these matters?" If, as the Westminster Confession of Faith insists, that the Scriptures are the supreme rule in faith and life, then our first task must be to elicit scriptural principles for true and dependable guidelines to life. And when Peter stresses the issue of submission and obedience he raises the question of whether we, as Christians, are going to be directed by Scripture or by the prevailing attitudes in society today. This is a very big challenge for the young generation, who should have all our sympathy in the problems that they face, especially since it is certain that they face problems today that young people of earlier generations never had to face. That is the first point; and there is another, equally important, which we shall turn to in the next note.

3:7

The second point arises from our Lord's reference in Mark to what God had done 'at the beginning'. This is even clearer in Matthew's account of this discussion (19:1ff). What Jesus did was to go back to the original order of creation, and in the discussion that ensued, He went on to speak the remarkable word about some being eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. What He said bears witness to the fact that although marriage is of the order of creation and therefore it is natural to suppose that it is something basic and natural for human life, nevertheless, marriage is still a gift, that may not as a matter of course be assumed. It may be withheld. It is withheld from some. Also, it may be waived in the higher interests in the kingdom of God. In any case, being a gift, it is a privilege, not a right; and it is always safer and healthier to be thinking of responsibilities rather than of rights, for we are bedevilled in modern society by people who demand rights, and forget about responsibilities in life. If we examine the creation narrative in Genesis we see that it was God Who initiated the proceedings so far as the first marriage was concerned. God gave Adam his wife. It was not Adam who sought her. It was God Who said, 'it is not good for man to be alone'. This underlines that it was a Divine gift; and if it is a gift, is it wise to be snatching it out of God's hand before He is pleased to bestow it? That is a point worth thinking about! One recalls the solemn word in the Psalms, "He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their souls". That is the story of many marriages. It is certainly possible to be too anxious to be married, and that leads to big trouble. Wait, then, until God is pleased to give!

3:8-16

The word 'Finally' in 8 indicates that Peter is at this point summing up his theme on submission. In doing so he underscores the note of submission once again: to be 'all of one mind' means and involves dying to one's own desires and self-regarding attitudes, as does the exhortation 'not rendering evil for evil or railing for railing', even if it means an experience, even a life, of suffering (14). This emphasis sums up what the apostle has been saying in the previous sections, where special aspects were under discussion, and can be read back into these sections as a commentary on them. But it is just as clear here as it was earlier that submission is certainly not to be regarded as a negative quantity but rather something positive and dynamic. What Peter is saying is this: on the one hand, not returning evil for evil does not mean 'not doing anything'. That would be negative; rather, we return positive things - compassion, love, pity, courtesy. On the other hand, we are to recognise that this is a calling for us. We are called to bless, and be a blessing. This is part of the priesthood of all believers, for part of the priest's duty was to come out from the Temple and bless the people. This opens up a wonderfully rich concept. By being what we are meant to be - entering into our true destiny, entering into 'our own', so to speak, in society, at work, in the home - by being submissive, we fulfil our calling to be a blessing to men.

3:8-16

This is not only a challenge, but also an opportunity, to Christians to outlive their fellows and demonstrate a more excellent way. For all too long there has been an almost servile acquiescence to the standards of society: the cry is 'Everybody's doing it', and with it the tacit assumption that the Christian way is really 'not on' as a serious possibility. It surely represents a failure of nerve on the part of believers when - openly or tacitly - we say that the world's pressure is simply too great to be any longer withstood. But the word that rings out here is: rise to the challenge! It is a great time to be a Christian, to be alive. Would it not be infinitely better, instead of wringing our hands in distress and despair, to believe that we have come to the kingdom for such a time as this? Rise to the challenge! Give credence to the attractiveness of such a life, the sheer quality of living - robust, healthy, wholesome, a life in God's hand, an instrument for Him to do something within His world. The grace of life! What a concept! This is why we are to think big and stop being on the defensive in our testimony. We have so much on our side, and so much to make us positive. Indeed, the Lord is on our side: we need not fear what man can do to us. Peter is quoting from Ps 34:12-16 here, basing his instruction on Scripture itself, spiritualizing the Psalmist's words and referring them to quality of life rather than literal length of days. The Psalmist's words in 10 are very striking, 'He that will love life, and see good days....' Peter means the kind of life that a man will love and find immensely attractive. And what is more, the kind of life that others will find attractive also. This is what a life truly lived in submission and obedience to the good and acceptable and perfect will of God can prove to be, for it shows forth Christ in His grace and charm, and it has a great drawing power, magnifying the Saviour, as the telescope magnifying the distant star, bringing it nearer, and enabling people to see Him more clearly and truly. What a prospect!

3:8-16

We should pause to consider how graphic and compelling a picture of the Christ life that the qualities Peter mentions in 8-13 give us -compassion, love, pity, courtesy, refraining from evil and guile, and doing and following good. These are the graces and the fruits of the Spirit; but they are often, frankly, somewhat at a discount in the lives of some Christians today. We certainly think that there is a place for militant Christianity, and for earnestly contending for the truth, but it would be sad if this were to drive the sweet graces of compassion, pity and courtesy from our lives. We do not need to be objectionable in order to be faithful to the gospel, and we need to remember that the offence of the Cross is not quite the same as the offensiveness of the Christian. Perhaps the gentler graces are considered too weak to deal with ugly situations but it still stands written that God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty. At all events, to be shown compassion and courtesy and pity might mean, for some, to see Christ.

We need also to say something about the thought-provoking words in 15 in its twofold thrust, a) 'sanctify the Lord God in your hearts' (AV), and b) 'ready always to give an answer...'. As to the first of these, Peter is quoting from Isa 8:12, 13 (which see). There is no doubt that the fear of the unbelieving king of Judah - Ahaz - is the fear that he and his people had of the Assyrian monarch Sennacarib, who at that time was ominously threatening Judah, a fear which was tempting them to seek forbidden alliances with the idolatrous kingdom of Syria and apostate Israel, north of them; and the prophet calls on them to trust in Jehovah, the Lord of hosts, to fear Him and obey His voice whatever the hazards that such obedience might bring and not in sheer fear and terror turn away in apostacy from the Lord and His truth. It was, in other words, an exhortation not to join in the general panic, but to stand firm.

3:8-16

Some translations of Peter's words in 15 read: 'Sanctify Christ as God in your hearts' - the RSV has 'in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord' - and this makes it mean that language used of God in the Old Testament is explicitly used here of Christ. And this is clearly an assumption of the Deity of Christ. But more: Isaiah goes on - as Peter does not - to add 'And he shall be as a sanctuary.' We may wonder why Peter does not quote these additional words. Perhaps it was that he had already spoken of the gospel being a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence, in 2:7,8, and would assume that his readers would recognise Isaiah's words well enough to enable them to continue the quotation without his mentioning it again. But what in fact Peter does add - which is not present in Isaiah - is the exhortation to be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you::: 'Be ready always' are words that were used of the official arraignment of Christians, and of their interrogation at a formal trial, such as Paul experienced in his last days (see 2 Tim 4:1-6), but it may be a more general reference here, in terms of speaking for Christ as occasion offered. As Calvin puts it, we really sanctify Christ as Lord "when neither fear nor shame hinders us from making a true profession of our faith".

3:8-16

Commentators think that Peter is alluding to his own failure when he denied his Lord. And, of course, the denial took place because he failed to enthrone Christ in his heart as Lord and King. He was unexpectedly asked to 'Give a reason for the hope that was in him' and he was not ready! It would seem then that ordinary conversation, rather than official enquiry is what is in view. A believer needs to remember that anybody at any time may ask him to explain and justify his Christian confidence. But we should also note that the exhortation is not to give an answer but to be ready to do so. It may not always be politic or appropriate to speak. There is, as Scripture says, a time to be silent, as well as a time to speak. And Peter has spoken about the unbelieving husband being won without the Word: This puts witnessing in perspective. Too often it is assumed that it is always right and necessary to be witnessing vocally. Peter thinks otherwise. Live in such a way, he means, that you will prompt people to ask you questions concerning your faith. Then, when you do speak, let it be with meekness and fear - and be more concerned to win your man than win your argument. The spirit in which a statement is made may matter more than its content. Only if people are attracted (or at least not put off) by the former will they give a hearing to the latter.

3:18-4:6

These verses bring us to one of the most problematic and controversial parts of the New Testament and contain statements that do not admit of any easy resolution. It will be necessary to spend some time on them, in order to ascertain as best we may what they mean and what they have to say to us. Two things must be said, however, at the outset: on the one hand, we need to recognise that 19-22 form a kind of parenthesis, and do not belong to the mainstream of Peter's argument and theme - the death of Christ -which is picked up again in 4:1 as he relates the Cross to the lives we are to live in His sight. On the other hand, we must first of all concentrate on the glorious statement about the meaning of Christ's death in 18 to which we must now turn:

We have frequently, over the years, sought to expound the meaning of Christ's atoning death, and it may be useful here to sum up the things that have been said about it. The Letter to the Hebrews begins with the sublime words, "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners, spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son" - that is to say, there were different strands of revelation, none complete in themselves, but all pointing beyond themselves, and finally culminating in Christ. This is how God revealed Himself to man: And consequently, from earliest times, there was a conscious search, God-given and God-inspired, for something to ease the conscience and give men peace. For in God's dealings with men, and in His revelation of Himself in all His holiness to His people, there developed a deep and deepening consciousness of sin, and of the guilty past: In the Old Testament era there were two great attempts at solving this problem of the past, complimentary to one another, and both finding their fruition in Christ: the priestly system, and the prophetic ministry. We shall consider these in the next note.

