

James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of LUKE

As in any new study of a book of Scripture, some introductory considerations are necessary. Serious students of the New Testament will be (and should be) equipped with a good and reliable Bible Dictionary or Handbook, which will give adequate information about Luke, the writer of this gospel, the probable date of its composition, and the circumstances surrounding its being written; and time need not be spent in these Notes on such information, which is readily available. The concern of all true ministry of the Word (which is what these Notes are designed to be) is pastoral and nourishing; and our desire is to provide not information so much as food.

Luke's is one of four gospels. Why four? Would one not have been sufficient? No: no one gospel could have done justice to such a subject, or adequately presented such a glorious Figure. From old time the four evangelists have been reckoned to present Christ as follows: Matthew, the King; Mark, the Servant; Luke, the Son of man; John, the Son of God. These, however, are only partial truths - true, indeed, but not exclusively so, for - to take only one consideration - all four present Jesus as a kingly Figure. The important point, however, is that they all present and proclaim Jesus. We should note these words carefully. These records are not called 'biographies' of Jesus, by Matthew, Mark, Luke or John, but gospels'. And 'gospel' means 'good news'. Luke proclaims the good news concerning Jesus Christ. His gospel is therefore evangelical in the truest sense of the term. All four gospels are alike in this respect, as indeed John makes it explicit in 20:31 - that is, they were written with a view to the creation of faith by the Holy Spirit, the maintaining and strengthening of it and deepening of it in the life of the believer. The written Word is the true agent and medium of the gospel.

1) 1:1-4

It should hardly need saying that the gospels were written from the standpoint of the resurrection and ascension of Christ, and in the glad power and joy of Pentecost and the coming of the Spirit. They were therefore written - as Paul puts it in Romans 1:17 - from faith to faith - that is, from the standpoint of faith and with the purpose of eliciting the response of faith in others, and building it up. This is surely the underlying purpose and concern in all Scripture - the creation and development of faith and the establishing of the Christian life on a strong and stable foundation. This is explicitly stressed by Luke in the introductory verses of his gospel, in the words "...know the certainty of the things wherein thou hast been instructed", that is, that the Scriptures might become the foundation and basis of your life. This pattern and procedure that Luke says he is going to follow - "things most surely believed among us" - is the message which the Holy Spirit is pleased to honour in the creating of faith in the hearts of men, Consider Acts 10:34-43. This is an important passage for scholars of the New Testament, for it is generally held to give a true synopsis of what is known as the 'apostolic kerugma', the fundamental message of the gospel as preached by the apostles of the early Church - the birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, on the basis of which the offer of forgiveness is made and proclaimed to all who believe. This is the 'gospel'. The good news concerning Jesus, which both brings faith to the birth, and establishes it in the lives of believers.

2) 1:1-4

The gospels - all four of them - are therefore simply the summary of the preaching and teaching of the early Church. Look at what Luke gives us: the birth and childhood of Jesus; the ministry of John the Baptist; the ministry of Jesus in Galilee; towards Jerusalem; the trial, death and resurrection of Jesus. It was while Peter preached this message in Cornelius' house (Acts 10:34 ff) that the Holy Spirit came and wrought salvation in their hearts - this, indeed, is the interpretation placed upon that event by the apostles themselves in Acts 11:18, "God hath granted unto the Gentiles repentance unto life". This is so important in its implications, and so central in this new study, that we must spend some time looking in detail at what Luke says to us in these introductory verses.

What we have here is an introductory inscription to the whole work. Luke is writing to 'a certain Theophilus', probably a Roman of high rank. There are two possibilities in this regard: either, he was a Christian convert, whose faith Luke wished to confirm; or, he was a pagan, well-disposed to the Christian message, who had "heard slanderous and incriminating rumours which were circulating concerning the Christians", and Luke was determined to correct these false impressions by presenting the facts as he knew them. The latter may well be the more likely supposition. But, either way, Luke is presenting truth as a means of accomplishing his objective. It is truth that saves, and it is truth that builds up and sanctifies. In this, he is at one with the Apostle Paul who, in his epistles, makes precisely this same emphasis. The Apostle's invariable approach was the presenting of truth to the minds of his hearers, making them think, engaging their minds, and through their minds, their consciences and their wills. It is in this way, and through this medium, that the Scriptures maintain that the Holy Spirit works in men's lives.

3) 1:1-4

It is here that the Scriptures decisively part company with some modern emphases in our time, when so much stress is laid upon emotional and psychological atmosphere and technique. We have not yet seen all the dangerous and disastrous consequences of stirring people up into emotional frenzies and calling this the power of the Holy Ghost. We should all be very careful not to be wise above that which is written, and to be content with what the Scriptures teach -indeed, take the trouble to find out what the Scriptures teach. We should not be taken in by misguided enthusiasm that is being made to do duty for genuine spiritual experience and maturity. The way to reach people for Christ is not to bludgeon them and pressurise them into making decisions they do not understand or appreciate, but to present the truth of the gospel to their minds and make them think, as Luke was clearly intent on doing with Theophilus.

4) 1:1-4

There are four things mentioned particularly in Luke's introduction: first of all, he says that his investigation goes right back to the course of events at the commencement of the gospel history; secondly, that he investigated 'all things'; thirdly, that he examined everything 'carefully'; and fourthly, that he composed his narrative 'in order'; it is an orderly account that he has given. Two points must be noted: on the one hand, Luke's emphasis is clearly on the historicity of the truth of the gospel. It is the integrity of the record that is stressed. The gospel, the good news of God, is anchored in history. And conviction comes through accurate historical truth. Faith can, and must, rest on unshakeable historical grounds. Furthermore, the inspiration of the Holy Ghost does not, it is clear, dispense with hard, systematic historical investigation, and scholarly research. Rather, it depends on it. This is the quality of Luke's testimony; and it is salutary to realise this, when we are sometimes faced today with a contemptuous disregard for education by some who claim that dependence on the Holy Spirit dispenses with scholarly processes. The apostles would certainly not have anything to do with such peculiar ideas! This historicity of the gospel, yes, but is not merely historic fact that Luke emphasises. The historic facts are presented within the framework of theological interpretation. Luke was also a theologian, and the truth he presents is not only historical, but religious. As has already been indicated, he wrote 'from faith to faith' - i.e. from the standpoint of faith, and he sets about showing the gospel to be the unfolding of the divine drama of redemption.

5) 1:5-17

One's first reaction on reading these words is to recognize that there is a decided emphasis on the supernatural. This bears witness to the truth that the Christian gospel represents a 'breakthrough' from the other world. What Luke is saying is that it is the hand of God stretched out to help mankind in its tragic plight and misery. It is open to us to regard this world of angels and celestial visitants in two ways: either, we look at it as a kind of gentle folklore presentation, not really related to the hard business of real life in the seventies; or, we realise that Luke means us to take this supernatural world really seriously, at their face value. When we do, we begin to understand that to reduce the angels to the unreal and anaemic proportions that contemporary thinking had tended to do is wide of the mark and misses the real point. For, in the Bible, angels are precisely not fairies or Christmas card figures, but tremendous, realities, before whom mortal man always trembled with fear and dread. They are good, yes; but they are great magnitudes, not decorations for Christmas trees: And their presence in the Christmas narratives bears witness to the truth that the gospel is a supernatural visitation from another world. This is a lesson of greatest moment; for this emphasis is one that has been lost in the world - and in the Church - with sinister and far-reaching consequences for ill, as we shall see in tomorrow's Note.

6) 1:5-17

The Christian gospel, as we have said, represents a breakthrough from the other world. There is a great need for the re-assertion of this in a materialistic, rationalistic world. Amidst the immense technological advances science has made and which we have accepted as part of our lives, we have also accepted a scientific philosophy of life which declares that miracles do not happen, and which refuses to accept anything as valid that cannot be measured by slide rule or examined under a microscope. You cannot thus measure an angelic visitation, and so, for all practical purposes, angels - and the supernatural - are 'out'; and the everlasting gospel is systematically stripped of everything that could really make it a gospel, and is reduced to little more than an ethical system, a code of behaviour, a way of life. It is little wonder that the churches are becoming emptier and emptier; for what is there, in what is left, to attract people to them?

The consequence of the loss of the supernatural are several. One is that concern for social, philanthropic or humanitarian issues, and matters of social justice, have replaced concern for the eternal dimension. To be true, these are issues that Christians should be concerned with: the compassion that Jesus showed in real, human situations is not an optional extra for His people, to be adopted or discarded at will. But when these things become a man's Christianity, and become Christianity for him, it needs to be said very firmly that this represents a radical departure from the New Testament gospel. If social, philanthropic, 'this-worldly' concerns, are the only grounds on which men are prepared to take Christianity seriously, it must be recognized that they have abandoned anything distinctively Christian in their thinking. And such an attitude is subject to the law of diminishing returns: there will soon be less and less inspiration for social and compassionate action when the eternal dimension is lost.

7) 1:5-17

But an even more sinister consequence has emerged in modern society, through the loss of the supernatural. Man is made for God, and God has set eternity in his heart. He therefore needs the eternal, the supernatural, And when this materialistic and rationalistic age has denied him this, in its denial of the supernatural, man turns elsewhere for the satisfaction of this need in him, Two things have flowed directly from this: people - especially young people - have turned to the drug scene to find an answer to this supernatural dimension in their souls, A whole cult has emerged in our day in which drugs are taken to induce religious experience, The other thing is that people are turning increasingly to astrology and black magic, which again offer the supernatural that their souls crave and were made for, The tragedy is however that there is an evil supernaturalism as well as good; and when the good is withheld, it is the evil that draws men, and will even destroy them. It is certainly no accident that it is our modern, rationalistic, scientific age that has been the one to see the resurgence of unhallowed and sinister practices, not only among adults but also among young people, not excluding school children, The only adequate answer to all this is the recovery and proclamation of a thoroughgoing supernaturalism in the Church's message to the world. And it is to this that the angelic visitants in the Christmas narrative bear witness,

8) 1:18-25

Let us take a further step in our thinking about the angels in this passage. The angel that appeared to Zacharias was the angel, Gabriel (19). There is something majestic and awesomely thrilling in the words of that verse. But consider their significance. What must this announcement have meant to Zacharias? He was a devout, godly man, well-versed in the Scriptures. And he would know where in Scripture the angel Gabriel is recorded to have appeared in the past, where, indeed, alone he is recorded to have appeared - in Daniel 8/9, and particularly 9:21 ff, which records the prophecy of the seventy weeks, relating to Messiah, the Prince, And here was the same messenger of God, announcing the same theme to him, Zacharias, and indicating that the long-promised coming of Messiah was now about to come to pass! This is one of the things that we indicated when it was said earlier that Luke is intent on showing that the gospel is the outworking of the divine drama of redemption; and this must be the next major consideration to occupy our attention in these verses.

9) 1:18-25

Both implicitly (as already suggested in the association of ideas with Gabriel) and explicitly in the references he makes, Luke 'identifies' the good news of the gospel as being rooted in the Old Testament, in the messianic prophecies relating to fulness of the times, He shares this conviction and insight with the other three gospel writers, who each in his own way emphasises the ministry of John the Baptist. The point about this reference is of course that John the Baptist was himself the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. In Malachi 3:1, 4:5', we have clear references to the appearing of a divine messenger who would prepare the way Of the Lord; and the mention of Elijah in Mal 4:5 turning the hearts of the fathers to the children is taken up by Luke in 17, in reference to John the Baptist. This, then, is the point they are all making: the 'beginning of the gospel' lies in the prophetic scriptures. Luke's account simply elaborates on Mark's, when the latter says 'The beginning of the gospel...as it is written in the prophets....'The beginning of the gospel, then, was not at Bethlehem; it traces right back through the Old Testament messianic prophecies to Genesis 3:15, to the promise that the seed of the woman would bruise the head of the serpent. Christ is the truth of all the prophecies. What they predicted, He fulfils. The whole Bible, not only the New Testament, bears witness to Christ. The history of the Bible is His story, from Genesis to Revelation, and we do not understand these chapters aright unless we see them to be the fulfilment of the divine plan of redemption announced at the beginning, in Genesis 3:15. This is the significance of Luke's account of the visitation to Zacharias and Elisabeth, and of John's birth,

10) 1:18-25

In the words in 17, "to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" we have a clear and distinct echo from Isaiah 40, which passage is explicitly quoted from in Mark 1:2, and also taken up by Luke in 3:4 ff, with reference to John's ministry. So, clearly, the wonderful Isaianic passage is in view here. There is a great deal of significance in this, for the message of that wonderful chapter is one not only of pardon (Isa 40:1, 2) but also deliverance (40:3-5). And just as the way was being prepared for Israel in the wilderness, back from Babylon to the promised land (getting back would have been the only real proof to them that God had forgiven them), so also Luke is indicating that in the coming of Jesus not only a word of pardon was being spoken to the world, but also a way of deliverance was being opened up from the bondage of sin. In this connection, it is significant to note that Luke later makes the point that the gospel is a kind of new Exodus (cf 9:31 -the decease /Greek 'exodos/ which He should accomplish at Jerusalem). This is what Isaiah was also saying: the deliverance from Babylon was a second Exodus for Israel, a setting free of the captives; and even this was only a faint shadow and illustration of the still greater Exodus and deliverance to which it pointed in the future, and which was fulfilled in the coming of Christ.

11) 1:18-25

There is another thought connected with the reference to Isaiah 40. The third 'voice' speaking in the passage (40:6-8) speaks to the dispiritedness and despair of the captives. They had been in captivity for so long and they were thinking, 'It is no use, it is too late for anything to be done'. And over against this was set the reality of the unchanging word of God that endures forever, and the assurance that therefore no difficulty need stand in the way. This is paralleled in a remarkable way in Luke's narrative, in what Zacharias said to the angel in 18, "Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man and my wife well stricken in years" (cf 'the grass withereth....!') we may detect the note of dispiritedness; but over against this, the word "I am Gabriel...and am sent to speak unto thee...." The living and abiding word of God over against all human despair!

And please to note that this new word of hope and salvation begins in the Temple....There is no 'knocking the establishment' here! There were the faithful in the Kirk then (however dispirited), and there are the faithful in the Kirk now, and it is to them, and through them, that the visitations of God come. Barren and near-apostate as the Church of that day was, there were those who had not bowed the knee to Baal. And the Lord spoke again, in the context of the established order. He that hath ears to hear let him hear!

12) 1:26-38

In this passage we come to what has been called the Annunciation, the announcement by the angel Gabriel of the coming birth of the Son of God. It is easy to see that structurally there is a parallelism here between what is said to Mary and what was earlier said to Zacharias; and the lessons we drew from the supernatural visitation to the latter are true also with regard to Mary. The child of Zacharias and Elisabeth was to be born to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. That coming is now described by Luke. For He came in the coming of His Son. The birth, life and ministry of Jesus was the promised coming or visitation of God; and this is Luke's point in recording it.

Let us consider first of all the implications of Gabriel's words, in relation to what we know as the doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ. Many modern commentators consider the idea of the virgin birth as a wrongful, legendary accretion, originally compiled to safeguard the idea of the sinlessness of Christ, ordinary conception being somehow unworthy, and leading to the inevitable taint of sin. And they point out that that taint would pass to Jesus just as much by one parent, Mary, as by two. This is, of course, true; and this is why, inevitably, the doctrine of the immaculate conception of Mary developed in the Roman Church. But an infinite regression of immaculate conceptions would be needed to deal with this problem! This, however, is not the point that is being made. The sinlessness of the Son of God is not the question at issue. Nor does the reality of the Incarnation depend on a virgin birth, as such. God could, we suppose, have done it otherwise. But He did not. He did it this way.

Further, it is sometimes said that the large part of the New Testament does not even mention the virgin birth. Paul makes no mention of it, etc., etc. But what is this supposed to prove? Is it not rather naive to speak in this way? The doctrine is mentioned twice, in Matthew and Luke. How often has God to say a thing in His Word before we are prepared to believe it? And consider this: it would be perfectly possible for an evangelical preacher to preach for a year or more, without mentioning the virgin birth in what he said. But would this have to mean that he did not believe in the truth of that doctrine, or even think it unimportant? Of course not. The critics have often a remarkably unrealistic understanding of the practical, day-to-day issues of life. More on this doctrine in tomorrow's Note.

13) 1:26-38

There are three points in particular that may be underlined in considering the meaning and significance of the virgin birth of Christ. First of all, it bears witness to the essentially supernatural nature of the Christian Faith, and tells us that in the divine provision of salvation man, as man, is set aside. "The male, as the specific agent of human action in history, with his responsibility for directing the human species, must now retire into the background as the powerless figure of Joseph....God did not choose man in his pride and defiance, but man in his weakness and humility, not man in his historical role, but man in the weakness of his nature as represented by the woman, the human creature who can confront God only with the words, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according to Thy word" (Barth). The doctrine of the virgin birth tells us that that part in us which wants to do - indeed, insists on doing - something active for our own salvation is resolutely and firmly set aside by God. Salvation is of God, and of Him alone.