3:18

As to the priestly system, no one could fail to be impressed by the elaborate and intricate sacrificial cultus unfolded in the Old Testament. Its message, in brief, may be summed up as follows: Sacrifice is the remedy for sin - "without shedding of blood is no remission": The taint and defilement of sin is removed, and its penalty - the penalty of the broken law - paid, by sacrifice. The particular insights afforded by the sacrificial system were these: it recognized that remedial action concerning the putting away of sin, namely reconciliation, was something that God had to do, something outside man himself, which man had to identify himself: it also recognized that God requires not only correct conduct from His creatures, but also the absolute devotion of man's self. Hence the concept of sacrifice, the giving of that devotion in death. The very fact, however, that reconciliation must come from outside and beyond man himself leads to, and did lead to, the possibility of abuse. And abuse came. The people of God multiplied sacrifices, but their hearts remained far from Him: and so God raised up His prophets to thunder against this corruption and the great and supreme note in the prophetic preaching was ethic-al. They called for a change of head: "What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God" (Mic 6:8) There was no basic contradiction - as some have supposed - between the message of the prophets and the priestly emphasis: rather, what the prophets proclaimed was the recognition of something the sacrificial cultus itself implied, but which in its abuse had become obscured, namely the spotless lamb: But in this recognition, the prophetic insight goes beyond reconciliation, and asserts that reconciliation can be based only on atonement. What God requires of men, what can satisfy His holy nature - and therefore what alone can atone for sin - is righteousness (Mic 6:8) This is why Peter speaks of Christ suffering as the Just One for the unjust.

3:18

The dilemma presented by both the sacrificial cultus and the prophetic ministry - both pointing beyond themselves since neither could present an answer - is met and solved in Christ. For, on the one hand, in the death He died the sacrifice for sin comes from outside man, for He makes reconciliation as God: it was God in Christ who reconciled the world unto Himself (2 Cor 5:19). And on the other hand, in that same death, the atonement is made by man, for He stood in our place as man. And in that death not only was the penalty for sin paid, but also -in His spotless life - He offered to God what He most desired, repairing the injury to the Divine majesty. This was the heart of Christ's suffering - it was not suffering as we know it, or death as we know it, that He endured, but suffering and death as the wages of sin and therefore as separation from God: He tasted death for every man. This is what He endured, for this is the ultimate issue of sin, to be cast out from the presence of God: The cry from the Cross, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" is the ultimate in the biblical idea of substitution: it was our condemnation and judgment that put Him outside the gates of God. There was no answer to that terrible cry -there could be no answer - for that is what hell means: And in the terrible darkness He paid the price of sin, and in that nameless agony our pardon was accomplished and sealed in blood: and a door was opened and a way back to the Father's house displayed for all to see. Nay, more, a sentence was lifted and cancelled, and a reinstatement proclaimed, so that "now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of the Cross" (Eph 2:13).

3:19; 4:6

We return now to the problematic and controversial interpretations placed on 3:19 and 4:6, verses which at least appear to be referring to the same thing. Among the questions that arise are: who are these spirits that are referred to in 3:19? And what is meant by the words 'in prison'? Are these the same beings as are spoken of as 'them that are dead' in 4:6? Even to ask these questions, let alone answer them, is to realise that we are up against some very unusual, even obscure, problems: and it is hardly surprising that some widely differing interpretations have been given. Some think, for example, that it is possible to find in these two verses an indication that an opportunity to hear the gospel is given to men after their death. Two things, however, may be said about this: first of all, such an interpretation, as Stibbs says in his Tyndale Commentary, "is not clearly demanded by the actual statements" and still less is it supported by their contexts: Nor does an idea of such far-reaching consequence find support elsewhere in the Bible. Not only so - and this is the second point - it is explicitly denied by our Lord Himself, in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16, where it is clearly indicated that there is a finality about death that makes such a possibility impossible to be countenanced. The words in the parable 'there is a great gulf fixed' make it inconceivable that any second chance could ever be possible. But it is easier to decide what the words do not and cannot mean: we shall discuss in the next note the differing interpretations that have been suggested.

3:19; 4:6

Two main lines of interpretation have been given. On the one hand, there are those who take 'the spirits' to refer to disembodied spirits of men now dead. On the other hand, there are those who take 'spirits' to refer to angelic spirits, fallen angels. Neither of these is free from difficulties. As to the 'disembodied spirits of men now dead' idea some think Peter means that our Lord, quickened in spirit went in a disembodied state between His death and resurrection to the place of departed spirits and preached to those spirits who were formerly disobedient when God's longsuffering waited in the days of Noah. But this raises difficulties similar in nature to those already mentioned, for it seems to imply that the gospel was preached to the dead in Hades and that this therefore implies the idea of a second chance after death. It is the general unthinkableness of this that has led many commentators to seek some other alternative. Others think that what is meant is that Christ preached in spirit to those unbelieving spirits while they were men, and before they died - that is preached to them in and through Noah. This would mean taking the words 'by the spirit' in 18 as referring to the Holy Spirit. This has been a widely held view. It was certainly Christ's Spirit that pleaded with the men of Noah's time through Noah's preaching. But it still needs to be asked what the point is of referring to this in the context before us: Would not a period after the death of Christ be more likely as an interpretation here? Or perhaps, we would need to translate it thus: "By which He also had previously gone and preached to the spirits (now) in prison." Difficulties certainly abound. And the suggestions raise as many problems as they answer.

3:19; 4:6

On the other hand, there are those who take 'spirits' to mean 'angelic beings', that is, 'fallen angels'. Stibbs maintains that this understanding fits in with the linguistic usage of Scripture, and with the reference to the days of Noah (cf Gen 6:1-4, 2 Pet 2:4,5), and points out that the word pneumata, alone and without qualification, is not thus used anywhere else in the Bible to describe departed spirits. Stibbs also quotes Selwyn as saying that 'The fact that the word pneumata is used absolutely of supernatural beings, that Jewish tradition spoke of such beings as disobeying God and transgressing their due order and being punished by imprisonment, that the period of this transgression was always reckoned as immediately prior to the Flood; and that these beliefs are undoubtedly alluded to 2 Pet 2 and Jude 6,7 - these facts tell strongly in favour of this interpretation here:" The idea would then be the proclamation of His triumph to these rebellious and imprisoned evil spirits. There is some ground for thinking this is a right interpretation, for we may look at Paul's words in Eph 3:10, where the apostle, speaking of preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ, goes on to add, "To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be made known by the church the manifold wisdom of God" - that is to say, a witness being made to cosmic beings – i.e. angelic powers - concerning the triumph and victory of Christ in His death and resurrection.

3:9; 4:6

The truth is, that no interpretation of these problematic verses is free from difficulty, and we should be careful of being over-dogmatic, or over-confident and assertive of a particular view, in something for which there is no unmistakable, unequivocal or obvious meaning or interpretation. But what we may add is that the point of the reference may have some bearing on coming to a correct interpretation and one can hardly doubt that it is the triumphant consequences of Christ's atoning work and victory that is in view. This seems to add weight to the interpretation we have just given as likely, in a way that alternative interpretations do not, since there does seem a lack of point in them. And so, cautiously, and indeed almost tentatively, we opt for the one that suggests that it is Christ's proclamation of His victory over all dark powers that is at the heart of everything. This seems to be corroborated by a phrase in a not too dissimilar passage - Phil 2 -which also speaks of the extent of Christ's victory: "God hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth "that is in the nether regions, in the dark underworld of spirits - all alike confessing His Lordship.

3:19; 4:6

As to the other verse, in 4:6 Matthew Henry, the Puritan commentator, says, "For this cause was the gospel preached to all the faithful of old, who are now dead in Christ, that thereby they may be taught and encouraged to bear the unrighteous judgments and persecutions which the rage of men might put upon them in the flesh, but might live in the Spirit unto God". But he also suggests an alternative understanding of 4:6, to take the words "that they might be judged according to men in the flesh" in a spiritual sense, thus: "The gospel was preached to them, to judge them, condemn them, and reprove them, for the corruption of their natures, and the viciousness of their lives, while they lived after the manner of the heathen or the mere natural man; and that, having thus mortified their sins, they might live according to God, a new and spiritual life". And taken thus, the message would be that the mortifying of our sins and living to God are the expected effects of the gospel preached to us. And God will certainly reckon with all those who have had the gospel preached to them, but without these good effects produced by it: God is ready to judge all those who have received his gospel in vain. What follows in the remainder of the chapter does tend to harmonise with the point that Matthew Henry makes, in the reference to the fiery trial that tries believers, and the reproach that comes on them for the sake of the name of Christ. And, importantly, the chapter concludes with the words (4:19), "Let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to Him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator".

3:19-22

Something requires to be said before we leave this passage, about Peter's statements on baptism. The reference to baptism arises from the statement the Apostle makes in relation to Noah and the Flood, using this as an illustration of New Testament doctrine. Rightly understood, what Peter says does not so much involve controversy here; rather it raises a genuine difficulty in the interpretation of the nature of his metaphor. It would only be controversial if we really thought that he was claiming that water baptism saves. But of course he does not say this, indeed he explicitly disclaims it "not the washing away of the filthiness of the flesh, but..." As to the illustration Peter employs, Alford says: 'The persons and the things compared must be carefully borne in mind: the few in Noah's day were saved by water: We also are saved by water. The anti-type of the water on which the Ark floated, saving its inmates, is the water of baptism. But as ours is a spiritual, not a material, rescue, so the anti-type is not the washing of our flesh by that water, but a far nobler thing, the cleanness and purity of our inner consciousness before God.' Stibbs is even clearer and more decisive in what he says: "Just as the Flood spoke of a judgment which those in the Ark were saved from and saved by, in order to enjoy a new world, so the water of Christian baptism speaks of the death that fell on Christ, a death due to sinners, which believers into Christ are both saved from and saved by, and through which they enter into the enjoyment of new life. In the fulfilment of this pattern in the gospel, it is the resurrection of Christ which enables believers to share in this new life". And Peter's parenthesis in the heart of 21 makes it clear that is not water baptism, but Spirit baptism that does this.

4:1-6

In 4:1 Peter returns once more to his central theme, the Cross of Christ, in what he says, relating the Cross to the lives we are to live in His sight. The link with what Peter has said in the parenthesis that has occupied us in the last few notes lies in the phrase 'the answer of a good conscience' A good conscience is possible for us only a) through the work of Christ, by which our consciences are purged from dead works to serve the living God; and b) through consecration of life. "If we walk in the light, as He is in the light..." - a life in which there is nothing hidden, where the light in us corresponds to and harmonies with the life that is in the Father, a light which matches the moral rectitude of the character of God. We go on, then, from that point to elaborate what has been said, and in this Peter brings us back to his emphasis on the Cross. It seems, does it not, that the Cross was a magnet, a lode stone, ever drawing the Apostle closer to its virtue and power: And what we have in these verses at the opening of this new chapter is the theme of what it means to be a Christian'. The first thing that Peter tells us, by implication, is that the Cross of Christ demands that we shall no longer live to the lusts of men, but to the will of God. This is not something peculiar to Peter, but something he shares with the Apostle Paul as may be seen not only in such references as 1 Cor 6:19,20 - 'ye are not your own, for ye are bought with a price therefore...' but also, and supremely, in Phil 2/3, where Paul, in a passage that echoes a number of Peter's statements here: For not only does Paul say, in Phil 2:5, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus....", as Peter also says here, "Arm yourselves likewise with the same mind....", but he also shows, in Phil 3:7 ff how having the mind of Christ 'works out' in a man's practical Christian experience.

4:1-6

What the Apostle Paul writes to the Philippians in 2:5 ff may be fairly summed up by saying that Christ, in turning His back on the glory He had before all worlds with the Father, 'counted all things loss' in the interests of a world's redemption and what he goes on to say of his own Christian experience reflects that perfectly.

'What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ: Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ....'

This is what it means to have the mind of Christ, to 'arm oneself with the same mind' as His. This is what happens when a man really regards himself as being 'not your own but bought with a price'. This indeed is what Peter himself says earlier in the epistle, in 2:24, where he speaks of the effect of Christ's death for our sins as being dead unto sins we should live unto righteousness... This also is 'living unto Him', for the cross lays upon us an inescapable obligation. Nowhere has this irresistible and irrevocable claim of the Divine love been expressed more movingly than in Isaac Watt's glorious words,

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small,
Love so amazing, so Divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

4:1-6

Peter underlines three considerations belonging to the demand that the death of Christ lays upon us. The first of these is that the Divine love lays upon us an inescapable demand for a decisive break with the past. This is made clear by Peter twice in as many verses, in the words 'no longer in 2, and in the phrase 'in time past' in 3. Part of the glorious offer of the gospel is that 'them past will be forgotten', but the one stipulation is that 'the past must become past. It is not so much that 'turning from the past' is a condition of salvation as that to come to Christ is to turn to Him, and turning to Him necessarily means turning from sin. The second consideration is that the nature of the past - the will of the Gentiles and the lusts of men - is set over against the will of God. These, in fact, are simply expressions of 'our own will'. As Isaiah puts it, 'We have turned every one to his own way'. This is the real essence of sin, and its evil root. When we trace 'sins' to their real origin, we realise that it is something within us which clamours for my desires to be satisfied, my lusts to be gratified, my way to be taken, my will to be done. In some, this will obviously lead to immortality and debauchery, but in others it may take a much more respectable turn, as William Temple, the late Archbishop of Canterbury, once said:

"A great deal too much attention has been given to sins as compared with sin: And so, if it happens that I cannot think of any particular wrong thing that I have done, or any particular good thing I might have done and neglected to do, yet still I must ask God to be merciful to me a sinner, for I share the common sin of mankind, and make myself in a host of ways the centre of the world - I think like a man and not like God:"

Well might the Apostle Paul say, in 2 Cor 5:15, 'He died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves', but 'unto Him who died for them, and rose again'.

4:1-6

The third consideration in Peter's words underlines (in 4) the hardening power of sin. Peter says that men from whom the believer withdraws 'think it strange' that he should no longer 'run with them to the same excess of riot', now that he has found Christ and new life in Him. The truth is that the ungodly have gone with the current for so long that when a man dares to stand out from it in an attitude of solemn dedication to God, they think he has turned queer and they malign him. The truth is, there is a progression evident in the life of sin. First of all, conscience may be stricken when a man sins but as sin is persisted in conscience can become seared and may finally be silenced. Such a progression is mentioned more than once in Scripture - one sees it in the life and experience of Herod the king; one sees it also in the story of Lot, Abraham's nephew (Gen 13:10,12; 14:12); one sees it likewise in the opening psalm of the Psalter, in the progression of the verbs 'walketh.... standeth.... sitteth'. This is why such a decisive break with the past is so necessary: it is very dangerous to traffic with sin. Its poisonous atmosphere always corrupts. But if the Cross lays an inexorable demand upon us to live no longer to the lusts of men, but to the will of God, it also is our enabling so to live. For it is not possible, from the New Testament point of view, to speak of sharing in the sufferings of Christ without also our sharing in His rising again. And when by faith our position as crucified with Christ is matched by our condition experimentally, as crucified with Him, then Christ, who is made Head over all things to the Church, gives us the victory, in the power of His resurrection. The way of the Cross is not a cramped, negative thing, but one that leads into the broad tableland of Divine liberty and freedom such as we could scarcely dream or conceive,

I lay in dust life's glory dead,
And from the ground there blossoms red
Life that shall endless be.

4:7-11

The emphasis at the beginning of these verses is a characteristic one, indeed, it would be fair comment to say that Peter unfolds all his teaching in this epistle in the light of 'the end of all things' (7). At the beginning of the epistle he speaks of the living hope set before all Christians (1:3) and of the inheritance reserved in heaven for us (1:4) and of the salvation ready to be revealed in the last time (1:5), and of faith being found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ (1:7), referring to believers as 'strangers and pilgrims', with their real life in the world to come (2:11). And now, at this point, he speaks explicitly of the coming end of all things, and in this solemn light of eternity we are enjoined to live holy lives. Here, then, is the significant 'hedging-in' of the believer's life: on the one hand, the death and resurrection of Christ, conditioning it throughout, and on the other hand, the reality of the end-time and its imminence laying upon believers an inexorable challenge to holiness of life. Those familiar with Peter's second epistle will know that he is even more explicit and insistent on this theme there, as witness 2 Pet 3:9-14, with its twofold insistence on holy conversation and godliness (11) and of being 'without spot and blameless' (14). Furthermore, this is not something peculiar to Peter's teaching, for it is the common emphasis throughout the New Testament. We shall look at these issues in more detail in the Notes that follow.

4:7-11

First of all, we have to look at the question that inevitably arises: were the apostles mistaken in their belief in the imminence of Christ's coming and the end of the world, and is it likely to be any nearer now? Is the long delay what made people ask, in 2 Pet 3:4, "where is the promise of His coming?" Something requires to be said about this for it presents a real problem. Indeed, Peter himself recognised this in his second epistle and gives us a twofold answer in 2 Pet 3:8,9: a) 'the Lord is not slack concerning His promise but is longsuffering to usward...'; and b) the statement that 'one day is with the Lord as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day. There are several things here worth considering with all seriousness. On the one hand, there is the longsuffering of God, Who is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. Do we not think this is something very understandable? When one remembers how our Lord wept over Jerusalem in its continued impenitence, longing that men might be saved, when one recalls how Paul wrote to the Romans that he could wish himself accursed from Christ if only his fellow-countrymen might be saved, when one recalls the passion in the hearts of the apostles, ready to suffer shame and reproach, if only men might be saved, it must surely become credible that the Lord should delay His coming, that none destined for salvation should be lost forever. This serves to highlight in an impressive way what Peter says in 11,12 about the importance of holy conversation and godliness, 'looking for and hasting the coming of the day of God. A holy church, Peter means, will bring the end-time nearer because it will be an important and fruitful witness in drawing many to Christ and filling up the roll of God's elect.