14) 1:26-38

In the second place, the doctrine of the virgin birth also bears witness to how close Christ came to the pollution of sin, when He came to be our Saviour, What we mean by that is this: The Christmas carol says,

'He came down to earth from heaven'

And how low He came! He lived on earth, not as a king, but as a carpenter; not in a palace, but in a peasant home; He was born, not in a childbed, but in a stable, and laid in a manger; not with doctors and nurses in attendance, but cattle. And the circumstances of His birth were such as to cast a shadow on Him and His mother all their earthly days. It was natural that Joseph should have reacted as he did, and want to put Mary away, and the angel reassured him. But no angel reassured the world, and the misunderstanding must necessarily have remained. Who would have believed Mary, had she told?

He came down - as low as this: And it was all part of what was involved in the awesome mystery of being made sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. How near He came to the pollution of sin, when He became our Saviour!

15) 1:26-38

But there is something else that the doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ means to tell us, and it is this: The fact of His birth being totally different from that of any other man proclaims that in this birth God was doing a new thing. A new humanity was being called into existence by the grace of God, which means a decisive break with the old humanity. This is the point that Matthew, for example, in his gospel, seems to be making when he suggests that the story he is telling is that of the second Adam. In Genesis 1:2, 'the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters', and here, Mary is told that she will be with child of the Holy Ghost (35). The power of the Highest overshadowing her symbolised the act of new creation. The old humanity, in spite of its glory and promise, had come to grief, and now the new humanity, signifying a complete break with the old, and a new beginning, was to be ushered in.

But more still: the nature of that new humanity, that new creation, is Christ Himself, living in man. It is not only 'God manifest in the flesh', as Paul puts it in 1. Tim 3:16, but God manifest in our flesh, living in us, made flesh in us. 'Christ liveth in me', living in us, made flesh in use 'Christ liveth in me' cries Paul in Gal 2:20, as he cries with like exultation in Col 1:27, 'Christ in you, the hope of glory'. This is the significance of the virgin birth and of the Christmas message, and this the ground of our rejoicing.

16) 1:39-45

We will need to say a word or two about the significance of the virgin Mary, and the place she should have in our thinking. The facts of the situation are these: the sovereign Lord approached His creature, and bestowed upon this unknown, insignificant, peasant woman the unique privilege and dignity of becoming the mother of the Saviour of the world. This unique happening does not, however, stand in isolation from the rest of history; it stands at the close of the Old Testament era, and is its culmination. The whole history of the old economy is summed up and finds fulfilment in this encounter. This is the marvel and the mystery of godliness. It was indeed a moment of destiny, planned before the foundation of the world. Through all the primal work of creation, as recorded in Genesis, God Almighty had this encounter in mind; through all the experiences of Abraham, the wanderings of the children of Israel, the backslidings and declensions of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel and the turmoil and travail of the captivity, God had His eyes steadily fixed on this, and everything was leading to this moment. It was the one far-off divine event to which the whole creation moved, as the poets have put it. True, this sovereign outworking of the divine purposes must be seen to enclose within it the responsible choice and submission of the human instrument of it. Mary said, 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to Thy word'. It is this that sets Mary's significance in a true perspective. As one of the commentators puts it, "Mary's blessedness (28) consisted simply in this, that, having been chosen for special service and having received an amazing promise, she believed that there would, be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord". And that is a blessedness which we all may share, by showing a like faith and submission (45).

17) 1:46-56

By way of introduction to this wonderful 'Magnificat' of Mary, let us note a general point: it is very significant that in this whole Christmas narrative there is such a considerable outburst of song. Elisabeth broke into song when Mary visited her; Mary breaks into song here; a later, Zacharias breaks into song; then the angels sing over the plains of Bethlehem, announcing the Saviour's birth; and the aged Simeon sings the Nunc Dimittis. As G. Campbell Morgan very beautifully puts it, "Luke, the artist, has gathered and collected, under the guidance of the Holy Ghost, the stories which reveal the fact that when Jesus came into the world poetry expressed itself, and music was reborn." Song is always the result of divine visitation. Whenever and wherever God comes in grace and power, men are set a-singing. It is a mark of reviving and quickening and refreshing. We must be careful here, however, Singing does not bring the quickening: that is to put it the wrong way round, just as to assume that because all-night prayer meetings have been known in the past to precede revival such meetings will necessarily promote revival is to put things round the wrong way. But there is no doubt that when God begins to work, hearts are kindled and constrained into song. Here, Mary and her people had something to sing about: And she has given the Church a glorious song of praise; and being this, it is a wonderful expression of faith. She speaks in it as if what had been promised had actually taken place. The definitive statements in these verses are all in the past tense. This is how faith always speaks: it reckons that God's word is as good as His deed.

18) 1:46-56

We must note at this point a curious and significant fact, on the one hand, there is no specific mention of the Child to be born in her song; and on the other, as commentators are quick to point out, the things she does say do not seem to have much connection with what has happened to her,. The significance of this is that. Mary's song very largely and considerably echoes another song, the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2, and clearly owes a great deal in its thought, structure and ideas to that earlier utterance. As for Hannah, the Lord's turning away of her reproach was seen by her as a token of His turning away Israel's reproach. What He did in her He would do in the nation, and through what He had done to her. And this is the kind of emphasis we see in the Magnificat. Mary saw beyond her own involvement in this divine transaction to what God was doing for the world. The thing she sang about was not the virgin birth and the mystery of conceiving by the Holy Ghost, but what that signified for the world. As Hannah saw in the birth of Samuel the turning away of the reproach of Israel, so Mary saw this also, on a far greater scale, in the birth of her son. And it can hardly be doubted that it was through her clearly intimate knowledge of the Scriptures that she was enabled to discern the purposes of God for her and through her. The entrance of His Word had given her light, and her whole understanding was quickened into awareness, by the influence of the Scriptures upon her.

19) 1:46-56

When we look at Mary's Song in this way, it becomes marvellously illuminative, for we see at once the significance of its central thought and theme, that of visitation - visitation, moreover as the culmination of the ages of divine preparation. She recognized that the fulness of the times had come and that now God had visited and redeemed His people. This is how she construed what the angel had said to her in 32,33. And we should note the language she uses in this connection in 48 and 50, in the phrases 'from henceforth' and 'from generation to generation'. Not only does she look back over the generations at what God has done among His people (51-53), but also she looks back to the beginning of His dealings with His people, to the promise made to Abraham (55), and sees, in what has happened to her, the fulfilment of that promise, and that, therefore, all the future is conditioned by it. That is how big and significant her understanding of the situation is! She had a grasp of the entire meaning of all her people's history, and of the fact that in the birth-to-be of her Son, the promise made to Abraham - nay, to Adam and Eve (Gen 3:15) - was fulfilled, and that the seed of the woman was to bruise the head of the serpent, and all the woe of the world healed. What Hannah's experience had but faintly adumbrated, had now come to pass in her.

20) 1:46-56

Although Mary saw her own exaltation from lowliness to greatness as typical of the new order which was to open out for the whole people of God through the coming of her Son, this is not to say that she was not personally involved in the divine activity: she too was to be blessed. And this she bears witness to in the words 'God, my Saviour'. As Calvin very beautifully points out: "It is with great propriety, in speaking of the joy of her heart, that she gives to God the appellation of Saviour° Till God has been recognized as a Saviour, the minds of men are not free to indulge in true and full joy, but will remain in doubt and anxiety, It is God's fatherly kindness alone, and the salvation flowing from it, that fill the soul with joy. In a word, the first thing necessary for believers is, to be able to rejoice that they have their salvation in God".

This personal involvement of Mary's in the divine purposes leads us to another consideration, which is this: her salvation was part of the great climactic fulfilment of the divine purposes in Christ and was included in it. She was caught up into these purposes. And so may we. This is the glorious possibility, for the message of grace is that in the gospel we are called to share this glorious outworking of the divine plan -we, the worms of the earth, are graced with the high dignity of being called to share His eternal glory! And, just as, before the fulness of the time, many things foreshadowed the great event (e.g. Hannah's experience), so also after it many things are reflections of it in our experience. Every 'call' of God 'repeats' it in some way, for blessing to the world. When God takes hold of a man, and whispers His promises to him, it is that man's responsibility and privilege to lay hold on the promises, and in the stern disciplines of grace to enter into their fulness and fulfilment.

21) 1:57-80

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Zacharias, he announced that the child that was to be born would be called John. When he was born, however, the relatives protested against that name, saying that no one in the family had been so called. But this is surely the point: it was a time of new departure; a new thing was being inaugurated, and a new name was given. It is said that the meaning of the name is 'The Lord is gracious, merciful', and John was to be the forerunner of the One in whom the grace and mercy of God became manifest for the salvation of men. Zacharias' insistence that it should be so is in contrast to his first attitude of unbelief (18-22), which brought judgment upon him. He learned to his cost that God means His word to be taken seriously, on pain of censure and punishment. He expects to be believed, and obeyed. It does not do to question His power to do what He says. It is this that explains his determination here (63) at the naming of the child that God's will should be done. There could be no further hindering of the divine purpose. That was something Zacharias had had time to learn under the chastening hand of God. It also serves to explain the note that runs through his song - the fulfilment of what God had said of old.

22) 1:57-80

The next thing that must be noticed in this: it is very significant that all the 'words' spoken in the Christmas story, by those whose words are recorded for us, are full of profound theology and doctrine. These folk were not theologians, but humble, ordinary people. Yet for them, what was happening had a profound, doctrinal and theological significance. This is the pointer to a true understanding of what Christmas is all about. There is a 'doctrine' of Christmas, and until and unless we understand it, Christmas can be no more than an empty name. Zacharias' song, for all its beauty, is no mere empty utterance; it is a whole system of divinity within brief compass. Look at what it contains: First of all, there is the emphasis on visitation - something that is prominent throughout the entire Christmas story, in all the songs. To say that God has visited His people in the coming of Christ does not mean a passing, or temporary visit, as we use the word. A royal visit if over in a day or two, but here, God has come to stay. He has come to be with us forever. In the Incarnation God has entered human life once for all, and the gulf between God and man has been bridged for good. Nothing will ever destroy that link again. That is why the Christmas message is such good news. Communications have been restored!

But more. The word 'visited' in the Greek has the force of 'turned His face upon' His people. The great thing about the Christmas message is that the God whose face had been turned from mankind because of sin has now once for all been turned towards man in love and pity, and that now His thoughts toward us are thoughts of peace and not of evil. Christmas speaks of a reconciled Face that has been turned towards the children of men. The Psalmist's prayer

Lord, bless and pity us
Shine on us with Thy face

is answered fully in the message of Christmas.

23) 1:57-80

Another emphasis Zacharias makes is on the fulfilment of Scripture and of prophecy, and on God's covenant with His people. It is a true insight in the lovely festival of Nine Lessons and Carols that it should take us right back to Genesis 3:15, for that, human wise, is where the covenant began and was instituted. Such is the grace of God: hard upon the fall of man came the promise of God that he would rise again; as soon as the darkness fell, there was the promise of light (it can hardly be accidental that Zacharias should so emphasise this metaphor in 79, when it figures so prominently in the messianic prophecies, as for example, Isa 9:2). All this qualifies what he goes on to say in 71, 74, in the thought of being 'delivered out of the hand of our enemies'. This, out of context, might be taken to be purely political in conception, even nationalistic, vis-a-vis Rome. But this would be to miss the point. The references to the covenant, and to the fulfilment of prophecy, preclude this idea. The prophecy, the covenant, have to do with the putting away of sin. One may think in this connection of the Jewish consciousness of spiritual need, which 'threw up' the prophecies. And what were the historical sacrifices but an attempt to answer the urgent question of having to face 'an angry God', an agonising, indwelling sin, the dark powers beyond all evil? Thus, 'our enemies' (71) here are all the things that need to be settled before man's true destiny as serving God can become possible.

24) 1:57-80

There is something very touching and moving in Zacharias' words about his own son (76) - a great tenderness indeed. But there is something more also: there is an awesome consciousness that his child is being taken up into the redeeming purposes of God for the world. Although John, like Mary, was in a unique position in this regard, as the forerunner of the Saviour, nevertheless, in some real measure and in a very real way, every believer is called and summoned to participate in God's redemptive purposes. John, then, the newborn babe, was thus destined for high honour, privilege and responsibility as the forerunner, to play a significant part in the divine purposes in the world. And what is spoken of him - 'to give knowledge of salvation by the remission of their sins' (77) - is spoken to all who name the name of Christ. It could hardly be misleading to suggest that one of the sentiments implicit in Zacharias' words must have been the sense of high privilege bestowed upon his son. This is certainly a note that is often struck in the New Testament, as we may gather from Paul's words in Ephes 3:8, "Unto me who am less than the least of all saints is this grace given...." The Apostle never got over the fact that he, the chief of sinners, should be permitted to do this work. This, to him, was a supreme wonder! And should it not be, also, to us?

25) 1:57-80

A word must be said about 'the dayspring from on high' in 78. Thoughtful commentators have seen here a reference to the prophecy in Mal 4:2: "Unto you that fear My name shall the sun of righteousness arise arise with healing in his wings". It is quite certain that what happened at Christmas is in fact described in these ancient prophetic words. This is what gives us the key to interpretation. The word 'dayspring' literally means 'sunrising', and the idea it is meant to express is that in the coming of the Saviour a new day has dawned for the world. Why, of course! If God has turned a reconciled face to the world, then a new day has dawned for men. It is the beginning of new life altogether.

We see here how necessary it is to think of the whole of Christ's saving work - the cross as well as the cradle, and the resurrection as well as the cross. It is not without significance that in the account of the resurrection we should have the same suggestive thought about a new day dawning. In Matt 28:1, we have the words, "In the end of the Sabbath, as it began to dawn towards the first day of the week". This is the final movement of the Incarnation - and this indeed constitutes a new day for the children of men. "Wherefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation: old things are passed away; behold all things are become new". And the 'new day' is a new day because it brings to men the remission of sins (77), the tender mercy of God (78), light in darkness (79) and the way of peace (79).

26) 1:80

A brief postscript to a wonderful chapter. We said earlier, in relation to Mary's being called into the purposes of God, (see Note for Thurs. 2nd March) that it was man's responsibility to lay hold on the promises of God, and in the stern disciplines of grace to enter their fulness and fulfilment. John was put in the deserts, as we read in this verse. He was put into training. Of course. You cannot do this kind of work without training. And there are long disciplines involved, being hidden in the quiver of the Lord (Isa 49:2) before being made into sharp arrows in His hand. Does not this explain a great deal in life, for the servants of the Lord?

27) 2:1-7

We have already seen, in our study of chapter 1, that there is a theology of Christmas, which may be summed up as follows: In the Incarnation of the Son of His love, God has bridged the gap between Himself and mankind, and He offers men in Him and through Him the knowledge of salvation, the remission of sins, light for darkness, and peace with God. When the angels announced to the shepherds the good tidings of great joy, this is what they meant. The 'good will toward men' in their song is not good will shown by man to man, but good will shown by God to man - the good news that He has turned His face towards them in love and pity, assuring them that He is not willing that any should perish, but that all may come to Him and live. It is in the light of this, the theology of Christmas, that we need to understand the highly significant and symbolic words of Luke, 'no room in the inn'. For this is what there was no room for! There are different ways of interpreting the words. They are, of course, a symbol of what the theologians call His humiliation, and as such are some indication of how real His self-emptying was, and how low He stooped for our sakes. But they are also a symbol of the kind of conflict that the message of Christmas, rightly understood, brings into the world and into men's lives. What we see in these verses is no accident of circumstances, due to the crowded state of Bethlehem at the time of the census. God meant this to be a parable, a symbol - 'He came unto His own, and His own received Him not'. More on this theme in tomorrow's Note.

28) 2:1-7

Here is a helpful comment from one of the commentators on this passage: "The point in the story that especially captured Luke's fancy was not just that Jesus was born in Bethlehem according to the old prediction, but that this promise of God came true because of an enactment of the Roman government. God was working His purpose out not only through the hesitancy of Zacharias, the exuberance of Elisabeth, and the quiet faith of Mary; Caesar Augustus too, like Cyrus in earlier days (Isa 45:1), had become the unwitting coadjutor of a salvation which would one day encompass his whole empire". This is a good way to describe the marvellous interaction of the human and the divine in the coming of the Saviour of the world. Ultimately, it was not Caesar Augustus who was responsible, by his decree obliging all to go to their own place. The divine Hand was at work ordaining this, and prophecy was being fulfilled: "Thou Bethlehem....(Micah 5:2). In this light, Caesar Augustus was simply being used, manipulated, by the living God of history.