4:7-11

Something more is still to be said, however, in relation to what Peter says about 'one day with the Lord being as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day': There are two ways of understanding the phrase 'at hand', not contradictory or mutually exclusive, but complementary. To use an illustration: if we asked a scientist in the electronics field to explain how a television works, he would begin by describing how the cathode ray tube picks up signals via the TV aerial from the broadcasting station and transmits those signals onto the surface of the tube and by a complex assortment of electronic gadgetry transforms this into a series of images on the screen. From one point of view this could be a highly technical but adequate explanation of how the thing works. On the other hand, however, if we were to ask someone from the production team in the television studio responsible for the programmes, he would describe something very different indeed, to do with actors, stage managers, script writers, camera men and so on, and he would paint a picture bearing no relation to cathode ray tubes and dipoles and aerials. Now, would it be possible for us to say, that the first is the real explanation, the second is not? Of course not: they are approaching the matter from an entirely different point of view: In their own field both are equally valid, because they are different kinds of descriptions: It is like this also in what the New Testament means when it says that our Lord's coming is at hand: It can hardly be controverted that sometimes the New Testament writers speak of our Lord's second coming as if it were about to take place at any moment, but also, that sometimes, as Jesus put it in one of his parables 'my Lord delayeth his coming': It is much too simplistic to come to the conclusion that quite simply the apostles were mistaken in supposing it would take place in their lifetime, and that the cynical people who asked Peter, "Where is the promise of His coming?" had a real point, after all: And for this reason: there may be two different standpoints from which the different emphases are made, both equally valid. It is the standpoint that is important. We shall explain what is meant by this in the next note.

4:7-11

From one standpoint we tend to think and speak of 'time' in linear terms – 'past', eternity, before time was, then the course of time and history as we know it, and then at the end of time, future' eternity. Nor can it be doubted that we are sometimes invited to think in this way by Scripture itself. The well-known words in Hebrews 9:27 "it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" are a good case in point. And in one sense, it is inevitable that we should think like this, for we are immersed in the 'time sequence' of life and can hardly do otherwise. But what if we should think of 'time' and the 'time-series' in the way a novelist thinks of the story he is writing. The novelist is outside the time-series he has created, and knows the end from the beginning, and the beginning from the end. It must surely be clear that God stands in that kind of relation to the 'story' He has created and clear also, therefore, that 'eternity' is not so much at the end of time, as all around it and consequently it is just as true to say that eternity is very near, and in a very real sense 'at hand' all the time, and could break in at any moment, just as the ocean could break in to a submarine, if the pressures within the submarine were to change adversely. If this be so then it is always true to say that 'the end of all things is at hand', for in the eyes of the Lord 'a thousand years are as one day and one day as a thousand years'. As we say, time is very relative.

4:7-11

The fact of the reality of the End has moral overtones and implications, as not only the New Testament as a whole but also what follows in 7a onwards makes plain, and as we may learn particularly from the parables of Jesus (particularly that of the talents and that of the pounds), and in Paul's emphasis in 1 Cor 9:27 on the dangers of becoming 'disqualified' or 'cast away'. What this means, therefore, is that we are making our future now, by the way we live. This is the significance of the injunctions that are given in these verses; and not to live like this carries its own penalty of disqualification, in which we will have in the end rendered ourselves incapable of receiving what God has stored up for those that love Him. Three things in particular are stressed in these verses, following the exhortation to be sober, watching unto prayer: love (8), hospitality (9), stewardship of the grace of God (10) - and all three need to be, and are, related to the gospel itself as 11 indicates: Here are the 'pounds' given to every believer (Lk 19:12 ff), in terms of basic commitment of responsibility, and they can be 'stewarded' whether by preaching or by ministering in the exercise of many other gifts: And, whatever the gift, it is to be suffused and directed by, and in, the spirit of love. The truth of the matter is that the sharing of love - disinterested love - can be done in acts and attitudes of caring to all, and in our homes (in hospitality) this can preach as powerfully as anything in the world. The mobilisation of Christian homes for the work of Christian witness is mandatory for all, and not simply a special few.

4-12-16

The fiery trial mentioned in these verses has often been misunderstood and misinterpreted, because it is so often taken out of context, and thought of in isolation. It is important for us to realise that what Peter says here flows naturally and inevitably from what he has said earlier in the chapter, and indeed throughout the epistle as a whole: For example, at the end of chapter 3, he has spoken about the sufferings of Christ; and at the beginning of ch: 4 he associates the believer with Christ's sufferings, as does Paul in his epistles and our Lord Himself, in his teaching following Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi: The Cross and the Christian are ever, and inseparably, linked together. It is in relation to this that Peter says all he does say in the rest of this chapter. The reference to the fiery trial therefore flows naturally, and indeed inevitably, from what Peter has just been saying. And since this is seen to be so we can at once say that he is thinking specifically of trials that come upon believers because of their Christian profession, and through their being faithful to Christ - and not - repeat not - to trials that come through the workings of a mysterious providence in our lives: It is of course recognised that suffering as the result of the workings of Divine providence - sickness, sorrow and suchlike - is a reality, and the Scriptures have much to teach about this; but that teaching is not in view here. Peter is specifically referring to sufferings which are incurred through being faithful to Christ and to one's Christian testimony. We must therefore grasp, first of all, that the words 'think it not strange' are not to be thought of in terms of some unlooked for or unexpected misfortune or tragedy, and still less do they warrant our taking them as any 'out of the blue' and sudden warning from on high, unrelated to anything in our Christian experience, as if God were hurling some sudden message to our trembling hearts. That is not how God works: He is our heavenly Father, and our Father's hand will never cause His child a needless tear.

4:12-16

The Tyndale commentary has an interesting and relevant comment on these verses:

"It has been aptly suggested that Gentile converts to Christ, as distinct from Jewish believers, would be particularly unused to persecution on account of their religion. Naturally, therefore, they would regard suffering consequent upon becoming Christians as a strange misfortune, wholly out of place, something which contradicted the promised blessings of the gospel."

This has something to say today to those who are brought to a profession of faith in Christ with a flimsy and often misleading notion that when you become a Christian 'everything in the garden will be lovely', and that all your problems will be solved. Not so: that is not the real point of the gospel. The joy of the Lord is a different kind of reality, having to do with the wonder of forgiveness and newness of life. It does not promise exemption from the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'; rather, it enables us to breast them and triumph over them. The sufferings of Christians in Peter's day were often great and terrible, and at times it seemed as if all hell was let loose upon the faithful band of believers. Today, the wheel is beginning to turn full circle, and Christians are again being called on to suffer for their faith by martyrdom, in China, in Iran, and elsewhere. But there are different kinds of suffering and persecution, and many who do not have to bear physical pain nevertheless suffer deeply, in their homes, at work, and among friends, for taking a true and faithful stand for Christ. It was common, before the fall of communism, in Eastern Europe for the cost of being a Christian to be the banning of any further education for the children of Christians, and their delegation to the lowest and meanest form of manual work. There are different pressures, other than physical suffering, for believers to bear.

4:12-16

There are several things to be said in relation to the costliness of Christian testimony. The first is that suffering (whether physical or otherwise) follows upon 'living to the will of God', because this means going against the current, the course of this world which is diametrically opposed to the Christian way. Any dead fish can float downstream, but it takes a live one to battle against the current. That is one indispensable mark of a genuine conversion. In the second place, suffering is inevitable because, with the end of all things at hand, Satan knows that 'his time is short', and unlooses violence and madness against Christ's church. The Scriptures rightly emphasise 'that in the last days perilous times shall come' and this underlines what many similar statements in the New Testament emphasise, namely that, the nearer the Day approaches, the more will be the volume of pressure on believers. In the third place, suffering is inevitable in the context of a faithful stewardship of the grace of God, by lip or by life. We can hardly suppose that it is going to be easy to live in terms of the words of the hymn

Lord speak to me, that I may speak
In living echoes of Thy tone.

Jesus said, "I came not to send peace but a sword". Look at the strife that Peter stirred up in Jerusalem by preaching the word of the gospel there - and, be it noted, it was religious men that did the persecuting. And it is sometimes like this today also. It is religious people who bring pressure to bear upon a minister of the gospel, who goes into a congregational situation with a true message of grace after generations of a dead and barren situation. It is a religious people, formal and orthodox and nominal in their adherence to the things of God, who put pressure upon members of their families who have a true experience of grace. This is the inevitable cost of being faithful to Christ and living to the will of God, and the man who has never experienced this may well question the reality of his profession of faith. It is not 'strange', but inevitable, that we should suffer for Christ's sake, and experience the fiery trial that comes to every believer.

4:12-16

That being so, certain things follow. In place of thinking it strange, and therefore being discouraged by it, it is rather a ground of rejoicing, as Peter indicates, and for the following reasons: for one thing we are thereby made partakers of Christ's sufferings (13). And this means fellowship with Him, something that is inexpressible in its sweetness. This will bear some quiet reflection - although it is not really something that can be explained, so much as experienced. When one thinks of our Lord's sufferings they were, from one point of view, dark and terrible, making Him shrink, as we may gather from His words in Gethsemane, 'Let this cup pass from Me'. Yet from another point of view, He said, 'The cup which My Father hath given Me, shall I not drink it?', and 'I delight to do Thy will, O My God'. He found delight in what He had to endure, in doing the Father's will. The will of God was a passion for Him, and it burned like a holy fire within His breast. We see this in the Transfiguration story, for there His delight in the Father's will and His love for Him became incandescent, burning Him up, so to speak, in a blaze of glory. And when we share His sufferings, in fellowship with Him, He brings us into a fellowship with Him in His delight in the Father's will. We are brought to drink at the secret fountain. This may be one of the things that the phrase 'the spirit of glory and of God' means (14), in terms of the glory that rested on Jesus on the Mount. But also - and this is even more awesome - it may refer to the Shekinah glory of the Old Testament, the distinctive mark of the Divine Presence. There is a manifestation of the Divine presence on lives that suffer for the sake of the Name. How very wonderful!