It is all the more startling, therefore, that there should have been no room for Him. But this was no accident in the divine planning, no 'slipup' in its execution. Rather, it was to show, in symbol, the determined enmity of the world against 'God, in its sin, to show up sin for what it is, as sin; and it was part of His humiliation, and of His atoning work for the sins of the world. It was in this 'no-room-ness' that redemption was wrought. In the world's very rejection of Him, God wrought His marvellous salvation. This is why the cradle and the cross necessarily belong together. For the inevitable and necessary climax of this 'no-room-ness' is seen in Christ as 'despised and rejected of men' and 'forsaken by God' in the dark agony of Calvary.

29) 2:8-20

The message of the angels needs to be understood in its true biblical context. The glad tidings could only be construed as the fulfilment of prophecy, the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. And the messianic prophecies were related to God's unrelenting hatred of sin and His determination to uproot it from His creation and destroy it (the first promise of this being, as we have seen, in Gen 3:15). The Babe is the 'sign', therefore, that God's counter-offensive against sin has now begun. This is God's mercy, says Luke, pointing to the infant Jesus, God's good will toward men. It is focused and sealed in Him. But note the startling, even ludicrous thing that is being said - the sign of divine power and grace in the world, God's answer to the vastness of human need - a Babe?

There are two ways to consider this extraordinary phenomenon, and both need to be looked at with care. One is to remember Paul's well-known words in 1 Cor 1:27, 'God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty'. This is the way He chooses to bless mankind! The Babe is the sign and testimony concerning God's principle of working in the world - the helplessness of a Babe, the weakness of the cross, the foolishness of preaching. Does it work? Ah, yes.

The weapons of our warfare, though weak and insignificant in the eyes of men, are mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds. The weakness of God is stronger than men; 'weakness' lets Him through to the world He longs to bless and save!

30) 2:8-20

But there is another way of solving the seeming incongruity of a helpless Babe being God's answer to the vastness of human need, and it is this: At the dawn of history, as soon as the darkness of sin fell upon mankind, and the crown of God's creation was vitiated, God gave the promise that 'the seed of the woman would bruise the head of the serpent. It was God promising that He would begin again, that there would be another Man, that His original purposes would come to pass for man, that man would come into his own as the overload of creation, that he would achieve and realise his true destiny. And, when the fulness of the time was come, and when the Babe of Bethlehem was born, it was, to be sure, the weakness of God that was to prove stronger than men, but it was something more also - it was God's new man, the new humanity in which His destined purposes were to be fulfilled and realised. It was the planting of a new humanity in the world. And if this be so, we can hardly speak of the incongruity of the situation - not if this Babe is to be the re-institution of man, the re-investiture of man as overlord of creation. Bethlehem represents the incalculable power and potential of a new man: It is little wonder that His coming threw all Jerusalem into a turmoil and drew the wisdom of the east to His infant feet! Here is God's Proper Man. Well might the prophet say, 'His name shall be called Wonderful....' Creation coming back into its own, and coming to fruition and fulfilment - through a Man, the Man Christ Jesus, conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, 'of the Father's love begotten'.

31) 2:8-20

We see Luke's symbolism again in the angels' song. At the first creation we are told that the morning stars sang together and the sons of God shouted for joy (Job 38:7). And, now, at the new creation, the same angels sing for joy, as they celebrate the new thing that is taking place. The 'glory' song that they sang is a full and significant statement of the gospel itself. We can trust the angels to know what the gospel is about! The significance of 'glory to God in the highest' is surely this, that it puts God first, it brings Him back again into His own world, and gives Him His rightful place. The tragedy of the world then, as it is now, is that God has been left out of His world. Sin means God driven out, and God withdrawn from men. But in this gift of the Babe, it is God coming back, God making the overtures of friendship and reconciliation. In Genesis 1 we read repeatedly, 'And God said....' He is the speaking God, and here He speaks, breaking the silence caused by sin, and His voice speaks the word of salvation in the Word made flesh. And this gospel gives God His rightful place once again in the hearts of men; and when it is believed, and this Saviour received, it puts things right, reversing the topsy-turvy order of things that has caused such ruin and havoc in the world. This is the meaning of the 'glory' song.

32) 2:8-20

Putting God at the centre, putting Him first, makes for harmony and peace on earth. Peace is always associated with allowing God His rightful place. It is when we are justified by faith (Rom 5:1 -i.e. when we take our proper place of submission to God) that we have peace with God. It is when our minds are stayed on Him (Isa 26:3 - i.e. when rightly related to Him) that we are kept in perfect peace. It is when we hearken to His commandments (Isa 48:18 - i.e. when He has His rightful place in our lives) that we know peace like a river attending our way. But - peace on earth? This is not yet a fact; but the words are a prophecy. The best part of Christmas has not happened yet. In the meantime, He offers peace; when He comes the second time, He will enforce it!

How is the peace achieved? Well, the gospel is God's good will toward men. It is God saying, "For a small moment I have hid My face from thee; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy upon thee" (Isa 54:9). It is God's olive branch stretched out to man, His hand of friendship and love. "While we were enemies, God reconciled us to Himself in the death of His Son". "This is the covenant I will make with them...I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more". That is the extent and measure of God's good will toward man, that is what He is willing to do - nay, has done - and what He offers. And the sign and seal of this covenant and good will is – the Babe! "God so loved the world that He gave His only – begotten Son...."

33) 2:8-20

There is a symbolism again at work in the response that the shepherds made to the message of the angels, for their reaction surely shows 'the one right thing to do' when the gospel is heard. They came to Jesus - what many have never yet done: - 'Let us now go even unto Bethlehem....'Why do men not come to Christ? Is it because Bethlehem is the lowly place, and they have to stoop to come to Him? Also, they came with haste. This reflects the urgency of the gospel message, in all the New Testament. 'Let us now go....There is no time to lose. Now, rather than later: that is the gospel summons: 'Today, if ye will hear His voice....'It is something that the New Testament can never understand, that men who know in their head and heart that the gospel is the hope of mankind, and are intellectually convinced that it is the answer to their personal lives, should put off the decisive encounter that would lead them into life. One can only conclude that it is a work of satanic deception so to hinder them.

There is one further lesson to be drawn from these verses: the results of the good news. Faith was born in the shepherds' hearts - before, be it noted, ever they saw the Infant Saviour. 'Let us see this thing that is come to pass'. They believed the word of the angels. Faith cometh by hearing. And faith for them was rewarded by sight. And thus they went away rejoicing. It was good news to them. Christmas has happened to them! And forthwith they began to witness. They could not keep it quiet. It was a day of good tidings, and they could not hold their peace. How much they have to teach us!

34) 2:21-40

These verses (21-24) tell of the circumcision of Jesus, the purification of his mother Mary, according to the law, and His being presented to the Lord in the temple, with the attendant sacrifices, according to the law. This has a message for us at the outset, and it is clear and unequivocal: it is sometimes maintained that Jesus was a revolutionary, and His support is sometimes claimed by revolutionaries of modern days, who are intent on kicking over the traces, and jettisoning law 'and order and all kinds of convention. But the Jesus of the New Testament was in fact very different. From His infancy, He conformed to Jewish law, and right through His life and ministry He honoured that law, and faithfully observed it. 'Thus it becomes us', He said, 'to fulfil all righteousness'. True, His gospel is a revolutionary power, but it is a revolution of love, not violence, and its principle of operation is through weakness and foolishness, not power and might. It is very impressive, in this regard to realise that Christ was to accomplish His salvation in the world within the structure of the 'status-quo' and the establishment, and that He was content that it should be so. He does not need revolution to bring in His kingdom, as men today think of revolution. He speaks of faith as a mustard seed, of leaven being hidden in measures of meal. It is the 'hiddenness' of His kingdom that is so impressive, and that excludes the possibility of violent overthrow - as Simon the Zealot had later perforce to learn. 'Not that way', said Jesus to him - and He says it today also.

35) 2:21-40

Simeon's song, the 'Nunc Dimittis' (these are simply the opening words of the song in the Latin version), is very beautiful, and there is something very lovely about this old man in the temple holding the Infant Saviour in his arms and close to his heart. But we must not allow a sentimental reading of it to obscure the profound implications that it has for our thinking. For Simeon, in taking the Saviour to his heart, symbolises the reception of the Son of God for salvation. His simple and moving welcome of the Saviour is a spiritual illustration of what all men must do if they are to be saved. His words can be taken in two ways: on the one hand, we may take them as meaning: 'I can die happy now, for I have seen the Lord's salvation'. We speak sometimes in this way when something great has happened to us, giving us enormous and full satisfaction - there is nothing more to wish for. A mother feels she can die happy if she sees her son getting on in life; a teacher feels he can die happy if he sees the pupil on whom he has set his hopes winning the top scholarship. It is the expression of fulfilment and satisfaction. This has a great lesson for us. To have Christ, we are meant to see, means everything. Not to have Him means to have missed the most wonderful thing in life. To have Him means that the hunger and longing of the human heart is met and answered in such a way that there is nothing left to desire. 'To me to live is Christ', said Paul, writing from prison, with a heart filled with joy and gladness and a peace that passed understanding. Having Christ, he had all, and abounded. And not only so: for him, death was something to be welcomed, for it but brought him into the immediate presence of the Saviour - to die was gain for him, for it brought him into the ocean fulness of what he had already tasted on earth. It is this that Simeon bears witness to - that the answer to the mystery of human existence is - Christ, and a personal relationship to Him, in fellowship with Him by His Spirit. We are made for God; He has set eternity in our hearts, so that only He Himself, in Christ, can meet and satisfy the hungers He has planted within us. This is the secret of life, and when we find Christ we have found all that it is of final importance to know and to find. Life has nothing more to offer us.

36) 2:21-40

The second way in which we can take Simeon's words is in relation, not to life, but to death. This is in fact connected with what has already been underlined, for it is only when we have found Christ to be the answer of God to the human soul that we can say, 'to die is gain', that we can die in peace. Otherwise, death is a grim and frightening enemy. Having seen Christ, and taken Him, Simeon felt he could safely die, and die in peace. This is the most practical and compelling of all questions - the business of dying. The plain truth is, there are many people who are not ready to die; they are afraid to die, because they are not right with God. It is in Christ alone that dying in peace is possible, but in Him it is blessedly possible, and this is the heritage of all who truly believe in Him. But more: these words have an even wider application: reduced to its essentials, the message of the Nunc Dimittis is this: Now that Christ is come, all the future, in life and death, is secure. It is the assurance given in Romans 8:39, 'Neither life, nor death... nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord'. This is why, in face of all possible crises, and every dark and sinister development of evil and lawlessness and violence that may come upon the earth, we need not fear, but on the contrary be possessed by a true and wholesome optimism. The best is yet to be, for the Christian, and it will be, for sure. 'Till He come' is a glorious hope for those who name the name of Christ, and Christmas is the pledge that they do not hope in vain.

37) 2:21-40

Simeon said something else also, however: 'This child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel...' (34). This is the 'other side' of the message of the gospel that must never be forgotten. Here is a note that 'qualifies' the peace of which the angels sang and Simeon himself experienced. What these words signify is that the coming of Jesus into human life means that life can never be the same again. God has set Him in the heart of human existence and, whether we will or no, whether we are conscious of it or not, He is now the centre of life and history, and all is conditioned by Him.

Therefore, everything in life depends on, and centres on, our reaction to Him. Place some radio-active material in a room, and everything there will be touched by it, willy-nilly. There is no escape from its all-prevailing influence. So it is with Christ. He is the living Christ - not merely in the sense that we are alive, but something infinitely more so, for He is life itself, and life-giving. It is the Author of life that has come into history. How could there but be reactions, profound, far-reaching? 'Fall and rising again'; 'thoughts of many hearts revealed'; 'sign to be spoken against' - these phrases are eloquent of the kind of disturbance that Christ causes among men. And it was true right from the start! 'This child', said Simeon; and even as a Child, He exercised the prerogatives of a King, as He laid the wisdom of the east under tribute, when the wise men kneeled before Him. Luke records the eager responsiveness of men's hearts to His coming, but Matthew tells a very different story - troubling, fear, resistance and opposition, with Herod and all Jerusalem in a ferment at the news of His birth. The thoughts of many hearts were indeed revealed!

38) 2:21-40

But there is another way also of looking at Simeon's words. Christ sometimes brings low in order that He might raise up again - indeed, that is always the pattern. He humbles us that He might exalt us. The being brought low can have a gracious issue in a man's life. It is an experience fraught with opportunity. If in being brought low a man is brought to an end of himself, there is hope that he may rise again. The apostle Paul is a case in point. When he came into contact with the living Christ, the result was one of characteristic disturbance. The gospel stuck like a barb in his soul, and it so wrought in him that he was finally brought down, humbled to the place of abject capitulation and surrender at the feet of the risen Lord on the Damascus Road. The wonderful word in Acts 26:16, 'Rise, and stand upon thy feet' shows us the outcome of that humbling. Blessed humbling, indeed, when we recall just how much it was to mean in the forward movement of the gospel in the early Church! But it is salutary for us to remember that, in the process, the very worst in him - all that was ugly and evil - was brought to the surface by the challenge of the gospel he was resisting. The thoughts of his heart were surely revealed!

The prophetess Anna is mentioned only here in the New Testament, but what a testimony she has left us, in her love for the house of God, the discipline that marked her life, and the prayers she offered! She was numbered among those that 'looked for redemption in Jerusalem'. With what joy they must have received her glad and eager witness at this time!

39) 2:41-52

These verses give us the solitary account in Scripture of our Lord's early life, apart from the birth narratives. In this sense, they are unique, and contain lessons of great importance for us. The significance of the age of 12 is of course that at this age a Jewish boy became what was known as 'a son of the law' (bar mitzvah), 'able to accept for himself the responsibilities and obligations to which his parents had committed him by the rite of circumcision' (Caird). Until that time, a boy's parents were responsible for him religiously; from then on, however, he assumed responsibility himself.

G. Campbell Morgan points out a distinction between what is said of Jesus in 40 - 'and the child grew' - and what is said in 52 - 'Jesus increased in wisdom. The first word, he says, refers to 'growth without responsibility', the second to 'growth in responsibility. The derivation of the second word indicates that it was used originally of the pioneer cutting his way through brushwood, and the idea suggested here is of Jesus carving out His way into life, the bringing of all life under control. This is what He began to do at this stage of His experience. It is a highly purposive picture, full of significance.

40) 2:41-52

An independent, responsible existence, yes - and yet, as we are told in 51, He went down from the temple with Mary and Joseph, and was subject to them. There is a fine - and significant - association of ideas here, between 'my Father's business' and being 'subject unto them'. As G.C. Morgan puts it, "the perfect response of the Boy to the will of God meant for Him natural correspondence to ordinary conditions. It did not set Him free from responsibilities to the home in which He had been brought up; but under the mastery of the will of His one Father, He submitted His life to the authority of the home". Conformity, in other words, was the keynote of His experience. This is a salutary lesson for those who appear to think that one can only be faithful to God by abandoning home and parents. It was not so with Jesus. The question of motive needs to be examined here. There is so often an element of the carnal in all this. It is easier, and more exciting and thrilling to the flesh, to leave home than to be obedient to the law of God. It should not be forgotten that, for some, surrender to God will mean just this: willingness to accept parental discipline. Humdrum? Yes, but pretty basic and fundamental for a true Christian position!

41) 2:41-52

All that has been said thus far, in the past two Notes, has a bearing on our Lord's words about being 'about His Father's business'. What is shown forth is His obedience to authority, and this is really the key to the work He came to do on earth. It is 'by the obedience of One' that many are made righteous. He was 'obedient unto death, even the death of the cross'. He was, in the fulness of the time, a man under authority, as the centurion in Luke 7 was able to discern, and it was this that gave Him His power to save and redeem. As Paul puts it in the famous words of Phil 2:9, "Wherefore God hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name..." - because of His obedience, because He was intent on doing His Father's will. Standing at the threshold of the story of His life and ministry, this surely has a symbolic value and significance, in Luke's presentation of the gospel. For, of course, He is the second Adam, who did what the first failed so miserably to do in the Garden of Eden. Here is the outworking of what Newman expresses so beautifully in the words of the hymn,

A second Adam to the tight
And to the rescue came.

42) 3:1-6

These words mark, so to speak, the beginning of the gospel proper, as we may gather also from Mark 1: 1ff, and from early apostolic preaching (Acts 10:37). As Jesus Himself said later, "the law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached." In 1:80, we are told that John was in the deserts till the day of his showing unto Israel; now, here, we have that showing. This serves to remind us of the context of John's ministry, which requires to be interpreted in the light of what is said in 1:77 ff. The question of how far John's ministry is to be regarded as merely preparatory, in relation to our Lord's, is something we shall look at later; in the meantime, we should note particularly the word that Luke uses to describe John's preaching in 18- it is the word from which we get our English 'evangelize' - the announcement of good news. We must therefore interpret the 'thunder' and sternness of John's ministry in an evangelical context. He was not preaching 'law' as we say. This was a work of the Spirit of God. We shall misunderstand John's purpose and function, unless we grasp this fact.

43) 3:1-6

Luke 'dates' the 'Baptist' movement very effectively in these verses, using one emperor, one governor, three tetrarchs and two high priests to do so! It is as if he were saying 'This thing was not done in a corner'. It was something for the world, and of world-wide significance. But more: he sets the Baptist revival against the background of the reign of Tiberias Caesar, against the grim, relentless, debauched, degenerate life of the Roman empire - as if to suggest that here was the only hope for the seriousness of the world-situation, and for the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of his - or any - age. This is an eloquent reminder to us that there is nothing too hard for the Lord, and that it is so often in such dark and formidable circumstances that God does speak again to men. One thinks of the national situation in Israel in the days following the time of the Judges, when "every man did that which was right in his own eyes", and how in such a situation the word of the Lord came to Samuel; and of how, when the book of the law was discovered in the temple in Josiah's day, a work of national reformation and renewal followed. Since this is so, it is not open to the people of God, in a time of declension and lawlessness, simply to bemoan the awfulness of the time, in a defeatist spirit. They must hope in God. That is the message that should surely emerge from these verses for our own time. Man's extremity is ever God's opportunity, and in days when the outlook is very bleak and forbidding, we should - such is His grace - expect God to make bare His holy arm. As the Psalmist once said, "It is time for Thee, Lord, to work: for they have made void Thy law" (Ps 119:126).

44) 3:1-6

Luke, in common with the other Evangelists, asserts that John fulfils in his coming the prophecy spoken by Isaiah (40:1ff). We should be particularly careful not to miss the significance of this fulfilment, for this is the keynote of the Baptist's ministry, rightly understood. The setting and context of the prophecy is that Israel, in captivity in Babylon, is pictured as being on the eve of deliverance by the mighty hand of God. The long discipline of the exile is about to end, and God is about to break in, in power and love. Isaiah himself associates this deliverance from exile with the great exodus from Egypt, centuries earlier, and indicates that God's 'new thing' (43:19) would be a second exodus for His people. It is this idea that the gospel writers also take up: for them, the gospel is a new exodus, the exodus, of which that from Egypt and that from Babylon were but illustrations and types. And John is the Fore runner, the Announcer, that this great and mighty visitation is at hand. And all the comfort, hope and promise of Isaiah 40:1-11 may very legitimately be read into the advent of John and his ministry.

Basically, it was a preparation of men's hearts to receive the good news of the gospel. Isaiah proclaimed a way back to Jerusalem from exile; John proclaimed a way back to God from the dark bondage of sin.

45) 3:1-6

In the phrase in 2, 'the word came unto John....' 'unto' in the Greek is really 'upon'. The suggestion seems almost to be that it 'pressed down from above', that it was a pressure from on high upon John's spirit. At all events, there is no kind of doubt but that he was possessed with a burning conviction. He was a man who had something to say, and he spoke with authority. That is perhaps the best word to describe the nature of his ministry. And it is clear that it was something new in that day. In fact, for long years, the inspired word had been lacking in Israel. As in the days of Samuel, the word of the Lord was a scarce commodity, and there was no open vision. The religious life of the nation was at a low ebb, when suddenly, after the silence of the years, the voice of this strange figure was heard throughout the land, thundering out the word of the Lord to the people. The Baptist movement was significant because it bore an authentic, authoritative word from God about eternal issues. It was a case of eternity breaking into time, touching the lives of men. There was a recovery of the word of God, and a proclamation of that word as an ultimatum to a nation that had slipped away from Him. It is this that explains the stern, almost forbidding note in John's message. True, he was the forerunner of 'good news' (Isa 40), but the only way good news can come to a national situation of decadence and degeneracy is by the radical disease that has caused it being dealt with radically. Hence the solemn summons to repent.

46) 3:7-18

When John's hearers asked him 'What shall we do?' (10), and he answered them in strict moral terms, we should realise that they asked this question not in order to obtain salvation, and John was not advocating 'works' as a way of salvation, but rather as those who had been wrought upon by the Spirit of God, and were now seeking to walk in the light (cf 1 Thess 4:1ff for a similar pattern). What he said, therefore, represents the outworking of the newly found faith. As is indicated in 8, there were to be fruits worthy of repentance, that is, that would be an evidence and proof that their repentance was real. This is always the true, authenticating factor in a genuine work of the Spirit of God: where that Spirit is, moral transformation will inevitably take place. This is indeed the touchstone and criterion by which to judge the reality of any work that claims the Spirit's seal: does it lead to good works, to the restoration of moral values, moral standards in men's lives, in the community, is the moral tone of society raised and purified - these are the real questions; and if these cannot be answered in the affirmative, if there is any uncertainty about these things, we are entitled to place a big question mark over any claim that is made. After all, the Spirit of God is a Holy Spirit, and where holiness is at a discount, there He is not! We heard recently about a new 'teaching' which proclaims that the gospel proclaims that Christ accepts us as we are. This is all very well, and true; but it would seem that those who are attracted to such teaching have construed it to mean also that He is content to leave us as we are, sins and all. Well, one has only to read through these verses to see how far such an attitude has parted company with true, biblical teaching; and we can hardly be in doubt as to what John the Baptist would have said about such an attitude.

47) 3:7-18

We pointed out in an earlier Note that it is sometimes said that John's ministry was not really a Christian ministry, in the true sense, but only preparatory, and mention is made of Jesus' own words about John, "he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he" (Luke 7: 28). One sees the force of this, of course, but what we have said in the last Note or two has surely answered this adequately, and shown the work to have been a genuine work of the Spirit, a work, moreover, that bore the marks of all that is best and truest in the history of awakening in the Church's life, in the scriptural record or in Church history.

For all that, however, there is a sense in which there is a truth in the suggestion that it was also a preparatory movement. Something requires to be said about this, for a number of important issues arise from it that are highly relevant for our time, particularly in relation to what John says about the baptism of the Holy Spirit. For John himself makes a distinction between his own baptism and the baptism Jesus was to administer: 'I baptize with water, but He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire'. How are we to interpret these words? Clearly, if our interpretation in the past Notes about the work under John's ministry being authentic in itself is correct, problems are raised that need some explanation. We shall try to clarify these issues in the next Note or two.

48) 3:7-18

The first thing that must be said is that there is a certain ambiguity, a certain paradox, inherent in the situation, and one that is in the nature of the case inevitable. What we mean is this: on the one hand, it is clear that John was speaking of some future operation of the Spirit when he spoke of the baptism of fire, just as Jesus Himself, later, spoke of it as something in the future. On the other hand the Spirit of God was undoubtedly at work in the world in the Old Testament dispensation, in spiritual awakenings, in the revival of the Baptist itself, and in the ministry of Jesus - and of His disciples - before Pentecost. Also, on the one hand, Jesus spoke of His Church as something only then beginning, in His ministry, and at Pentecost - 'I will build My Church' - and on the other hand it is clear and certain that He was also building His Church in the Old Testament dispensation, operating in history before His Incarnation (cf Paul's teaching in 1 Cor 10). A belief in the doctrine of the Trinity commits us to this view. It is this kind of ambiguity that enables us to say that John's ministry was both a work of the Spirit of God in its own right, and also a preparatory movement; it is this also which enables our Westminster Confession to say on the one hand that the whole Old Testament dispensation was preparatory, and on the other hand to insist very properly that the Old Testament types, sacrifices, ordinances, etc., '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 sins, and eternal salvation (West.Conf. 7.V.)'. Unless we understand that this ambiguity belongs to the very nature of the gospel, and to the fact that Christ came at a particular and specific point in history, once for all, and that the events associated with His coming stand on the border line between two dispensations, the old and the new, we shall remain very confused about many things, and particularly about the teaching of the New Testament about the Holy Spirit.

49) 3:7-18

Take, for example, our Lord's words to the disciples, "Wait for the promise of the Father" (Acts 1:4). This is an instruction to wait for the Spirit. But, if we did not understand the ambiguity we referred to in yesterday's Note, we could easily misinterpret and misunderstand His meaning, and take it to mean that the reception of the Spirit was an additional experience to the experience of conversion or of becoming disciples. And, of course, this misinterpretation is often made. But, the Holy Spirit could not yet be given at this point in the story, because Christ's 'work' was not yet complete - the Ascension was yet to take place. And therefore these men could not as yet have the Spirit. But we today are not in that kind of position, standing on the threshold of a new dispensation, and therefore their experience cannot be taken as normative, valid or relevant for us. And it is idle to try to decide whether they were true believers or not before the Spirit could have been given. For they both were, and they were not. They were true believers of the old dispensation, but they were not yet believers of the new, for the new had not yet dawned, but was only about to, at Pentecost indeed, the experience of the first disciples was not even regarded as normative as an example for the later disciples of the early Church, let alone for us. They did not wait, nor did they have to wait, for the promise of the Father after the days of Pentecost. The Spirit came upon them on their reception of the gospel. Definitive doctrine of the Spirit is to be found in the epistles of the New Testament, not in Acts. And there, in the epistles, we find that the baptism of the Spirit is the initiatory work of grace by which we are brought into Christ (cf John 3, 1 Cor 12:13, Eph 1:14).

50) 3:7-18

In other words, John the Baptist is speaking here of the initiation of the new covenant, by which stony hearts are made into hearts of flesh (Jer 31:31, Ezek 36:26) - the covenant which Christ had come to inaugurate, and which He sealed in His blood. As to the nature of that covenant, it is well expressed in the words John uses to describe Christ's baptism. 'Holy Ghost' and 'fire' are not to be thought of separately, still less does one refer to grace, the other to judgment. Fire is the symbol of the Holy Ghost. Further, the preposition should be 'in', not 'with'. Christ plunges us into this fire (one thinks of the association of this idea with Romans 6, being baptized into Christ's death and resurrection. This is the 'fire' which seals the new covenant to our lives). The fire, then, indicates the nature of what Christ seeks to do for us and in us. It represents divine energy (cf the burning bush and the pillar of fire in Exodus) working in grace towards men. In this sense the qualities it suggests are cleansing and life-giving. On the one hand, fire imparts warmth, and life. Fire "lays hold upon cold, dead matter, making it sparkle and blaze, and turning it into the likeness of its own leaping brightness". This is what happens when the grace of God lays hold of one dead in trespasses and sins. As spring coaxes life into dead branches and twigs, so the fire of the Spirit awakes life where death has reigned. Christ kindles a fire on the cold hearth of men's hearts, and sets them aflame with love for God and man. But fire is also a purifying agent, separating the dross from the pure metal. Indeed, it is when love is kindled in our hearts that it burns all the impurities out of our system. This is one of the things Paul means when he speaks of the love of God being shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost. The cleansing power of the Spirit of God, as He applies the merits of Christ's blood to our hearts, is the glorious message of good news that John proclaimed.

51) 3:7-18

One further thing may be said on this subject before we pass on to the next passage. We have said that John's ministry was a spiritual work in its own right, as well as being, in the other sense, a preparatory work, just as Pentecost was two things in one, the inauguration of the New Testament Church and also an outpouring of the Spirit. It is true that we do not have to wait for the Spirit's coming as the first disciples had to; in the nature of the case it is impossible for us to do so, for He is come. And in this sense it would be truer to say that He is waiting for us. But in another sense, we can, should, and must long for the kind of outpouring of the Spirit that signals a time of refreshing for the Church. Who would dispute that this is our crying need today? In this sense, we supplicate His Presence, and cry with longing hearts,

"Come, Holy Ghost, Spirit of burning, come".

Thou Christ of burning, cleansing flame,

Send the Fire!

Thy blood-bought gift today we claim,

Send the Fire!

Look down and see this waiting host,

Give us the promised Holy Ghost,

We want another Pentecost,

Send the Fire:

52) 3:19-38

Comparison with Mark 1:14 and Matt 4:12 shows that Luke's chronology of the event of John's imprisonment is different. This need not concern us, however, since he is simply rounding off the story of John's ministry before beginning the account of our Lord's. The account of the circumstances of John's imprisonment is given fully in Matt 14:3ff. It was inevitable that such a ministry as John's, which rebuked fearlessly the evils of the time, should have disturbed and roused the opposition of the court and of Herod the king; and this serves to remind us of the cost of faithful ministry to those who exercise it. Luke's words in 20 about Herod, 'added yet this above all', seems to bear a solemn significance: certainly, in the ongoing 'saga' of Herod's spiritual history, the arrest of John marked a stage in the hardening process within his heart against the things of God. At first, when John began to preach, Herod's conscience was stirred and aroused (cf Mark 6:20). But it is clear that he let opportunity slip through unwillingness to take resolute action. He knew not the time of his visitation; and here we see him on the downward road that led finally to a conscience seared and silenced, when the Son of God had nothing to say to him (Luke 23:8,9). By then he had passed the point of no return. Solemn, frightening thought!

53) 3:19-38

Luke gives the subject of Jesus' baptism only two verses, but this should not make us suppose that it is not significant in his interpretation and presentation of the gospel. Indeed, the opposite, as the long genealogy is designed to underline, for it (the genealogy) puts Jesus in His historical context 'as a real man with a family tree' (Caird), standing in the historic line of promise, not only going back to David (and therefore standing as the fulfilment of the Jewish Messianic hope) but also back to Adam (thus showing His kinship with humanity). It should be noted that Luke speaks of the baptism of Jesus in a participial phrase - as if the baptism of all the people were regarded as carrying with it the baptism of Jesus almost as a necessary complement. This has its own significance, indeed, for Jesus' baptism was that of a man with a public calling, as one identified with the people in their need. It was for this reason that He went to the Jordan and submitted Himself to John's baptism. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance; but Jesus had no sins of His own to repent of, no stain on His life that the symbolic waters of baptism needed to touch. The implication is clear and incontrovertible: it was a vicarious baptism that He underwent (i.e. a baptism for others). He did not go to the Jordan because He was a sinner, but because He wanted to number Himself with the transgressors (Isa 53:12), and thus fulfil the role prophesied for Him as the suffering servant of the Lord. He was therefore identifying Himself with men in their sin, standing in with them in their plight and need, and pledging Himself, as their Substitute and Representative, to procure their eternal salvation. Christ, we are told in Romans 8:3, was made 'in the likeness of sinful flesh'; and this shows how like it He became. It was the beginning of His mission 'to be made sin for us' (2 Cor 5:21).

54) 3:19-28

There are some further points to be noted in the account of Jesus baptism before going further in our study. For one thing, it is impressive to see all three Persons of the Trinity mentioned here - Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all alike involved in the divine work of man's redemption. Another consideration of great significance relates to the words spoken by the voice from heaven. It is important to realise - and commentators are largely agreed on this - that this is a composite statement, and that it is derived from two distinct Old Testament passages, Psalm 2:7, and Isaiah 42:1. Of Psalm 2:7, Tasker says, "In the verse of the Psalm the Lord of Israel is pictured as crowning a Son of David as Messiah, with the words, 'Thou art My Son: this day have I begotten thee?'. In the other part of the statement, which comes from Isaiah 42:1, the prophet speaks of an ideal servant of God who perfectly does His will as he treads the pathway of obedience and service. Now - and this is the real heart of the meaning of Christ's baptism - these two quotations represent the two distinct pictures given in the Old Testament of the messianic idea - that of the glorious King, and that of the suffering servant. And Jesus, in this tremendous experience of the baptism, was conscious that He was called of God to fulfil 7-7th of them in His own Person - roles that had hitherto seemed to be inconsistent with and contradictory to one another. It was a recognition - and a proclamation, for those who had ears to hear - that the seemingly divergent lines of prophecy did in fact converge and meet in Him, and that God's glorious, promised King was to be this by being His suffering servant obedient unto death. In the baptism of Jesus, and in the voice from heaven, God was pointing to a Saviour, and a Saviour who was to take the sinner's place and die the sinner's death. It was a pledge of what He was to do on the cross for our sakes.

55) 3:19-38

There is one further lesson for us here, and to understand it we need to go back to Genesis 3. When man sinned, he was cast out of the Garden, and the gates were shut against him, and barred by the flaming sword of the cherubim –

There is a city bright,
Closed are its gates to sin

The gates of Eden were closed by sin. But here we are told that the gates of heaven were opened by Christ (21). He has opened a new and living way, by His blood, into the presence of the Father. What happened on the day of Christ's baptism was that God gave a foretaste of what would be when His beloved Son died on the cross for the sins of men. The open heavens here correspond to the rent veil at the Crucifixion (Luke 23: 45), and both signify the same blessed truth, that now, through Christ, the way back to God is open. It is God saying, "Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it" (Rev 3:8).