4:12-16

In all this that we have said, love is the key. It was because Christ loved the Father that He delighted in His will; and if we love the Saviour, we will also gladly suffer for His sake. And we will assuredly not be the losers for it. Here are some words written in the Foreword of a missionary book we once read:

"To all eternity we shall live and reign with Christ, but shall we ever be able to make sacrifices for Him again? When sin and pain and death are no more, and all tears are wiped away, shall we ever again have the privilege that is ours now of sharing the fellowship of His sufferings?"

Ah, to be confronted in glory with the crucified and glorified Saviour, and be asked "What hast thou suffered for Me", and to have to say, "Nothing, Lord" - that would be shame indeed! To have opted for an easier way (as Peter once did) is something we may learn to live with down here, but oh, in the everlasting light of the Hereafter, to be ashamed before Him at His coming would be to suffer an unspeakable loss.

4:12-16

There is something further to be added to what was said in the previous note. The sufferings we experience as believers, in fellowship with the sufferings of Christ, are in some way redemptive. It is of course true in the absolute sense that our Lord's sufferings are alone redemptive. Redemption is something He alone could accomplish. Yet it is true also to say - as Paul does explicitly in Col 1:24 - that believers' sufferings with Christ somehow partake of that redemptive virtue, and 'fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in their flesh for His body's sake, which is the Church', as if, in some strange and mysterious way, Christ's death is not effectual in the lives of men without the answering marks of the cross in our own. This is a great mystery indeed; but there is a deep truth in it. It is not enough to proclaim the Cross: it must be placarded before men, as Paul indicates in Gal 3:1, in the words 'before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth (placarded) as crucified among you'. And we must bear in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus in these terms. This, indeed, is the law of spiritual harvest. No one is ever used of God without sharing in the sufferings of Christ. Behind every fruitful life there is a Calvary road; and the preaching of Christ crucified can be effectually done only by crucified men.

4-17-19

The theme in the remaining verses of the chapter is still that of suffering for the Name of Christ and 'the fiery trial' that is the lot of those who walk with Him. The word about judgment beginning at the house of God (17) is prefaced, in the previous verse, by the phrase 'if any man suffer as a Christian.....' This is one of only three places in the New Testament where the word 'Christian' is used. Ordinarily, Christians are spoken of as 'believers', or 'disciples', or 'children (or sons) of God', or 'them that love God', but only in three places as Christians - Acts 11:26, 'the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch'; Acts 26:28, 'almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian', and here. It is tempting to pause for a while with these three references, but it is one to be resisted, in favour of trying to ascertain the precise reason why Peter should speak of 'judgment beginning at the house of God' at this point. In fact, the apostle seems to be quoting from the Old Testament here, from Ezek 9:6, where the prophet speaks of a time of great chastening and judgment to come upon men, and adds the words 'Begin at My sanctuary'. However, there are a number of similar references in the prophets - e.g. Isa 10:12, Jer 25:29, 49:12, Mal 3:5; and this has led Calvin to conclude that this is the common and constant teaching of the prophets and that Peter has this in view rather than one particular passage. We should also remember that Peter has already said (in 7) 'The end of all things is at hand', which is certainly a time of judgment. And there is a certain element of judgment included in the notion of Christians enduring suffering for the sake of the Name. The righteous are saved from judgment in the final, irremedial sense because of the 'mark' they bear, as Ezek 9:6 indicates, the 'mark' being the Name they bear as Christians in the world, which is a cause of derision to the world, but a protection to the believer. We shall look at the implications of this in the next note.

4:17-19

The judgments that a holy God sends upon the earth have a cleansing and purifying effect so far as believers are concerned. God presses all things into His service for the fulfilment of His purposes. Nothing is allowed to go to waste. Even the suffering that comes on believers for being faithful and true to Him is used by Him in doing things in them to make them purer and holier. This, then, is Peter's point: the sufferings that believers endure are part of the judgment of God. This is the teaching we are meant to gather from this passage. In regard to this, however, it is too simplistic for us to say that we have suffered the hand of God heavy upon us because we have sinned, in the sense of saying that this is because of that. Rather, the truth is we are sinners in thought, word and deed, and the fact that we are sinners at all is enough to merit the Divine displeasure. We should consider what is said in Hebrews 11: that 'no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous, nevertheless afterward it yielded the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby'. Peter is relating the discipline of chastening to this fact of the judgment for believers. So far as they are concerned, penal judgment is out of the question: 'there is no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus'.

But the principle of judgment operates nevertheless, in that testing and trial purge, purify and refine the believer, sifting the wheat from the chaff in his life and no believer is ever so pure or sanctified but that he needs this purifying grace again and again to make him what he ought to be. This is why Joseph was able to say to his brethren, after the long disciplines of grace over the years, 'God meant it unto good'.

4:17-19

But God not only chastens His children: He chastises them when they are disobedient and rebellious, sometimes very severely, as we may see from 1 Cor 5:1-5, 11:29-32, Acts 5:1-11. Peter takes this up in the phrase 'suffering as a busybody' (15) This is an unusual word, occurring only here in the New Testament. Barclay thinks Peter may well have invented it. It has three possible meanings: i) 'to cast envious eyes on others' goods'. The Christian must not be envious or covetous. The commandment says 'Thou shalt not covet'. ii) 'to be interested in other people's affairs in a meddlesome way'. A believer is not entitled to interfere unwisely and improperly in other people's lives. This may have something to say in relation to the propensity we sometimes have to be looking over our shoulder at other people. Peter's own yielding to this impulse, when he said of John, "Lord, and what shall this man do?" earned the rebuke, "What is that to thee? Follow thou Me". We should not make the mistake of supposing that the suffering that comes to us when we adopt this attitude is a sharing of Christ's sufferings. It is something we bring on ourselves, and is our own fault. iii) 'That which belongs to someone else' in the sense of 'being alien and foreign to oneself. The meaning would then be that the Christian is guilty of conduct and entering upon undertakings which do not befit the Christian life. It has been said, 'A Christian must never interest himself in things, or engage in a trade, or enter a course of action, which is alien and foreign to the life that a Christian should lead'. In other words, the Christian is one of whom it could be said that his life and conduct must be the best argument that he does not deserve the suffering that has come upon him.

4:17-19

In 19, we are given the conclusion of the matter. However greatly we may suffer as Christians - and the true Christian life is costly in sufferings of many kinds - the ultimate issue can still be peace of heart if we commit our cause to God. Not only is He a refuge for us, and a sanctuary where we find a true shelter, however much the storms may rage without - and it is one of the glad surprises of the Christian life to discover that there is such a place of rest near the very heart of God -but when the issues are truly committed to Him, He turns the wrath of man to praise Him, making all things work together for good to them that love Him, so that our experience is deepened and enriched, with new dimensions added to our lives. It should bring a thrill of solemn glory to our hearts to realise that evil no longer has the initiative in a believer's life, but has to do service for God unto our sanctification and upbuilding in grace now, and our glory hereafter. Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, the Apostle Paul says, 'worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory' (2 Cor 4:17). It can hardly be accidental that what Peter says here echoes so closely our Lord's words on the Cross, when He breathed His last, saying, 'Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit'. These words must surely have been in Peter's mind when he wrote what he did here. And what a thrill it must be also for us to realise that when we do so, we are following in our Lord's footsteps.

5:1-4

The opening words of this final chapter are addressed to elders, those who have been given the oversight of God's people in any company of believers, but the value of the passage goes beyond the reference to the strict use of the word 'elder', for Peter's exhortations apply in principle to all with any position of responsibility in the church, and indeed to all who engage in Christian service. For service, as we saw in 4:10, is a stewardship committed to us, and one concerning which we shall be called to give an account. We are called to be 'good stewards of the manifold grace of God' and there can be little doubt that, although there is both privilege and responsibility involved, the New Testament lays a much greater emphasis on the responsibility than on the privilege. 'It is required in stewards', the apostle Paul says in 1 Cor 4:2, 'that a man be found faithful'. There is a connecting particle at the beginning of the sentence in which the AV and the NIV do not show. The word is 'therefore', and it connects the exhortation with what is said in the immediately preceding verses about judgment beginning at the house of God. Peter's mind is evidently - as we pointed out earlier - on the 'judgment scene' in Ezek 9:6, and the words 'Begin at My sanctuary', which are followed by the words 'Then they began at the ancient men which were before the house' - that is the elders of the people. It is in this light, and for this reason, and with this in view, that Peter solemnly exhorts the elders to be faithful to their calling. Those to whom solemn responsibility has been given will be the first to receive the Lord of the Church's examination.

5:1-4

Peter's exhortation to the elders is given in six points, and in three pairs, each containing a negative and a positive injunction. First of all, the elders' work should be done for the right reason, and in the right spirit, not because they must but because they freely and willingly choose to do so. Peter speaks in 3 of elders being 'ensamples to the flock', in godliness, faithfulness and prayer. If this is what elders are supposed to be - that is to say, the predominant characteristic of their lives - they should surely not need to be cajoled unwillingly into something they do not appear to have the desire for, since it was for this that they were appointed. In the second place, the elder's work should be done with the right motive, not for material gain but for the joy and privilege of doing it - not for the satisfaction of a restless 'ego', but for the joy of serving, and finding satisfaction in the work itself rather than for what can be got out of it. 'Eagerly' is how the RSV renders 'ready mind'. In the third place, the elder's work should be done in the right manner, not driving, but leading. This also is a question of motive. Christian service may become the vehicle of spiritual pride, or the means of expressing a deep psychological urge. Some 'people need to be needed', and this can lead to all sorts of problems in the spiritual life. In all this, there must be a proper awareness that we serve the Chief Shepherd, to Whom we are answerable. And it is He Who will reward or rebuke at the end of the day.

5:1-4

There are also more general considerations to be noted here, for service is a stewardship committed to all who belong to Christ. And while it is true that the oversight, as Peter refers to it in 5:2, is committed to the elders of the fellowship, it has to be conceded that in passages like 1 Thess 5:11,14; Col 3:16; Rom 12:15; 1 Cor 12:26 (which see) and elsewhere it is clearly the task and responsibility of every believer to exercise this kind of pastoral 'episcopate'. And just as there are some who are particularly set apart for the task of teaching and preaching (cf Eph 4:11), so also at the same time, there is the duty that all of us have of teaching and admonishing one another. We are therefore well entitled to take Peter's words here in a wider sense than the limited one of elders only. There are, in fact, as we have already suggested, one or two links between what the apostle says here and the last verses of chapter 4. For one thing, we have already noted, in the passage in Ezekiel 9 that Peter seems to have in view, that the Greek translation of 'them ancient men' referred to there would be 'presbuteroi', the word Peter uses here for 'elders', and significantly this is the word which Paul uses in 2 Cor 5:20 to describe his ambassadorial work in commending the gospel - as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead be ye reconciled to God'. And this is a work certainly not confined to a special class set apart for such work, but one to which we are all of us committed. For another thing, the theme of trials, testing and judgment in the people of God surely makes the whole concept of pastoral care a very necessary and urgent one. For, when passing through times of trial, for whatever reason, believers need above all else wise and compassionate pastoral care. And this is surely something that any believer can and should be able to give.

5:1-4

In relation to what was said in the previous note the words that Peter uses in these verses are significant: elders (presbuteroi), feed, shepherd (poimanes), oversight (episcopoi) are equivalent to one another, and all alike stress not the office, and still less the position, but rather the duty and the responsibility, and the need to be getting on with the job. The word 'feed' or 'shepherd' has a particular significance since it is surely almost certain that in using this word Peter would have in his mind the tremendous interview and encounter he had with the risen Lord on the shores of Galilee (John 21:15 ff) when Jesus said to him 'Loves thou Me?' and 'Feed My sheep'. What a lesson there is in this for us! It is not special gifts we need for this work, so much as love for the Saviour. If we love Him, that is the qualification we need both for the eldership and for true Christian stewardship in more general terms. The hymn 'Christian, work for Jesus' puts it very truly and simply, in the words:

Work with lips so fervid
That thy words may prove
Thou hast brought a message
From the God of love.

Work with heart that burneth
Humbly at His feet
Priceless gems to offer
For His crown made meet.

5:1-4

We also need to note what is said in 3 about 'lording it over God's heritage'. What is referred to is an undue exercise of authority with the meaning of an assumption of power going beyond one's remit. The word in the AV for 'heritage' is better rendered 'what is allotted to you', and the phrase has the force of going beyond one's proper place, taking too much on oneself with an exaggerated sense of one's position and authority, arrogating to oneself an authority one does not rightly have. There is something very important here for us to grasp and accept. The question of allotment needs to be set in the context of the differing functions within the Body of Christ. Here is a comment from a Bible Note on Romans 12:4, 5 which is very pertinent in this connection:

"We all have different duties, and we must be intent on doing to the best of our ability what God has given us to do. The gifts that men have are gifts, and not to be taken pride in, or used for personal advancement, but for the good of the body, the Church. And, since this is so, it is both useless and dangerous for one member to covet another's place or gift, for in so doing he is both trespassing beyond bounds and at the same time neglecting his own. To see things in this light is to come to a true assessment of one's importance. We all have a part to play, and only a part, and if God has appointed us not only a small, but also an unobtrusive, part, then we must content ourselves with it, and realise that only in glad acceptance of it will true happiness and peace - and wholeness - ever be found. After all, we cannot be more useful to God than He chooses to make us...."

5:1-4

What was said in the previous comment on Romans 12:4, 5 represents a biggish step for that to become a reality in our lives, but it is the only way to true holiness, and the only way that we can become true 'ensamples to the flock'. The word Peter uses in 3 for 'ensamples' is one meaning 'to make a mark', and is used to describe the 'mould' into which molten metal is poured, giving it its shape, and the impress a die makes on a soft surface. The idea is that by our influence and example we can shape the lives of others, leaving our mark on them.

Before we leave these words we may usefully sum up their message on the stewardship committed to all who belong to Christ. First of all, we see the inspiration of service. Peter calls himself 'a witness of the sufferings of Christ', and we have repeatedly seen in this epistle that his thoughts have been drawn to the Cross as by a magnet. This, for him, is the central message of the gospel, and it is this alone that qualifies us to serve Christ aright. In the next place, they tell us what the responsibility in service is. The stewardship committed to us, whether in preaching, teaching, instructing, leading, is the stewardship of souls, and souls need to be fed if they are to be strong and healthy. The old phrase 'the cure of souls' has a great deal in it and it is to this that we are committed, and all our labours and efforts are to be directed to this grand aim and goal. In the third place, we are told what the requirements of service are. Peter says we must be ensamples to the flock. We have a twofold witness, by lip and by life: we have a message to proclaim, and we have a life to live. We are to be 'living epistles', known and read of men. The Word must become flesh again in us, and we must be so transparent that men will see Christ in us. Finally, the apostle underlines the rewards of service. Here is the obverse side of 4:15-19. This is the positive alternative to that. In the light of eternity how wonderful it will be to produce for Him the souls we have fed and shepherded in the faithful and costly exercise of our stewardship and to hear the Divine accolade, 'Well done, good and faithful servant....' Ah, for the faithful, the best is yet to be!

5:5-7

The word 'likewise' in these verses indicates that there is a progression and development in Peter's thinking from the earlier verses (1-4) to what he says here. It is worth giving some thought to this link, so as to be clear on what the apostle is saying. In our calling to be 'ensamples to the flock', we are to follow the example of Christ Who did not 'lord it over men', but humbled Himself and became the servant of all. This is the principle which Peter now spells out in detail, in a progression of thought in which he speaks of the submission of younger to elder, the submission of one to another, and the submission of all alike, young and old, to God. Peter has already spoken on this note of submission, in the civil realm, in relation to the powers that be (2:13 ff), in ordinary industrial relationships (2:18 ff), and in the relationship between husband and wife (3:7 ff). From this repeated emphasis we may judge its importance in his thinking. Why, for example, should a younger person find it difficult or irksome to submit to one who is older? Is it not, quite simply, that at heart he desires independent existence? It is precisely this desire for independence which makes it difficult for us to submit to one another and, above all, to God. This was the primal sin in the Garden of Eden, when Adam opted for independence instead of obedience and submission to the Divine will for his life. What we so often fail to see is that independence of this sort leads, not to freedom, but to bondage, while true submission, since it is obedience to a God-ordained order, is the road to freedom, whether that submission be of the younger to the elder(it can never be unmanly or unwomanly to do this) or of the one to the other (which is a basic recognition of the sanctity and dignity of each other's personality), or of oneself to God (continuing submission to Whom means perfect and ever fuller liberty and freedom).

5:5-7

Allied, of course, to the spirit of independence, is a spirit of pride, and this needs to be spelt out also in such a way as to expose the camouflage with which it so often conceals and disguises itself. Few have more devastatingly exposed this than C.S.Lewis, in the words he puts into Screwtape's mouth, as he describes the manner in which he seeks to corrupt and destroy humans by getting them all tied up and totally confused about the true meaning of what men call democracy.

"Democracy, says Screwtape, "is properly the name of a political system, even a system of voting....it is connected with the political ideal that men should be equally treated. But you then make the stealthy transition from this political ideal to a factual belief that all men are equal. As a result, you can use the word Democracy to sanction in his thought the most degrading (and also the least enjoyable) of all human feelings. You can get him to practice, not only without shame but with a positive glow of self-approval, conduct which if undefended by the magic word, would be universally derided. The feeling I mean is, of course, that which prompts a man to say, "I'm as good as you." (This should be prescribed reading for all believers, for it serves to 'expose the inverted pride, and the itching, smarting resentment that comes from a sense of inferiority that we are unwilling to accept). We tend to forget how little need there is for such feelings to bother us, or how little place there is for them when we recognise our true position as 'members in particular' of the Body of Christ. For there, each of us has his own unique place: being all different from one another we are essentially dependent on one another. Equality means independence, and this is the recipe for disaster. But in the Body of Christ, which is an organism, each member has a different function, and is not the same as every other, with the health of the body depending on each member in particular fulfilling his own unique function, and not trespassing on that of others. This is the real antidote to pride, and therefore to independence.