Today Thy gate is open,
And all who enter in
Shall find a Father's welcome,
And pardon for their sin.

56) 4:1-23

There are great and tremendous lessons for us to learn from the record of our Lord's temptation in the wilderness; but these lessons are to be found in the context of the story, and have to be mulled over, and dug deeply for. There is a theology to be grasped and understood here, and careful study will pay rich dividends.

Let us begin with the statements made in Heb 2:18, 4:15, about our Lord's experience: "In that he himself hath suffered, being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted"; and "He was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin". The implications in these statements, as Plummer says, are threefold: (i) the temptations were real; (ii) Jesus remained absolutely unstained by them; (iii) one purpose of the temptations was to assure us of His sympathy when we are tempted. Plummer goes on: "The second point limits the first and intensifies the third. The sinlessness of Jesus excluded all those temptations which spring from previous sin; for there was no taint in Him to become the source of temptation. But the fact that the solicitations came wholly from without, and were not born from within, does not prevent that which was offered to Him being regarded as desirable. The force of a temptation depends, not upon the sin involved in what is proposed, but upon the advantage connected with it. And a righteous man, whose will never falters for a moment, may feel the attractiveness of the advantage more keenly than the weak man who succumbs; for the latter probably gave way before he recognized the whole of the attractiveness; or his nature may be less capable of such recognition. In this way the sinlessness of Jesus augments His capacity for sympathy; for in every case He felt the full force of temptation."

57) 4:1-13

We should also remember Paul's words in 1 Cor 10:13 about temptation being common to man. This observation should serve to remind us that studying the temptations of our Lord is no mere academic exercise, of no practical relevance to our day-to-day living; for Jesus was man. He was God, yes, but He was also man, and fully human. And it was as man that He sustained the assault of the enemy (man shall not live by bread alone....).

It is clear that Luke presents the temptation as a confrontation with the enemy. There is something elemental here; it is no mere subterfuge. We are taken right to the heart of the situation. Sin is spoken of in Genesis 3 in terms of an attack by Satan; and now salvation - and it is the history of salvation we are concerned with in the gospel record - is spoken of as a battle with and victory over Satan. In this connection, we should bear in mind the 'symbolic' character of gospel writing. We have already referred to the concept of a second Exodus (which lies behind the thinking of more than one of the Evangelists), with Christ as the second Moses delivering His people out of bondage. Thus, the Red Sea 'baptism' of Israel, which corresponds to our Lord's baptism in Jordan; and now, here also, the forty days and nights to correspond with Israel's forty years in the wilderness. This is not as fanciful an exegesis as might first appear: for the three quotations from Scripture that Jesus uses in the Temptation are all from Deuteronomy, and refer to the testing of Israel in the wilderness after the crossing of the Red Sea. Israel was tested (Deut 8:2) to know what was in their heart; and Jesus is also put to the test. But where Israel failed, Jesus was victorious.

58) 4:1-13

But there is an even deeper association with the Old Testament, and it is this: it is clear that the Temptation story is connected vitally to that of our Lord's baptism, the significance of which, as we have seen, is that He was anointed as God's King and Suffering Servant. The Temptation must therefore be understood in this light. Here is the King entering into enemy-occupied territory, to subdue the kingdom to Himself - through suffering. In this connection we need to see that the initiative lay with Him, not with Satan. He was led of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted. Newman's hymn says,

A second Adam to the fight
And to the rescue came

This is a most significant statement, for we need to see the Temptation in relation to Christ's role as the second or last Adam. The devil challenged the first man, Adam, in the Garden. Here is now the counter-attack: the last Adam challenged the devil, by His presence in the wilderness. The devil ruined the first Adam; the last Adam spoiled the devil. Christ's Temptation therefore takes on a representative character: it was for us, as our Representative, that He suffered, being tempted. As such, it belongs in some sense to the substitutionary work which He accomplished in His coming into the world to be the world's Saviour, and is part of what was involved for Him in following the path prophesied for the Messiah who was to come, in suffering and glory. It was part of what was involved in taking His stand with man in his sin and need. It was, in fact, a 'rehearsal', so to speak, a 'trial run', a foretaste, of His Passion on the cross, as His baptism in Jordan also was.

59) 4:1-13

If, then, we are to assume the representative character of our Lord's Temptation, and that He was tempted as the last Adam, we may therefore expect that the temptations followed the general pattern of those that assailed the first Adam in the Garden of Eden. And, of course, this is what we do in fact see here. Adam and Eve were tempted to eat unlawfully the forbidden fruit; so was Christ: 'If thou be the son of God, command this stone that it be made bread'. Adam and Eve were promised 'Ye shall be as gods'; so was Christ: 'All this power will I give thee...'. Adam and Eve were tempted to presume upon God's word: 'Ye shall not surely die...'; so was Christ: 'He shall give his angels charge over thee...'. The parallel is very striking, and very significant. The great difference is: Adam and Eve fell; but Christ stood firm. Here, then, is the beginning of the great reversal of the effects of sin in the world, the divine counter-offensive, the first stroke of the battle that was to lead to final victory over sin and Satan at the cross and in the resurrection.

If, then, we are to understand Christ's temptations in relation to His Messiahship, it is clear that they have much to say to us today, as they have to all - whether the Church or the individual - for they came to One Whose business and desire was to establish the kingdom of God and promote the gospel in the world. They have therefore particular reference to the dangers and pitfalls that lie in wait for any who put their hands to this work. Let the Church learn, therefore, from them, let fellowships learn, let individuals learn, from these temptations what the Lord wants us to learn, that we may avoid mistakes that lead to disaster and loss in the work of the kingdom. "It is necessary", says James Denney, "to be on our guard against false ideals, and even more against false methods of pursuing true ones."

60) 4:1-13

We turn now to a consideration of the first temptation, the incitement to 'command this stone that it be made bread.' There are a number of pointed lessons to be drawn from this. For one thing, we must see it as a temptation to unbelief. Jesus was tempted to doubt God's Word, to doubt His care and goodness. Significantly, this is how the trouble began in the Garden of Eden: 'Yea, hath God said...?' 'If Thou be the Son of God....The emphasis is all on the 'If'. We should remember what has just happened at the beginning of these forty days. At the Baptism, God had said, 'Thou art My beloved Son'. It had been, for Jesus, a moment of high spiritual exaltation and dedication. Now came the sowing of the doubt: 'If Thou be the Son of God....'Is it all an illusion, a hallucination? In the cold, grey light of the wilderness, when He was hungry, when there was no atmosphere of the open heaven and the sense of God's nearness – then came the temptation to doubt. This is all so real, so true to human experience. In such a situation, one doubts one's calling, and everything seems to be put in the melting pot - and there is no clear, Divine voice to reassure, only the assertion of faith in the dark. And it needs to be this'.

The fact is, if changed circumstances - the removal of the aura of spiritual atmosphere, the loss of creature comforts, the sense of desolation - are going to make us doubt God and His calling of us to His work, then we had better realise how weak our faith really is. For these things will surely come. God sees to it that they will, so as to make sure that our faith and hope rest in Him, and in nothing else.

61) 4:1-13

Another lesson to be drawn from this first temptation is that it came along the line of Messianic power. Jesus had received power at His baptism, and how He was tempted to use it wrongly, to act in His own right independently of God. It is sometimes said that Satan tempted Jesus to do a right thing in a wrong way, and at a wrong time; and this is doubtless true, but it is even deeper than that. It was pointed out earlier that in the Divine pronouncement at the Baptism there were combined two ideas - that of God's anointed King and that of the Suffering Servant - and that Christ was to combine both these figures in Himself. And Satan was precisely trying to drive a wedge between the two, by suggesting a Messiahship without suffering. "You are hungry. Use your power, to turn stones into bread. Why should you suffer, and die of starvation. What use will you be to God if you die? It is your duty to save yourself". This is a temptation that came back to Jesus again and again. He faced it at Caesarea Philippi, when He began to teach that the Son of man must suffer, and Peter began to rebuke him, saying, "Be it far from Thee, Lord: this shall not be unto Thee", earning the devastating rejoinder, "Get thee behind me, Satan". He faced it again at the Cross, when passersby, the unwitting mouthpiece of Satan, said to Him, "If Thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross". This is exactly what Satan was saying to Jesus in the first temptation in the wilderness.

62) 4:1-13

The interpretations given in the last two Notes show us sufficiently clearly the principle involved - it is the temptation to take lower ground, and an easier way than God's appointed way, in the furtherance of His kingdom. This temptation, as James Denney says, "is always with the Church, and it is not the less a temptation that there are many at the present time who turn it into an accusation. The Church, we are constantly being told, does not care for the poor.... people may starve for all it will do to help them. We would believe in it if it made our bread its first care, but if it does not, we will have nothing to do with it. Voices like these are sometimes the modern equivalent of the voice which whispered to Jesus in the wilderness, 'Command that these stones be made bread'....The demand which is here made upon the Church is one to which, if it is to be true to Christ, it cannot accede. It dare not, either for itself or for others, contemplate a kingdom of God founded upon bread. It must have pity for the poor - it must feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick, or be lost forever; but it must have the hardness to say to itself and to all men, even though they are poor, Seek first the kingdom of God; Labour not for the meat which perisheth; Man shall not live by bread alone."

63) 4:1-13

We come now to the second temptation. It will be noticed that Luke's order is different from Matthew's, and it has been suggested that while Matthew's is probably the historical order, Luke places the temptation to presume on the word of God last, as being 'the religious temptation through the word of God, and therefore morally the hardest of all to one who values that Word'. This may be the truth of the matter, although, as Plummer says, 'the reasons for preferring one order to the other are subjective and convincing.'

What has already been said by way of introduction to the temptations in general is just as true with this one as with the first. And we may truly say that Satan's over-all, specific aim was to draw Jesus away from His Messianic calling to be a suffering Saviour. It was, of course, in Satan's interests to seek to get Christ to by-pass the cross, for the cross was destined by God to be the devil's destruction. Small wonder that he whispered so urgently to our Lord, 'Not that way'. It is in this light that we must examine it, and it is in this light that it is best understood, though doubtless it also bears more general lessons, such as that it reminds us of our Lord's own words later in His ministry, "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

64) 4:1-13

We have already pointed out the connection between the Temptations and the Baptism of Christ. This is seen very clearly also in this one, and confirms what was said earlier about the association of the words 'Thou art My beloved Son' with Psalm 2. The words in the Psalm, "Thou art....this day have I begotten thee" (2:7) are followed immediately by "Ask of Me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession". It is against this word of God that Satan's words, "All this power will I give thee, and the glory of them...." are seen in all their blasphemous arrogance. For he is 'ape-ing' Deity, taking God's words on his lips in a foul, irreverent parody. This, in fact, is one of the dominant characteristics of Satan: not only does he parade as an angel of light, confusing the issue, pretending he is God and deceiving men into thinking that it is God who is speaking to them (this is part of the great subtlety of temptation, and one of its most confusing aspects, that terrible point of indecision when we no longer can recognize the distinction between Satan's voice and God's - leading finally to the fearful state of calling evil good and good evil, the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost which represents Satan's final aim and final victory in a man's heart) but also this reveals the real heart of evil: Satan wants to be God. He wants even Jesus - and especially Jesus - to bow down and worship him; and he apes the Godhead in this dreadful way by using the Divine word for himself. This is unfolded in a remarkable way in the book of Revelation where, in the horrific images of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet we have represented to us the idea of a trinity of evil standing over against the Holy Trinity, and in competition with God the Three-in-One.

65) 4:1-13

Satan's offer to Christ, then, is essentially an imitation of God's, and alternative to His. And precisely here do we see its malevolence and danger. For he is offering Christ an alternative way to attain His kingdom, an easier way, a way that involved compromise, a way that by-passed the cross. Put at its simplest, both God and Satan are say in the same thing: "Ask of Me, and I will give thee....", and the condition is also the same: '...if thou fall down and worship me'. But 'worshipping' God involves obedience to His will, and obedience to His will means the cross. This was the choice that faced Jesus.

There is a remarkable and impressive commentary on this in Paul's famous words in Phil2:5 ff where the Apostle says that Jesus 'did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped...but became obedient unto death, even death on a cross' (RSV) That is, Jesus, in saying 'Get thee behind me, Satan....', was saying, "Not that way, Satan; not thus will I take my power and reign". Rather, He chose the path of obedience, even unto death, and because He did so, the kingdoms of the world were given Him, and He was given a name above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow. It is obedience unto death that ever leads to life and power - for our Lord and for His Church. How faithful to this principle the early Church was: 'I determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified' - the 'foolishness of preaching' - the 'weakness of God' - how easy : would have been to depart from this emphasis, in favour of something more spectacular, more 'effective', more 'worldly-wise', more accommodating to the spirit of the world. But the Church, then, resolutely resisted, and therefore conquered for the weakness of God is stronger than men:

66) 4:1-13

But it is a temptation that has not always been resisted today, to our cost. For let us be quite clear he] Christ's attitude comes down on the side of discipline, denial, cross-bearing, 'narrowness', and the principle of division with the world, cutting across its cherished notions, habits, attitudes and desires, and this 'goes against the grain' with the 'natural man' in us. It is so much easier to compromise: It is hardly surprising, in the light of this, that Paul should warn us of the danger of 'corrupting the word of God' (2 Cor 2:17) and of 'handling the word of God deceitfully' (2 Cor 4:2), and of the need to speak in sincerity, as men commissioned by God, when the temptation to accommodate our message, for peace' sake, and minimise the offence of the cross, is so real. Is the thought of offering a 'cut-price' Christianity, with a view to winning more people, so far off the mark as a way of describing some approaches to Christian work? Jesus would not lower the price of discipleship, when dealing with the rich young ruler, and was prepared to let him go rather than compromise the challenge of the gospel; but one suspects that some modern attitudes would have been prepared - because of his 'potential' as a future leader or his social position - to make some diplomatic and judicious adjustment so as to accommodate his undoubted interest in spiritual things, in the hope that at a later stage he might become more committed. However such an attitude may be regarded, whatever it may be called, such an accommodation is still a betrayal of the highest; and Christ simply refused to win men on such terms. For Him and in his estimation, discipleship without a cross was of the devil.

67) 4:1-13

If our interpretation of the temptations of Jesus in general has been right, then we must see that the central message of the third temptation as recorded by Luke lies along the line, once again, of messianic power. It was a temptation to do something spectacular - we shall take this up later - but why this particular kind of spectacular action? What lies behind it? We suggest that only one thing would be conjured up in the minds of pious Jews by the sight of someone being borne by angels down from the pinnacle of the temple - the Son of Man coming in the glory with His angels (see Daniel 7:13, Matt 26:64, Jude 14): This was a deliberate attempt on Satan's part to get Jesus to identify Himself with the Messianic idea of the coming glorious King, without reference to that of the Suffering Figure mentioned elsewhere in the Old Testament prophecies. "Be the glorious King, Jesus, not a Sufferer. If Thou be the Son of God, show Thyself as a King, not as a criminal on a cross:" Once again, it is the whisper: "Bypass the cross, take an easier way". But a Messiah-ship on these terms and in this way was something Jesus was not prepared to countenance, precisely because it was a denial of the Scriptural pattern laid down for Him in the messianic prophecies and assumed by Him in His baptism. This is the force of His counter-quotation of Scripture in 12 (Matthew -puts it even more graphically than Luke, "It is written again", as if to say 'This is the correct interpretation of Scripture, not that'. We shall look at this corrective use of Scripture in tomorrow's Note.

68) 4:1-13

Part of the subtlety of this temptation, of course, lay in the fact that Satan quoted Scripture to substantiate his case. There is something very telling here. It can be very dangerous to base either specific doctrines or specific courses of action on single verses of Scripture. For one thing, this is the danger of taking for divine guidance an isolated verse that 'comes' to one. It can hardly be doubted that God does in fact guide in this way, but we should realise that it can be dangerous in isolation from the rest of Scripture. Satan's point here was unexceptionable, but it happened to be false and wrong. Jesus' word in 12 is a summons to compare Scripture with Scripture. We must beware of looking for propitious verses to justify a course we may already have secretly decided in our hearts, and of exalting a single Scripture into an elevation never meant for it.

That is one lesson to be learned here. Another has to do with the implication in the devil's words, 'If thou be the Son of God....' It is as if he had said, 'Get God to prove you are His Son by putting Him to the test'. There is great plausibility in this, but what does it imply? To ask for proof, to demand a sign from God, a token, is evidence that we cannot trust His simple word. He has said, 'Thou art My beloved Son', but we do not really believe Him, so we must have a spectacular, unmistakeable proof that He means what He says. But 'faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen', and when faith is real, it renders the demand for proofs and tokens unnecessary. This is the force of what Jesus said in reply, 'Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God'.

69) 4:1-13

All this has something very telling to teach us about the work of the kingdom God. The temptation to have 'trust in God' express itself in doing and of daring something unusual for God, something brilliant and spectacular, something that will cause a stir, is often very real, and it betrays fear rather than faith. It is an evidence of insecurity and uncertainty, rather than calm unshakeable trust in God. This is what is often at the root of much abortive activity in the work of the gospel. When will we learn that activity is not necessarily a sign of grace? The apostolic prescription for forward movement was "We will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word". One would have thought that this was a sufficiently clear and unambiguous directive to follow without hesitation, but apparently not: any expedient is good enough as an excuse and a substitute for this calling and the Church spares no pains to contract out of the down-to-earth, hard grind and discipline that it would involve. It is not, of course, spectacular, it does not stir the emotions or titillate the palate; and so it is at a discount. And the Church then wonders why its multifarious activities are so abortive.

70) 4:1-13

Let us look one more time at this third temptation before going on. The appeal to the spectacular is a very subtle one, and needs to be examined with some care to see what lies at its root. The idea that was suggested to Jesus was that 'miraculous works, dazzling, overwhelming, dumb foundering, are the basis on which the kingdom of God can be built. Overpower the senses of men, and you will win their souls for God. This was for Jesus radically false, and it contained a temptation which He steadily resisted. He never worked a miracle of ostentation or display...." (Denney). But it is true that some of His miracles were taken like this. And here is the point: true faith was never produced by them (cf John 2:23 - the kind of faith produced by the miracles was one that Jesus questioned, and repudiated). One thinks in this connection of the rich man's appeal (in the parable in Luke 16:27 ff) to Father Abraham for a spectacular manifestation that would convince his brethren. But Father Abraham said, 'No; they have the Word; if that does not convince them, nothing will'. Denney adds: "The trust of the Church in 'other things' is really a distrust of the truth, an unwillingness to believe that its power lies in itself, a desire to have something more irresistible than truth to plead truth's cause; and all these are modes of atheism....What the evangelist calls 'the word' -the spiritual truth, the message of the Father and of His kingdom - spoken in the Spirit and enforced by the Spirit, told by faith and heard by faith - is our only real resource, and we must not be ashamed of its simplicity." Ah, the temptation to take lower ground than this is a very real one. God give us all grace to believe, quite simply and fervently, that there is nothing more irresistible than truth in pleading the cause of truth!

71) 4:13-15

We look now at the outcome of the temptations. Luke uses a phrase in 14, 'in the power of the Spirit' which stands over against 'being full of the Holy Ghost' in 1, and seems to require some comment. G. Campbell Morgan helpfully says, "Between the condition prior to temptation and that following it, there is a distinction and a difference. It is that which exists between the plenitude of the Spirit and the power of the Spirit. The plenitude of the Spirit is the result and evidence of holiness of character, and is in itself capacity and sufficiency for service. The power of the Spirit is the consciousness which is born of victories won, and triumphs achieved. He entered upon temptation full of the Spirit, that is to say, in possession of all power necessary for the fulfilment of His work. But power bestowed becomes truly powerful when it has been tested through the process of temptation. What is seen in perfection in Christ, is a lesson that men do well to lay to heart. Fulness of the Spirit becomes the power of the Spirit, through process of testing. Herein is revealed the value of the trials and temptations that beset the pathway of the Christian worker. In the experience of all those who know anything of what it is to follow in the footsteps of the Lord in God-appointed service, the power of the Spirit is never realised save through some wilderness of personal conflict with the foe. From such experience entered upon in the fullness of the Spirit, men go out either broken and incapable of service, or with the tread and force of conscious power; in which way, depends upon the attitude in which the enemy is met. If in the spirit of self-complacency, then the devil is invariably the victor. If in the spirit of resolute abandonment to, and abiding in, the will of God, the foe is routed, and consciousness of power is the inevitable sequence."

72) 4:14-30

We come in these verses to the beginning of our Lord's public ministry. It would seem that Luke is intent on indicating that the key to understanding here lies in the statement made in 14 about Christ's return in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and that, so far as he is concerned, the significance of this incident in the synagogue in Nazareth lies in its association with the Temptation experience, and what preceded it, i.e. the consecration at the river Jordan. Indeed, there were echoes throughout the whole passage of the earlier incidents, and it may be that we are meant to see the integral link between them, e.g., the Spirit came upon Christ at Baptism: the Tempter sought to sidetrack Him from His messianic vocation of suffering, but failed: the Spirit's seal was therefore upon our Lord, and therefore, in very reality, He could say, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me" (18), in the solemn consciousness that He had proved this reality in the wilderness temptation. Also in the wilderness, He had refused to be sidetracked from the messianic vocation of suffering, and here, He uses words from the Old Testament which Isaiah originally spoke of the suffering servant of the Lord. And the point is this: Jesus could be 'the Lord's anointed' in the sense of Isaiah's words, and do these things - preach the gospel to the poor, heal the broken hearted, preach deliverance to the captive, only by virtue of the fact that He had refused the easier way of Messiahship without a cross in the Temptation experience, and had accepted in principle the discipline of death for the fulfilment of His calling to be the Saviour of the world. As Paul puts it in Phil 2, He was given a name that is above every name because of His obedience unto death.

73) 4:14-30

There are other echoes, too, in this passage, of the Temptation incident. The first temptation had been to bring in the kingdom by turning stones into bread. And here, Jesus very clearly indicates that man shall not live by bread alone, in His words about what He had come to do (18). The second temptation had quoted from Psalm 2, 'Ask of Me, and I will give thee the heathen for thine inheritance... Here, in the reference to the blessing of God going outwith Israel to the Gentiles (25-27), Jesus speaks of how His gospel will reach beyond the confines of the covenant people to the heathen of the world. Not in Satan's way, but in the way of God, would the uttermost parts of the earth become His possession! The third temptation had spoken of God's miraculous preservation (Ps 91:11, 12) -a perverted use of Scripture by the devil. But in the event, when the scribes and Pharisees reacted so violently against Him preaching and teaching, and drove Him out and would have cast Him down headlong from the brow of the hill outwith the city, this promise was fulfilled, and God did miraculously preserve Him from evil, and His angels delivered Him from the fury of His enemies. The false alternatives of Satan are therefore replaced here by the true. Truth and reality always prevail when we are prepared to say and stand by what Jesus said and stood by: 'It is written'. To live by the word of God is to find life and peace, and righteousness and power!

74) 4:14-30

It does not require much imagination to picture the scene in the synagogue that Sabbath day: It was their usual Sabbath worship, with the usual procedure that had gone on week after week down the years; but the sleepy routine was suddenly interrupted and galvanised by the Man they knew so well, from among themselves ('Is not this Joseph's son?'), standing up to read the Scriptures. One can sense the electrical hush that came upon the place, as they realised that here was something different, something they had so rarely known. It was as if God Himself had come into their midst - as indeed He had! - a moment of moments, fraught with destiny, as well-known, often-read words suddenly became vibrant and indeed incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth as He read them. From being for so long no more than a pious religious aspiration, they suddenly became alive and wonderfully real and vital, as He told them that 'this day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears'. The prophecy which found fulfilment that day was one in which "in the original the Prophet puts into the mouth of Jehovah's ideal Servant a gracious message to those in captivity, promising them release and a return to the restored Jerusalem, the joy of which is compared to the joy of the year of jubilee. It is obvious that both figures, the return from exile and the release at the jubilee, admirably express Christ's work of redemption" (Plummer). The beauty of the words in 18 serves to underline and emphasise that His message - the gospel -- is essentially one of good news, and therefore 'acceptable' (19). The fact that it was not accepted by so many of those who heard it is not a reflection upon the gospel but upon them. They admired, but they did not receive His testimony (22).

75) 4:14-30

The wonder (22) with which the Jews at first heard Jesus' words and testimony quickly turned to opposition and violence. Thus early, our Lord is seen to be a divider of men, who came not to send peace but a sword. At first reading this would seem to be a truly extraordinary reaction in face of such an announcement and proclamation of good news; but it is in fact in keeping with the whole testimony of the New Testament. The gospel is a disturbing force, and it touches men somewhere in the raw - in this case the Jews' hide-bound prejudice and exclusiveness vis-a-vis the Gentiles. One thinks of Paul's experience in Acts 22:21, where the Jews were quite prepared to listen to his testimony until he mentioned the Gentiles. Jesus' words in 25-27 have an impressive prophetic ring about them, for they describe what in fact proved to be so true of the Jews as a people, not only in Biblical times, but down the ages until now. John sums it up well in the Prologue to his gospel (1:11): "He came unto his own, and his own received him not". One wonders, however, whether the real heart of this opposition shown here lies in the fact that they failed to recognize Who Jesus was. 'Is not this Joseph's son?', they asked. This was purely an earth-bound view of Him; faith must surely have seen that anyone making such a claim as He did - that the Scripture just read had been fulfilled in His reading of it - could only be the Messiah Himself, and the Son of God. It was this that made them stumble and, stumbling, react as they did, in bitter hostility against Him. They did not see the truth; they would not see it, because 'seeing' it would have proved too costly and caused too great an upheaval in their lives. As we say, there are none so blind as those that will not see.

76) 4:31-44

In this passage we now see the message of good tidings that Jesus had proclaimed in the synagogue unfolded and exemplified in the incidents that took place in Capernaum. It is as if Luke, after recording that earlier scene in Nazareth, were now saying to us, 'For example...this!' This section of the gospel can be studied in different ways. On the one hand, we could look at it as a description of the meaning of the Sabbath. For what happened in it all took place on the Sabbath Day. We may surely find a significance in this. It tells us that this is what a Sabbath should be like, what, in fact, the Sabbath was designed and ordained of God to be - a day of blessing, renewal, refreshment, a day of the right hand of the Most High. We see the power of God at work in the synagogue in the morning; in a private home in the afternoon; and in the streets and the open air in the evening. We should notice the words used by his audience to describe the nature of his work - 'with authority and power' (36). Exactly! In this connection let us remember that Luke, in common with the other gospel writers, is writing from the standpoint of the resurrection and victory of Christ, looking back and viewing all from the standpoint of the kingship and lordship of Christ. He is interpreting and explaining how it was that Christ could do these things, and on what basis. This opens up what could be called the 'doctrine' of miracles, and we shall need to say something about this in the Notes that follow.

77) 4:31-44

The significance of the miracles that Jesus wrought is, in the first instance, that they stand in the record as a testimony to the fact that 'miracle' is what the whole story of the gospel is about. It is the story of God's miraculous intervention in the human situation. But more: if we think of Jesus as having come as the King of the kingdom He proclaimed, then the miracles may be regarded as the credentials of the King Who had come from God, the evidence that His claim to kingship was not an idle one. Considered thus, the miracles and signs assume a notable significance as proving that He was the promised King and the fulfilment of the age-long hopes and yearnings of the Old Testament. The New Testament Church had a great clarion call in its preaching and testimony - 'Jesus is Lord', and it is this that the gospel writers are concerned to communicate to their readers, and this their purpose in recording the miracles. Thus we see His Lordship manifested and exercised over nature and the elements, over disease, devils and death. They demonstrate His absolute authority in all these realms. Nor is this all, either. The miracles are evidences and tokens of the new order that Christ came to inaugurate. The kingdom has come, albeit only in its first-fruits as yet, and we await its glorious consummation. The miracles have a forward look. C.S. Lewis illustrates this point well when he likens them to the snowdrops that appear in the early months of the year. They are the harbingers of spring. There may be storms still to come, and the weather bleak and desolate; but the tokens of spring have been seen, and it is sure to come. So the miracles tell us that grace has decisively breached this weary, sinsick world of ours, and that a new day is about to dawn. In these works of His power man has been privileged, so to speak, to have a brief glance at the last chapter of the story, to see how it all ends. In this sense, the words of the well known hymn are particularly applicable: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord".

78) 4:31-44

In the miracles mentioned in these verses there is another note, besides the authority of Christ, ringing through them, which equally vital and characteristic of the gospel, namely His compassion. The word itself, indeed, is not mentioned (Mark uses it in his parallel passage (1:41)), but its reality can hardly be in question, as we may gather particularly from 40, where loving hands were laid on every one of them. From which we may gather that the Lordship of Christ is a compassionate one, and that the compassion of Christ is a strong, vital, authoritative thing, with nothing maudlin or sentimental about it. Nor should we miss the connection between the manifestation of authority and compassion, on the one hand, and the life of prayer which our Lord lived. In 42 we read that Jesus departed and went into a desert place - to pray. This was the fountainhead of all the blessing that gladdened hearts and homes in Capernaum in these days. The lesson for us is simple and plain. It is prayer that releases the authority and compassion of God upon men's lives. If we want to see the power of God manifest in our day, and the compassionate touch of the Saviour's hand upon broken lives around us, we must be much in prayer to God, for in no other way will this be. It is when we ask how many, or how few, prayer meetings there are throughout the Church, and how many, or how few, people attend them, that we come upon the reason why the Church is so barren of life and power and authority. A prayerless Church is a Church that is dead.

79) 5:1-11

One commentator points out that a clear and definite section of Luke's record begins at this point, reaching to 6:11, in which a possibly intentional symmetry is indicated, as follows: The call of a leading disciple (Peter), 1-11, followed by two healings (12-16 and 17-26), which provoke controversy; then, the call of another disciple (Levi), 27-39, followed by two Sabbath incidents (6:1-5, 6-11), which again provoke controversy. This is an interesting structure, and helpful in showing us the 'build-up' of opposition to our Lord's ministry which finally led to the dark and ugly plotting to destroy Him. As to the call of Peter, Calvin regards this passage as being the first, initial call of Peter and the others to discipleship. But this raises real problems; it is certainly the first mention of Peter in Luke's gospel up to this point; but we must remember John's gospel with its emphasis on a Judaeen ministry of Jesus a year before that recorded by the Synoptic writers, Matthew, Mark and Luke, and in which Peter was already called by Jesus (John 1:42). There, also, a promise was made - 'Thou shalt be called Cephas...a stone' - as here, '...from henceforth thou shalt catch men'. And this episode was one of the ways in which the other was helped towards its fulfilment. We shall think further of the disciples' call in tomorrow's Note.

80) 5:1-11

A comparison of the various passages in the gospels which deal with our Lord's summons to the disciples seems to indicate that it was during Jesus' Judaeen ministry (recorded in John, chapters 1-4) that Andrew and Peter, in all probability John, and possibly James also, were called to discipleship. This, it would appear, was a call to personal allegiance - their 'conversion' experience, so to speak, which involved association with Jesus, and fellowship with Him, but not in any way that interrupted their daily duty and calling. Then at a later stage, came the call, recorded in Matt 4:18-22 and Mark 1:16-20 (which may or may not be identified with the incident recorded in this passage in Luke), by which they forsook their nets and followed Jesus - in other words, not so much a call to discipleship as a call to service. Some think that this was also more or less intermittent, and that here, in Luke 5, there was a further 'call', which severed them completely from their secular employment. Then, in Mark 3:13 ff, we are told of their appointment as apostles, and in Matthew 10:1 ff, their commissioning and sending forth in the gospel and the work of the kingdom. Finally, there was the anointing at Pentecost, and their use of the keys of the kingdom. Thus, in the making of the disciples there were several stages, and their development in that calling was gradual, as they were led on stage by stage, until they 'qualified' in the fulness of the time. They were pupils in the school of Christ. More of this in tomorrow's Note.

81) 5:1-11

There are two things that need to be distinguished in the matter of the disciples' calling. On the one hand, it seems clear that they were led on into ever-deepening levels of spiritual experience by our Lord. This is something that necessarily happens to all who go on with Him. On the other hand, however, we must beware of thinking that a call to service implies a deeper level of consecration than that involved in discipleship. There is only one level of consecration permitted for believers, and that is expressed in Romans 12: 1, 2. Also, we must in this connection take care that we know what we mean by the phrase 'full-time service'. All service for Christ must be 'full-time'; there is no such thing as 'part-time' service in the kingdom of God, in this sense, that one cannot be a Christian for just part of the time, for this is a denial of the very nature of discipleship. The Christian in industry or in the professions is just as much in full-time service as the minister or missionary. What we often mean by 'full-time' service would be better called special or specific service. All are called to full-time discipleship, but not all are called to give up their secular employment in the fulfilment of it. Not all are called to preach, for example, for preaching is a specific and special activity that only some are called to and required for. But every disciple may nevertheless be a 'fisher of men', that is, they may learn to win others to Christ. The positive, definite, distinct work of introducing others to Christ is what the Church exists for; and it implies two things: first of all, the man who fulfils this vocation must himself know Christ as his Saviour and Redeemer. We cannot introduce anyone to a Jesus we do not know ourselves; secondly, the 'others' we seek to introduce to Him are really 'outside' until they are brought 'in'. They really need to be 'caught', and saved; and if they are not, they will be lost. This should make it clear that there is an eternal difference between being 'caught' and 'not caught' in the net of the gospel.