5:5-7

C.S. Lewis has a wise and perceptive passage in an address he once gave about the true meaning of membership:

"How true membership in a body differs from inclusion in a collective may be seen in the structure of a family. The grandfather, the parents, the grown-up son, the child, the dog, and the cat are true members (in the organic sense) precisely because they are not members or units of a homogeneous class. They are not interchangeable. Each person is almost a species in himself. The mother is not simply a different person from the daughter, she is a different kind of person. The grown-up brother is not simply one unit in the class children, he is a separate estate of the realm. The father and grandfather are almost as different as the cat and the dog. If you subtract any one member you have not simply reduced the family in number, you have inflicted an injury on its structure. Its unity is a unity of unlikes, almost of incommensurables That is why the modern notion that children should call their parents by their Christian names is so perverse. For this is an effort to ignore the difference in kind which makes for real organic unity...."

We may see another example of this pattern and principle in the make-up of the human being as an individual. We are made and constituted in such a way that mind and intellect (or intelligence) are to be in control of the lesser and lower 'animal instincts'. Our natural and animal instincts and appetites are an integral and essential part of life. But most sensible folk can see that they were given to us under lock and key. And true well-being consists in their being under the control of mind and will. But let them rebel against authority, and get out of the place of submission, which is their proper place, then confusion and disorder reign. Temper is an essential ingredient of our constitution, and without it we would be poor spirited creatures. But let temper usurp its proper place, and all hell may be let loose before it is brought under control again. And so it is with every sensual appetite.

5:5-7

When this is translated into the life of the church as the Body of Christ the message is plain. There is a God-ordained authority set at the heart of the Church's life, and the necessity of submission to it when someone under authority rebels and exalts himself above that authority, lifting himself up above his fellows, immediately confusion and disorder enter. One has only to look at the Church in Corinth to see the truth of this, or at the Church in John's day, and the strictures he placed on Diotrephes "who loveth to have the pre-eminence", and who by his ambition for power and for ascendancy, wrought such havoc in the work of God. It may well be that such people think of submission to authority as likely to be too irksome for comfort. But here is the paradox: it is when we are most submissive to God-ordained authority that we are most free. As the hymn says:

Make me a captive, Lord
And then I shall be free.

Obedience is the road to freedom, and submission and humility the way to true fulfilment. In the injunction to be submissive one to another that Peter goes on to underline, it is as if he were saying "How little cause any of us has for exalting himself in any way, for each of us in the Body is infinitely inferior to our glorious Head, and in His Presence it behoves us to be lowly. Paul's injunction to the Philippians has the same force and challenge: "Let nothing be done through strife or vain glory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others."

5:8-9

If we took the trouble to look back over our series of Readings in First Peter, we would certainly be able to discern that the Apostle, in his exposition of the benefits of Christ's atoning and redeeming work, makes mention of what we might well call 'a three-dimensional salvation', in which we experience freedom from the guilt of sin, freedom from its power and dominion, and freedom from the tyranny of the evil one who lurks behind it all. We have more than touched upon the first two of these, in relation to the message of the Cross, and the evil one has never been very far from our thoughts throughout these readings, but now we need to concentrate on the enemy himself, in these verses before us, whom Peter speaks of as our adversary the devil', and particularly in his guise 'as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour'. It is impressive to see how the New Testament underlines this three-dimensional salvation, now separately, and now together - and in the latter case nowhere more clearly and dramatically than in Col 2:11-15 (which see). By way of introduction, let it be said that there are two opposite dangers in this whole realm. One is an undue preoccupation with the fact of Satan that tends to eclipse the real biblical emphasis -namely, that the greatest thing the Bible tells us about Satan is that Jesus Christ has conquered him. In regard to this, we should see the context in which the evil one is spoken of here in these verses: Satan as a roaring lion is compassed about on either side by i) an emphasis on God's care for us (7), and ii) the reality and operation of the God of all grace (10). This is the way to think of the evil one, and not otherwise do we get the true biblical perspective.

5:8-9

Even in the context of Christ's victory, however, there can still be undue preoccupation with Satan, with devils and demons 'under every bed' so to speak, and in every circumstance. This, in my view, is an unhealthy and morbid preoccupation that needs to be warned against. The other extreme is to deny the existence and reality of the demonic altogether. This also is dangerous and can indeed be fatal for the Christian life. And those in the church who take this view are being jolted by what is happening in today's society into a puzzled awareness of a dimension that they had hitherto discounted and dismissed as fantasy. Examples of this abound today, with even children indulging in table-tapping' and 'Ouija boards', the increase in occult programmes on children's TV, the growing incidence of 'black magic' and 'witches covens', the experiments in communicating with spirits 'for a lark', sometimes with the most frightening and terrifying of results. Now, it is the loss of the 'good' supernatural in the church's message that has led to the seeking of the 'bad' and 'wrong' supernatural. For man needs the supernatural, the eternal dimension, in his life, for he is made for God and only the eternal dimension can satisfy his deepest heart's need, hence the popularity today of astrology, horoscopes, fortune-telling; hence also the use of drugs, not in the last analysis to find escape, but to induce 'religious' experience of a kind not otherwise known or available to men. Above all, there is the evil fascination of 'ye shall be as God, knowing good and evil' - the secret of the tree of knowledge, and the invitation into secret and sinister things. Behind Peter's words in this passage there is a grim reality. What he is saying is this: that behind the life of the Christian, and the Christian walk, there is the activity and influence of a personal enemy seeking to harm and destroy the people of God, and that this is the deepest dimension in the situation. And in the immediate context of Peter's central thesis, he is stating that all the trial and testing that his readers were enduring were not only the opposition of evil men to the gospel, but that there was also a sinister element present, a dark, alien power and intelligence. And he is saying that we will never fully understand the trial and the testing until we recognise this and learn to deal with it.

5:8-9

Peter is not alone in this emphasis. Paul tells us in Eph 2:1 ff that we are to view the Christian life not only as a battle against the current (the 'course of this world'), but also to recognise that behind that current, and controlling it, is 'The prince of the power of the air'. Not only do we have the bias of sin within us to battle against, but also behind it a personal foe. But, lest we should get the idea of warfare itself out of perspective, and think of it in exalted, even romantic, terms we need to remember the context of Paul's famous passage on spiritual warfare in Eph 6 as indicating that the warfare is conducted in the sphere of human relationships, between husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants. It is there - in the nitty-gritty of life - that the battle is joined, there that we need to recognise the foe, and there that we need to get the victory.

Now, we do not do justice to the biblical doctrine of man and of sin if we do not take this seriously. We do well to remember that the biblical account of the Fall of man in Gen 3 is couched entirely in terms of a satanic attack on man and that the promise of redemption is likewise spoken of in terms of a promise of victory over Satan. Jesus became partaker of flesh and blood that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is the devil (Heb 2:14). This is why Paul exhorts Timothy to instruct men "that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will" (2 Tim 2:26).

5:8-9

Peter is not merely expounding a theological point in these verses, although he is doing that, he is speaking of something that is a reality in his life and experience. He has known what it is to have been under pressure, and he knows very well that behind the pressure there has been the shadowy figure of the evil one. Jesus Himself had told him, "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he might sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not". (Lk 22:31, 32). Paul says, in 2 Cor 2:11, 'We are not ignorant of his devices'. But alas, many are and this ignorance can often prove costly to spiritual life and development, for thereby Satan 'gains an advantage' over believers, and they 'give place' to him. This will bear some thought for a little. We sometimes tend to think that it is when we are spiritually slack and unconsecrated that the enemy plays havoc with our lives. This, of course, is true; but there is something even truer and more significant, and it is this. Paul makes it plain that this spiritual warfare goes on in the 'heavenly places'. We need to see the significance of this. Ephesians 1 speaks of the believer's position in Christ as being blessed with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places, and in Eph 2, as our having been raised with Christ to sit in heavenly places with Him and when our position is realised, and becomes our possession in practical reality, it is precisely then that the warfare with the powers of darkness begins in earnest. Samuel Chadwick, the Methodist saint, once said that "Every man's Pentecost is a signal for Satan to gird himself", and one of the Puritans said, "He that stands near to his Captain is a sure target for the archers,". and Emil Brunner, one of the greatest theologians of this century, is on record as saying, "It is precisely those Christians who have the deepest Christian experience who have the greatest personal experience of the reality of the powers of darkness". It is precisely at the place of consecration that the battle ground is set. And if there is ignorance then there will be disastrous consequences.

5:8-9

It seems far commoner, however, to pay lip service to this idea of the reality of satanic attack than to take it seriously and responsibly in experience as a practical reality. It may be that one reason for this is that in theory the commonest aspect of the devil's work lies in the area of temptation to sin, and people are only too conscious of the weakness of their own hearts, and regard that as the primary factor in their situation. But it is one thing to know that Satan is behind all sin, and to recall that the Fall is described in Gen 3 in terms of an incitement to sin. But it is quite another to recognise that temptation to sin is not the only wile that Satan uses to attack us. And it is failure to realise this that causes so much trouble in Christian life.