82) 5:1-11

Some think, as indicated in the last Note but one, that the call mentioned here was what finally severed the disciples from their nets and their secular employment. This may well be. If so, the incident has a profound point to make. It may be that they had not fully appreciated the implications of His call as being the complete forsaking of their nets, or that while realising this well enough, they had felt the pull of their old ways too strong for them, and had gone back to them. If so, then the command to launch out into the deep, and the huge catch of fish that followed, was meant to teach them that work done at His command, and in obedience to Him was work that was supremely worthwhile; and that when He called them to follow Him as disciples, nothing half-hearted would do. It required absolute and unquestioning obedience to Him, and a total commitment of themselves. It meant, in fact, to launch out into the deep in a spiritual sense also. Perhaps this is the point of Peter's confession on 8. Did he realise that his commitment to Christ had-been all too partial and superficial, that he had only been playing at discipleship up to that point? It is not arbitrary to 'spiritualise' in this way, for Jesus Himself did so, in this incident, passing from fishing in the sea to 'fishing for men'; nor must we hesitate to make the transition. There are deeps - and there are shallows - in the spiritual life, and it makes all the difference in the world to the work of the kingdom whether we launch out into the one, or remain content to be in the other. More of this in tomorrow's Note.

83) 5:1-11

The call to Christian consecration, to true discipleship, then, is a call to cast off from shore, to leave the shallows for the deeps. There are different kinds of shallows in spiritual life. There are mental shallows, in which many are content with a superficial understanding of the gospel. They will not go deeply into the mysteries of the Word. They live on their emotions, on fits and starts and moods, but seldom exercise their minds in understanding God's Word. In so doing, they are disobeying that Word, which tells us clearly that we are to love the Lord our God with all our minds, as well as with all our heart. Half the problems that beset the lives of Christians would be solved almost overnight if they were prepared to think intelligently about them, instead of reacting emotionally to them.

Then, there are the moral shallows. There are those who fail, or refuse, to let the great, deep doctrines of the Word touch them at the heart and root of their being. They have been content with a superficial transformation, a cleaning up of the outside of their lives. But salvation is a moral transformation within, in the deep places of the being; and when the discipline of the Word has not been allowed to do its work there, a man is living in moral shallows, and he remains, from the spiritual point of view, stunted.

And there are the spiritual shallows. When a man is living mentally and morally in the shallows, his spiritual life is inevitably going to be poverty-stricken in every way - it will be dwarfed, stunted, empty and nondescript. Babies in Christ when we should be men - is not this the charge that can so often be laid against us in the Christian Church? Christ wants us to get clear of the shallows; He demands all that there is of us, body, mind, heart, soul, and all else. When He has less than this, this much will be true of us: however genuine our interest in the work of the kingdom, our lives will never tell for God, and our witness will never be effective.

84) 5:12-15

In the parallel account of this incident, Matthew in his gospel places it immediately following the Sermon on the Mount (8:1-4), and this serves to underline from whence the leper's conviction came as to Christ's power to help Him. With him, faith came by hearing (cf Romans 10:17). Luke does not indicate this, but at all events he does show a man with a great confidence in Jesus' power to help him. Nor was that confidence misplaced: it was confirmed in the word of sovereign authority which Jesus spoke to him: "I will: be thou clean". The faith that was in his heart found an immediate response in the Son of God, and the miracle was done. But we must notice that there was an 'if' in the leper's approach to the Saviour. 'If Thou wilt, Thou canst cleanse me'. There was no doubt as to His power to do so; that was clear to him from all he had heard of, and from the lips of, Jesus. But there was a doubt as to His willingness. "It does not follow", he thought, "that although He is able, He will be also willing to help me". Why is this? We can scarcely say that though the power of Christ shone through His preaching, His compassion failed to do so to the same extent. The conclusion we must come to is this: a dreary sense of utter helplessness and despair, born of long years of isolation, ostracism and loneliness, must have bred in him such a spirit of hopelessness that he doubted whether Christ, mighty as He was, could even want to have anything to do with him. "Could even a loving God care for such as I?", he must have thought. It was surely this that kindled and called forth the compassion of Christ, and made Him assure the man immediately that He would cleanse him.

85) 5:12-15

It is this compassion that explains the touch of Christ's hand upon the leper (13). It was not the touch that cleansed him; it was Christ's word, 'I will! be thou cleansed' that cleansed him. The touch was not needed for the cleansing: what it did was to assure the man of the care and love of God. It was God saying to him, "Yes, I do have a care for such as you". As the hymn puts it,

None too vile or loathsome
For a Saviour's grace.

The man had been an outsider for years. He had almost forgotten what the touch of a human hand felt like. He had walked alone and in a terrible isolation. And the touch was Christ's discernment of the comfort and assurance the man needed that the long loneliness was now over. It was his reinstatement into humanity, his welcome back into , human fellowship, a touch that told the poor outcast that he mattered to God.

The illustration this lovely story gives us of the spiritual realities of the gospel can hardly be in doubt. What Jesus did here - the touch He gave to the leper - is simply a parable of His Incarnation, in which He came in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, taking our sinful flesh, identifying Himself with it, touching it, yet not being defiled, in order to take its defilement away. And in the word He spoke we have a parable of the mighty, saving, cleansing word that He speaks to men today in the gospel, in Word and Sacrament. We could hardly find a more moving -or more accurate - description of the good news of the gospel than in these words of Jesus: "I will: be thou clean"!

86) 5:16-26

There are several important lessons to be learned from the story of the man sick of the palsy, the first of which has to do with the man's friends, who brought him to Jesus. Taken at its simplest, what they teach us is to take our needy friends to where Jesus is to be found. Well, do we? Consider what happened: it does not say they asked Jesus to heal him. Presumably it was for healing that they brought him, although who shall say they did not also discern his deeper need, as Jesus certainly did? Now, we may say that the heart of the gospel is the word of forgiveness, and this is the word Jesus spoke to him; and the important thing we need to note is that it was when Jesus saw their faith that He spoke to the man the word of forgiveness. It is faith that calls forth that word from the Son of God, and it is when faith is present that He does speak it. Furthermore, their faith prevailed for him. This is the principle of vicarious faith - faith for those who do not have faith for themselves, who cannot exercise faith on their own behalf. This man literally and physically could not come by himself to Jesus, and there is no evidence in the story that he was capable of exercising faith for himself. The word Christ spoke to him created faith in his heart, and enabled him to appropriate forgiveness and wholeness. More: these men overcame all sorts of difficulties and obstacles in order to bring their friend to Jesus, and this persistence was a proof of the validity of their faith. Sometimes it is difficult to get through to Jesus; yet these men were not discouraged: they persevered, and won through. Here is a lesson for us, indeed! - to be put on our mettle by difficulties and impossibilities, hazards and hindrances, and to press on regardless, refusing to take No for an answer from the circumstances around us.

87) 5:16-26

The heart of the story, of course, is the man himself, and what happened to him. And the first thing we see in this regard is that he had more wrong with him than palsy. The palsy of sin was on his soul, and Christ went unerringly to the root of his problem. And when we bring others to Christ with their needs - or come to Him ourselves with our own - we must be prepared for the all-wise Physician to probe more deeply than we often care about, for He is more concerned to get to the root of our problems than to cure their symptoms. What we think is the matter with us, and what He thinks is the matter with us may be two very different things. This is why Jesus pronounced forgiveness upon him, before healing his sickness. In this regard we should remember that there is an integral relation between sickness and sin, in a number of ways. Some sickness is 'psycho-somatic', that is, something in the mind or soul can produce physical symptoms that are quite incontrovertible and genuine. Then, sickness can sometimes be a direct medical consequence of some sin (a drunkard can literally drink himself to death by doing irreparable harm to his liver). Then, sickness can be a direct chastisement from God (cf 1 Cor 11:30). But, having said these things, we must beware of making unwarranted assumptions about sickness, and assume that all sickness can be explained in these ways. Not so: true, it is the presence of the tragedy of sin in the world that lies behind all sickness, but there are countless innocent sufferers in the world (not indeed but that they are sinful, for all have sinned) of whom it cannot be said that sickness for them has been caused by their own sin. We must beware of being like Job's comforters.

88) 5:16-26

We must pay close attention to the question Jesus asked the Pharisees in 23. The question was not which was easier to do, forgive or heal; for forgiveness (which is eternal) is a greater miracle than healing palsy (which is temporal). The question was which was easier to say. And what Jesus meant was this: "You think it would be easier to say, 'Your sins be forgiven' than to say 'arise and walk', for the first statement is incapable of proof or disproof, and therefore anyone could say that without much fear of proving an imposter; whereas, if you said, 'Arise and walk' and the man did not do it, you would be proved an imposter. Therefore, to prove that My word is valid in the unseen realm as it is in the seen, I will heal him too, as a proof that I have power also to forgive sins". Thus, the miracle in the visible realm (healing) was the evidence and proof of the greater miracle in the unseen, invisible realm, and its sign and seal.

We see, then, that for Jesus the central and all-important issue was forgiveness: 'The Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins' - this is the glory of the gospel. This is the heart of all - not miracle in the physical realm, but in the spiritual. This is the deepest need, the crying, desperate need of humanity. Our problem is not psychological, emotional, but spiritual. It is not a problem of disorientation or of alienation fundamentally considered, but a problem of sin; and our need is not primarily or fundamentally for adjustment or integration, or any of the other popular words in use today: our need is for forgiveness. We need to know the forgiveness of sin. This is the true healing.

89) 5:27-32

The call of Levi (Matthew) gives another instance of the greater kind of miracle, that in the moral and spiritual realm. This is, indeed, Christ's real work, as He Himself indicates in 32, 'I came...to call sinners to repentance'. Levi was a tax gatherer, and it is clear from the gospels how deeply such people were held in contempt and distaste by the people. The system of tax collection was such that an unscrupulous man could extort a great deal of money from his luckless countrymen - and many did. They were therefore a despised and hated class of men, and by none more so than the Pharisees, in whose eyes they were flagrant, obvious sinners, and outcasts of the people. This is the kind of man Jesus called to discipleship on this occasion. Interestingly, Matthew's own account of his conversion is couched in different language from Luke's or Mark's. Luke says 'He saw a publican....'. Mark says, 'He saw Levi....'. But Matthew says, 'He saw a man, named Matthew....' Essentially, all say the same about him; but Matthew himself records a wonderfully illuminating fact. It is as if he were saying to us: "When men looked on me, they saw the tax-gatherer, the sinner, the member of the despised class; but when Jesus looked on me, He saw a man - a man with a soul, a man in need, a man made in the image of God, capable of being made - re-made - into a life with meaning and purpose, capable of being recalled to the dignity of true personality. Can you imagine what that meant to me", cries Matthew? "Do you wonder that I left all, to follow Him?" This is the simple truth of the matter; for Levi was called out of that cold, dark, lonely life of isolation, into fellowship with the Son of God.

90) 5:27-32

Levi's response to Jesus was immediate and decisive. He left all, rose up, and followed Him (28). He entered into life. And the evidence of that new life was not long in showing itself. When we enter into life, there are some things we will want to do. We will want, like Levi, to share this glorious experience with others. We will want our friends to meet this glorious Saviour. Levi gave a feast (he had something to celebrate, after all), at which Jesus was the honoured guest, and to which a great company of tax gatherers and others were invited. That was one evidence of his conversion. Another, as we know, was that he wrote a book, the gospel that bears his name - that is to say, his talents, such as they were, were laid at the disposal of Christ. Not many of us may have talents in this direction, but we all have differing gifts and abilities, and these may be put at Christ's disposal for the gospel's sake, and - when the experience of grace is genuine - will be.

The criticism that Jesus' attitude towards Levi evoked in the Pharisees was marked and significant. It is true that the situation was rapidly becoming such that everything He did was liable to be frowned upon and condemned; but there was in fact a question of Jewish law involved here. The tax gatherers had, by their occupation, associating themselves with the Roman government, put themselves outside the law. They were 'sinners' in this sense particularly; and therefore to associate oneself with them, above all to eat with them, was to defile oneself. But Jesus tells them that this is precisely what He can come to do, to heal the sick, and those who had by their lives put themselves outside the law were most patently the sick. That was why He sat with them. You cannot do this 'by proxy'; communicating the gospel to men necessarily involves communicating with them!

91) 5:33-39

These verses record three parabolic illustrations given by Jesus in answer to criticisms made of Him by the Pharisees. We need to look at them - and we shall understand them best - in relation to what precedes them, viz., the conversion of Levi, and the feast which he gave in celebration of it. The scribes and Pharisees uttered their criticism of Jesus' disciples because of their -and His - participation in Levi's feast, and our Lord's reply was surely significant in this light. For Levi's conversion was the marriage of a soul with the Saviour, and this is what they were in fact celebrating. If there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth, it cannot be out of place for such joy to be expressed on earth also! "Rejoice with me", says the Shepherd, "for I have found my sheep that was lost". The illustrations about the garments and the wine have the same kind of force: the nature of what had happened to Levi is well expressed in them. The miracle of regeneration, of newness of life, had taken place, and he was a new creation. It was not a matter of patching up old clothes, or using old bottles; he had received a change of raiment altogether. Christ did not come to patch up our broken, torn lives; He came to make us new men. He had not come to call Levi to a better way of living, but to an altogether different way of living. Our Lord's final word in 39 has its own peculiar force. The previous illustrations show how impossible it is to link the new spirit of the gospel with the worn out forms of Judaism; but this word shows how natural it is for those who have been nurtured in the old to prefer it (in their blindness) to the new - and, indeed, how much easier it is for someone not hidebound by old and hoary tradition (like the scribes and Pharisees) to respond to the new message.

92) 6:1-5

The underlying conflict with the scribes and Pharisees continues in these verses. It is clear that they had not understood what Jesus meant in the illustrations He gave in 5:32-39, for here again they turned critically, as they did concerning the question of the disciples not fasting, to the question of their not keeping the Sabbath. And Christ's attitude exemplifies once more the new wine bursting the old bottles. The dynamic of the new thing He had brought was too great for the old legalism. But there are problems for us here, and it is possible for us to misinterpret and misunderstand what is being said. Clearly, it was the Sabbath commandment that the Pharisees regarded Jesus and His disciples to have broken, and the question for us is: What does Jesus reply to this charge? Is He saying that this commandment is now abrogated by His coming, and that it is possible now to think differently about Sabbath observance? This is where the confusions lie, and it is needful for us to spend some time examining the whole question of the relation between law and grace.

93) 6:1-5

Consider first of all Jesus' reply to his critics. He reminds them of the story of David, and what he did (1 Sam 21:6) in old time. The comparison is not what David did on the Sabbath, but what he did when he was hungry - i.e., Jesus implies that it was hunger that made the disciples do what they did, walking through the cornfields. Nor is Jesus saying that the fact of their hunger entitled them to break the law on this occasion: what they did was, to be sure, a violation of the letter of tradition (i.e. of the Pharisaic interpretation of the law). David, for the same reason of hunger, did the same thing as the disciples; and if it was not wrong for David, in a big matter, with holy, consecrated bread involved, it could hardly be wrong for the disciples in a trifling matter like pulling ears of corn. Jesus' teaching here is that it cannot be wrong to meet real human need on the Sabbath, even if doing so seems to violate cherished traditions, for hunger is as real on the Sabbath as it is on any other day. The law of the Sabbath was not given to restrict or encumber the true needs of humanity, but only to restrict men's sinful propensities. The Sabbath was made for man, as a help, inspiration and blessing, not a bondage.

94) 6:1-5

There are some very major and fundamental issues underlying this whole debate. What had happened in our Lord's time - indeed for generations leading up to that time - was that the glorious doctrines of grace in the Old Testament had been petrified into New Testament legalism. It is a total misunderstanding of the Old Testament to suppose that its emphasis is law, where as that of the New Testament is grace. The truth of the matter is that the Old Testament is full of grace, and that the law therein is an expression of it. It is not a question of the law saying 'This do, and thou shalt live', but of God saying, 'I have redeemed thee, therefore do this, as those that have been redeemed'. It is this that the Pharisees had so utterly distorted, and it was this distortion that Jesus so roundly challenged. In other words, our Lord disentangled truth from error. On the one hand, He challenged the false legalism; on the other, He exalted the true meaning, and purpose, of law, and in so doing, made an absolute distinction between law and legalism. It is this distinction that enables us to understand the emphasis the New Testament makes on keeping the commandments (cf John 14:21, 15:10ff; 1 Thess 4:2; 1 John 2:3ff) and to see that this is a matter of evangelical obedience, not legalism; as something entirely gracious, and therefore liberating.