Are there other wiles, then, than temptation to sin? Ah, yes! Look at the situation in the context of this epistle of Peter. Temptation to sin, as such, was not really the issue that Peter was addressing. The pressures on these believers that he was writing to were not so much designed to tempt them into sin as to attack, and if possible, to destroy their faith and make them recant altogether. The very word 'adversary' that the apostle uses is some indication of this. It has the force of an opponent in a law suit, and the idea conveyed is that of accusations being made. One thinks of a counsel for the prosecution pounding us in the witness box with his clever, and ruthless, questioning, getting us more and more confused - this gives us some idea of what Satan can do to a man's mind. He is called, in Rev 12:10, 'the accuser of the brethren', and this is the kind of thing that Peter has in view.

5:8-9

There are, in fact, a number of different 'guises' in which the evil one comes to the believer with his wiles. This word 'guises' is an apt one to describe his approach, for of course he does not advertise his presence but keeps himself in the background. It is at least significant that only on three occasions in Scripture do we ever actually hear his voice - in Gen 3, in Job 1/2, and in our Lord's Temptation in Matt 4/Lk 4. But he needs to be exposed, for all that, in his workings in the believer's life. For one thing, there is his work as Hinderer, as for example the way in which, as the god of this world he blinds the minds of them that believe not (cf Nicodemus' uncomprehending response, 'How can these things be?'); and cf also 1 Thess 2:18, where Paul tells us that the evil one hindered him and his companions from visiting Thessalonica again. For another thing, he is spoken of in Rev 12:10 as 'the accuser of the brethren' - one readily thinks of the opening chapters of Job where the evil one certainly appears as an accusatorial figure maligning Job to God, and indeed maligning God to Job, and not only in the opening chapters, but throughout the book. Indeed, there is a sense in which we need to understand the entire book as having this background underlying it, and we do not well understand it unless we understand it against such a background.

5:8-9

In relation to this, we may well think of what Bunyan says of Christian when he passed through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, with dark oppressive attacks confusing his mind, bringing him into despair. There is a wonderfully illuminating verse in Job 9:24 (obscured in the AV translation but wonderfully clear in the RSV and NIV) which says if it is not He (i.e. God), who then is it? The answer is that it is Satan as The Accuser and Destroyer. Then, there is also Satan as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14), counterfeiting the Spirit of God, assuming this guise in order to deceive God's people into believing that it is God Himself who is speaking to them. How earnestly we need to take the Apostle John's words here "Beloved, try the spirits, whether they be of God", and to learn that not all spiritual impressions - or 'voices', audible or otherwise - are necessarily from the good Spirit of God. The surest way to make spiritual shipwreck is to open the mind indiscriminately to such spiritual impulses. Finally, as here in these verses, it is Satan as a roaring lion. This is meant to represent the evil one in his roused state and - we may say - at his most dangerous. In all this, however, the most important thing of all that the Scriptures teach about Satan is that Jesus Christ has conquered him. And in that triumph and victory He was made Head over all things - all principality and power - to the Church - for us, indeed, to give us the victory.

5:10-11

When we began our discussion on the reality of the evil one in his various guises and wiles as he seeks to ensnare, harm and even destroy God's people, we pointed out, in the need to keep our thinking about him in a true biblical perspective, that Peter's reference to him is encompassed before and after by two wonderful realities - on the one hand, the assurance of God's unchanging care for us (7), and on the other, the glorious doxology in 10, 11. It is to this tremendous and mighty utterance - one of the very great words of Scripture, displaying something of the sheer depth and grandeur of the gospel - that we now turn. It is as if Peter were saying to his readers, 'There is a real devil to contend with, yes; but there is also a real and living God, Whose grace is greater than all our need' - assuring us therefore as he speaks to wavering faith that we need not fear, because our roots are far deeper than we had ever realised, in eternity and in the sovereign, electing grace of God. This means and implies that our faith, which we personally are summoned to exercise, is simply the issue and expression in time of something that God has ordained in eternity. When a man finds faith in Christ unto salvation, and is converted through believing in Him, it means that out of the mists of eternity there has come a loving and mighty hand that lays hold upon his life and claims it for a destiny of joy and blessedness beyond all his understanding and deserving, and almost beyond belief. And we are to set this over against all trial and pressure, and recognise that there is no possible combination of circumstances in which this glorious truth will not make all the difference.

5:10-11

But more. There is a sense also in which Peter is summing up in this doxology so much of what he has been saying throughout the epistle. And it is rather wonderful to see just how much he is able to do this within the compass of one verse. There are two emphases that we must look at in turn. First of all, there is grace in the 'here and now', and the resources that provide for us in every circumstance. The first thing we need to note is that Peter is speaking of the God of all grace. Grace is an all-sufficient reality - sufficient in the common, daily concerns of life, in a hundred different ways, in what the hymn calls 'the trivial round, the common task'. It is hardly possible to think of any circumstance in which this is not true. We are told that we must beware of 'trivialising' the great truths of Scripture by applying this great word to unworthy, unimportant things. That may be so; but it depends what one considers unworthy and unimportant, and too trivial for God's notice. Losing a purse with a pound or two in it may be hardly worthy of an affluent person's concern; but it may well make all the difference in the world to a pensioner. Paul says, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything.....let your requests be made known unto God", and if this cannot apply to a housewife trying hard to make ends meet, or to the man seeking to do a day's work honourably and well, or to the Christian concerned to maintain a Christian walk in all things during the day, it could well raise real questions about the sufficiency of grace, for these are the common experiences of all of us. But we may thank God that there is grace sufficient for all such ordinary needs.

5:10-11

It may well be, however, that what Peter has particularly in mind are the extremities of life, in which we can be confronted with situations for which our puny strength and resources are simply no match. We sometimes sing,

When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father's full giving is only begun.

It may be the presence of some affliction, such as Paul's thorn in the flesh, vexing and distressing, and a source of constant pain and hurt, but God said to Paul, and He also says to us, 'My grace is sufficient for thee. This turned Paul's ache into joy. And it can turn ours also: 'Most gladly therefore will I glory in my infirmities....' Or, it may be some sudden situation of crisis or disaster that arises, like the storm on the Sea of Galilee threatening to engulf us, and we cry in our extremity, "Carest Thou not that we perish?" Ah, there is grace for such a situation and crisis. Think of Paul at Jerusalem amidst the enemies of the faith, bound and in chains, knowing not what awaited him. In this darkest hour, God stood by him and said, "Be of good cheer, Paul...." That is grace. There is grace also for the tempted and tried, as Paul makes clear in 1 Cor 10:13. There is grace for the sorrowing (Ps 147:3). There is grace for those who have failed, and have been a disappointment to those who love them, and to themselves, and to God –

O teach me what it meaneth
Thy love beyond compare;
The love that reacheth deeper
Than depths of self-despair.

5:10-11

But not only is it grace for the 'here and now', but also grace 'in the future', for God has called us in Christ 'to His eternal glory' in the ages to come. This is something that gives a wonderful sense of the ultimate purposes of God for His people, for He has called us to a destiny bright beyond all imagining, and the riches of His grace not merely for our earthly span of years, but through all the ages of eternity, will be at work in us, changing us from glory into glory, in an enterprise beyond the thought of man, and of which Paul says "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor hath it entered into the heart of man the things that God hath prepared for them that love Him". Such are the wider horizons on which the grace of God in Christ is set. The sheer vastness and magnitude of His operation beggars our imagination in the very immensity of it! It is this that we must understand as being implied in the words 'make you perfect'. This does not mean that we are made sinless in this life, but rather that we are brought into our proper condition in the purposes of God - and that purpose as we have seen, and which is expounded in the words that follow - 'stablish, strengthen, settle you', stretch out into an endless future, of which Paul, in setting what Peter says about our trials and testings in a proper perspective, says "Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.... "

5:12-14

The AV rendering in 12 is better rendered in the modern versions, 'This is the true grace of God: stand ye fast in it; and this serves more accurately to bring out the nature of the two participles exhorting and testifying, for Peter's testimony is his epistle - and what a testimony it has proved to be! - and his exhortation to his readers is to stand fast in it. We are therefore given one last opportunity to look at the salient points of Peter's message, which he describes as 'the true grace of God'. Note the association of ideas between 'I have written' and 'the true grace of God'. The implication is surely that the written word is the receptacle and vehicle of the Divine grace, and its location. But, though the testimony and the exhortation belong together in the mind and purpose of God, they do not automatically become true in the experience of those to whom they are addressed. It is all too possible for the testimony - the message in all its grace and power - to remain only a message, without being made a man's own in his personal experience. 'The word preached' sometimes does not profit because it is not mixed with faith in those who hear it (Heb 4:2). Indeed, it is perfectly possible for two people listening to the same message in church, with one of them being bored and unreceptive, and the other changed and transformed in heart and life through the obedience of faith. Again, one of the things we have seen in our studies is that Peter leans substantially towards the indicatives of the Faith, speaking of what we are in Christ far more than what we ought to do - not exhortation, in the first instance, but affirmation. Understanding this develops a certain attitude of mind: Christians will begin to think in a particular way, they will learn to allow God to tell them where He has placed them in Christ. Finally, we have seen how Peter anchors the true grace of God in the centrality of the cross, and how he proclaims, in relation to the enemy of souls, Satan, the glorious truth that in that Cross Jesus Christ has conquered him, and that we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us. Blessed be His great and glorious Name!