95) 6:1-5

As to the Sabbath commandment itself, two further points will suffice for the moment. One is that the Sabbath idea belongs to the creation ordinances enunciated in Genesis 2, and by a very long while antedates the law as given in Exodus 20. This means that it is an integral part of man's essential being, just as marriage (Gen 2:20) and labour (Gen 2:15) are. These are unchanging ordinances, and therefore cannot be thought of as being superceded with the passing of the old economy and the coming of the new. Neither the gospel nor any other consideration affects the concept of law in this sense: it is enduring, and eternal. The second point is that there is a great need in the Church today to bear witness to the true meaning and purpose of the Sabbath, to press in to its true blessings, to faith's unclaimed inheritance. There is far far more here for God's people than many have realised, through lack of understanding, or fear of legalism, or unwillingness to submit to the gracious sanctions of the divine law. All the blessings of the everlasting covenant lie in store for those who keep the Sabbath holy as God meant it to be, and fulfil it in spirit and in truth. For the Lord's Day is the day when He specially meets with His people, to bless them and do them good. To sit lightly to it, therefore, is to sit lightly to the Divine purpose for His people, and ultimately to refuse His best.

96) 6:6-11

The story recorded in these verses affords a very good illustration of what was said at the end of the previous note about the blessings of the Sabbath. Our Lord's action in healing the man with the withered hand shows clearly that to take the opportunity to heal and bless men not only did not transgress the law of the Sabbath, but in fact fulfilled it, and made it what it was always the divine intention that it should be. This is the point of Jesus' question in 9, and what He said also serves to expose the ugliness of the Pharisees' attitude. At the very moment Jesus was asking the man to stretch out his hand for healing, they were planning and plotting to trap and destroy Him, in their madness, rage and hatred. And Christ, comparing His own desire to deal with their murderous hate, said, "Is it lawful...to save life or to destroy it?" Put like this, the terrifying 'badness' of these religious men stands out starkly and provides a grim warning of the dangers inherent in a legalism that takes over in men's hearts and minds. It is a terrible blasphemy against true and undefiled religion, and our Lord always challenged it in the severest possible terms. The strictest observance of Sabbath rules and regulations is all in vain, if men's hearts secretly harbour unhallowed and bitter things. The truly damning thing about Pharisaism - then and now - is that it robs men ultimately of humanity. The man with the withered hand did not come into their thinking at all, far less their compassion. His need was obscured and eclipsed by their 'rules'.

97) 6:6-11

As to the miracle itself, we may see in it, not only an evidence of Christ's Lordship over sickness and disease, authenticating His claim to Messiahship, but also a parable of grace, illustrating the operation of the power and mercy of God on the soul. When we lay this passage alongside Paul's words in Ephes 2:1ff, with their graphic description of man dead in trespasses and sins being brought to newness of life by God's word of power in the gospel, we see the force of the comparison very clearly. To be a sinner means to be unable to help oneself, just as the man with the withered hand was unable to help himself; it means to be 'without strength' (Rom 5:6). It is this that is represented to us in the man's withered hand: it was paralysed, and no willpower of his could coerce it into movement. There was no life in it, and 'stretching forth his hand' was the one thing he could not do. Christ's command to him to do so is therefore a superb illustration of the sovereign grace of God in regeneration, in the giving of life. For when He spoke, the creative Word went forth. Christ's command was His enabling, and virtue, life-giving and prevailing, went forth with the word from His lips, and communicated itself to the man. The healing was in the word of the Lord, and in the spiritual miracle of regeneration the same thing happens:

He speaks, and, listening to His voice,
New life the dead receive.

Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. This is the word of power that meets men in the preaching of the gospel.

98) 6:12-19

The appointment of the disciples to the apostleship recorded here needs to be taken along with earlier references to discipleship (see Notes on 5:1-11). Here, we take note of the background of this appointment. Luke indicates that it was in the context of the growing hostility of the Pharisees that Jesus called them to be apostles. This should not be interpreted in negative, defensive terms, as if to say that His message must be preserved at all costs, and the succession secured, should anything happen to Him. Christ was never on the defensive: the initiative was always His; and here, He was intent on carrying the war into the enemy's camp. This bears a real lesson for us today. "When the enemy comes in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord raises a standard against him." In times of opposition, in times of crisis, this is the Lord's answer: He gives gifts unto men, and sets in His Church some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers. This is how we should look at these appointments. It is the evidence of the inexorable, ongoing work of the gospel. He is always on the initiative to bless men; and what we read in 17-19 serves to confirm this: multitudes of needy people came to Him, and He healed them all. But not without cost: virtue, we are told, went out of Him; and it may be that Luke is implying that this is how it would have to be with the apostles also. A price has to be paid for spiritual fruitfulness.

99) 6:20-26

Having called the disciples to His service, Jesus next proceeds to unfold to them the way of discipleship, and what was said about the cost and discipline of discipleship at the end of the previous note is now spelt out for us in detail. There are two preliminary points that must be mentioned at the outset. The first is that it will be noticed that there is a great similarity between the statements in the rest of the chapter and what we know as the Sermon on the Mount, in Matt 5-7. What we have here is of course much shorter, and it differs in several significant points from the other. The question that arises is whether this is Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount, or whether it is a separate sermon. Opinion is divided among the scholars, some thinking one thing, and some the other and some think there is not enough conclusive evidence one way or the other to decide on the matter. In point of fact, an answer to this problem is really immaterial for our purposes. It is enough for us to see the similarity of context as between Matthew and Luke, for both passages follow a call to the disciples and a response made by them. The other point is this: these words are spoken to disciples; and discipleship is presupposed by them. They are not spoken to the people at large. The people may have heard them, but they were to understand that what was said applied to disciples only. Jesus' words presuppose the acceptance of the message of the gospel (cf Matt 4:17-22), and entrance into the life of discipleship.

100) 6:20-26

It is worthwhile to look further at the second point made in the previous note about discipleship being presupposed in these verses. Consider, for example, Paul's teaching in Romans 12:14, 17, 19, 20, 21. These verses are very similar to our Lord's teaching here, and for Paul they represent the implications, the practical outworking, of the gospel which he has unfolded in Romans 1-8. In all his epistles, we have first of all an exposition of the truth of the gospel, and following this, the exhortation and command to live in a certain fashion, to be a certain kind of people on the basis of that truth. And so it is here, in our Lord's teaching. Furthermore, we should note the emphasis on ideas of discipleship, as for example in 39, where He speaks of 'the blind leading the blind', and 43, where He speaks of 'bearing fruit'. These link up with the earlier emphasis in 5:10, 'I will make you fishers of men'. In other words, what Jesus is saying is, "This is what true 'fishers of men' will have to be like, and live like".

And the incentive to such service? The multitude around them at that point (17) – all kinds of needy people. Living, vital discipleship is the only way for God to get through to the needs of the world. Here, then, is the picture presented in these verses: a mighty Christ, in the midst of human need, and the prospect of a living, vital Church in the midst of it, becoming the channel of divine grace to men. This is the setting of our Lord's words, and this is the background against which we need to understand the thrust of the passage.

101) 6:20-26

There are different ways of expounding these statements, but the simple fact that stands out is what the source of true blessedness really is, and with it, the source of fruitfulness and effectiveness; for it is when God's servants are what they ought to be that their lives will tell for the gospel. And that blessedness represents a complete reversal of the world's values (as one commentator puts it). This is one of the points at which we begin to think that Jesus' words here were spoken at a different time from those recorded in Matthew, for where Matthew 'spiritualises' them - 'poor in spirit' - Luke records a plain statement - 'blessed are the poor'. It is literal poverty, not poverty of spirit, that is in view. But we must be careful not to misunderstand Jesus' words. It is not as though poverty, hunger, or grief were in themselves blessed, or guarantees of blessedness. It is to the faithful Christian that poverty, hunger, sorrow and unpopularity are real blessings. The poverty, though literal and real, is a poverty occasioned and entailed by faithful adherence to Jesus. To others, it could be mere sterile suffering, with no blessedness and no significance. Some of the disciples had become poor by surrendering all to follow Jesus. There need be no fanaticism involved in this kind of discipleship. Taking up the cross and following Christ simply leads to this kind of poverty. The missionary who turns his back on worldly and material advancement, the man who gives up a lucrative career for the ministry - these are the parallels. The reversal of the world's values indeed! It is a variation of the words 'the first shall be last and the last shall be first'. In the spiritual world, the way up is down; you die to live, and reign by suffering. And, of course the converse is also true, as the 'woes' in 24-26 make clear. These are the 'this worldly', those whose eyes are on this world rather than on that to come. Jesus said, in another place, "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

102) 6:20-26

Here is a telling comment by the godly Bishop Ryle on these verses. It is worth our careful thought:

"One mighty lesson stands out plainly on the face of these verses. May we all lay it to heart, and learn wisdom! That lesson is the utter contrariety between the mind of Christ, and the common opinions of mankind - the entire variance between the thoughts of Jesus, and the prevailing thoughts of the world. The conditions of life which the world reckons desirable are the very conditions upon which the Lord pronounces 'woes'. Poverty, and hunger, and sorrow, and persecution, are the very things which man labours to avoid. Riches, and fulness, and merriment, and popularity, are precisely the things which men are always struggling to attain. When we have said all, in the way of qualifying, explaining, and limiting our Lord's words, there still remain two sweeping assertions, which flatly contradict the current doctrine of mankind. The state of life which our Lord blesses, the world cordially dislikes. The people to whom our Lord says, "Woe unto you", are the very people whom the world admires, praises, and imitates. This is an awful fact. It ought to raise within us great searchings of heart."

103) 6:27-38

Another characteristic of the new life is love. One commentator observes: "The Greek language has three words for love, which enable us to distinguish Christian love (agape) from passionate devotion (eros) and warm affection (philia). Jesus did not tell His disciples to fall in love with their enemies, or to feel for them as they felt for their families and friends. Agape is a gracious, determined, and active interest in the true welfare of others, which is not deterred even by hatred, cursing, and abuse, not limited by calculation of deserts or results, based solely on the nature of God. Love does not retaliate (27-31), seeks no reward (32-36), is not censorious (37, 38)." It must be conceded that no word has been so devalued and adulterated as love. It is evident that the misunderstanding that bedevilled so much thinking then - and this is as true today - was to think of love in terms of natural attraction for people (32). But love is not natural attraction, nor is it a feeling of generosity towards people, or being well-disposed towards them. It is not a feeling at all, but an attitude. It is the confusion between feeling and attitude that explains the perplexity many experience when faced with the biblical command 'Thou shalt love....' How can one love like that, to order?', they ask. But this is to confuse loving with liking. Liking cannot be commanded, because it is a feeling. 'I like Beethoven, I do not like....' What is the basis of this? One appeals to me, the other does not. In this realm, the liking is called forth by something in the other. And one does not turn that on to order. But to love is different. It is the adoption of a certain attitude towards people, at the command of God, without reference to anything in the people themselves, and independently of them. It involves the adoption of a certain attitude of thought and action towards them. And thought and action, as distinct from feelings, can be controlled and turned on, to order! This is what it is to love!

104) 6:39-45

Our Lord underlines in these verses the relation between character and influence. It is what we are in all this that will tell. It is only by the working out of basic Christian character, the building up of true lives, that we will tell for Christ and His kingdom. There is an inexorableness, almost, in what our Lord says here, in this regard. There can be no possibility of 'pulling the wool over people's eyes' so far as this is concerned. We simply have to be real, and anything less will surely be exposed: those we try to lead will surely land in the ditch, our efforts at doing good (42) will be nullified by our own need to be put right, and our fruitlessness will be manifest to all. In this realm, all forms of unreality come to grief, and no one gets off. One thinks of the incident at the foot of the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt 17:19) when the disciples were unable to help the demon-possessed boy. When they asked Jesus "Why could not we cast him out?" Jesus said it was because of their unbelief. Quite. But the reason for their unbelief was surely that they had not as yet been made - indeed, had not as yet allowed themselves to be made - into the right kind of men, men who could have faith to do this. It is what we are that determines the worth of what we say or do in the service of the gospel.

105) 6:46-49

The final emphasis in the passage – another characteristic of the new life - is on obedience. True faith expresses itself in obedience, and this alone authenticates faith. The parable of the wise and foolish builders underlines in a very graphic way the thrust of Jesus' words in 46 about the futility - and hypocrisy - of calling Jesus Lord without doing the things He says. Hearing without doing is compared to building a house without a proper foundation, and this is always fatal, for storms will come, undermining it and finally bringing it down. For the full force of the illustration we need to look back over the whole passage: not to commit oneself to a new lifestyle (20-26), not to love (which means to show love) in the Spirit of Christ (27-38), not to allow the word of Christ to shape and fashion true Christian character (39-45), not to obey (46) - this is to build falsely and to court disaster. And, indeed, the parable applies in a twofold way - to unbelievers, with eternal consequences of weal or woe, and also to believers who, as Paul indicates in 1 Cor 3, may build gold, silver and precious stones, or wood, hay and stubble. If the former, they will receive their reward; if the latter, they shall suffer loss. Ah, life is earnest indeed, and we are, all of us, building in sorrow or building in joy.

106) 7:1-10

There is a sense in which the story of the Roman centurion provides another, if indirect, comment on the nature of the discipleship which the past notes have been emphasising, for its subject is faith, and it shows a faith that got things done, a faith that worked, a faith that prevailed. This is the meaning of real discipleship. But - the story of the centurion? Is it not rather the story of the healing of the centurion's servant? Ah, well, it depends what we think is important here. To be true, the servant was healed, and that healing was indeed a miracle; but there is something very much more important in this story than the miracle of healing, and that something is the miracle of the centurion's faith. This is the real heart of the passage. It was something that made Jesus marvel. And our primary concern must be to consider what it was about the centurion's faith that so impressed Jesus. It is the centurion and the Saviour that hold the centre of attention, not the servant who was healed. There is a wonderful simplicity about the story, but there is a real sense in which that simplicity is deceptive, for it is a great and profound statement about some of the ultimate things of the Christian faith. This, we believe, will become clear in the Notes that follow.

107) 7:1-10

Sometimes people say they do not wish to have anything to do with doctrine and theology, that it obscures and makes difficult what is essentially simple, and that what is needed is a straightforward, uncomplicated expression of faith such as we have in this story. But, simple as it sounds, there is a whole theology involved in it, and this requires to be made clear. When it is, the meaning of true faith, and the nature of our Lord's saving work, and the secret of victory in the Christian life will become clear also. Theology and doctrine are inevitably involved in a true understanding of the gospel and of faith, and right interpretation - which is simply another name for theology - is essential. To speak of a simple, untheological approach is in fact to put a wrong interpretation upon it, and will therefore lead us astray.

There are three points in particular to be underlined, which together gather up the message of the passage. The first relates to the centurion himself. The man was a Gentile, a stranger to the covenant of promise. Yet Christ said of him that he had not found so great faith, no not in Israel. It is impressive to realise that something good is said about practically every centurion in the New Testament. This should teach us to beware of too rigid an assessment of where to expect to find true believers. God has His folk in some strange and unexpected places! Consider the testimony of the Jews concerning him: "He is worthy for whom Thou shouldst do this". He was a good man. He must have been a good man, for Jews to speak well of a Gentile! He was full of good works, but it was not his works that earned him the attention of Jesus, and he was not helped because he was worthy. In this connection, it is interesting to compare the Jews' estimate of him with his own. "He is worthy", they said. "I am not worthy", he said. It was not the fact that he was worthy, but the fact that he had faith, that brought the help of Jesus.

108) 7:1-10

It was the centurion's faith, not his good works, that Jesus was impressed with. The truth is, his faith was proved real by his works. There is a very positive note in the testimony borne him. Those who knew him and rubbed shoulders with him day by day were able to form definite impressions about him. And they certainly did not receive the impression that his was a negative life: "He loveth our nation, and hath built us a synagogue". It is a great triumph when 'faith worketh through love'! This is the point at which a testimony really tells for God, when those to whom we bear testimony realise that we care for them, and love them! The other thing we need to note about him is that his was a faith that moved the hand of God. He asked, and he received; he sought, and he found; he knocked, and it was opened unto him. What was his secret? This brings us to the second point in the story - this is really the central issue - his estimate of Christ. It is certainly true that the central question in Scripture for faith is, "What think ye of Christ?"; "Whom do ye say that I am?" Two things emerge in the centurion's estimate of Christ: one is that he perceived that Christ was One whose word was with power - "Speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed"; the other is that he perceived that Christ was, like himself, a man under authority, and that this is what gave His word that power. When we understand these two things, we shall have penetrated into the deepest mysteries of the Christian faith.

109) 7:1-10

He perceived that Jesus was one whose word was with power. This is the kind of faith the leper showed when he ran to Jesus saying, "If Thou wilt, Thou canst make me clean" (Luke 5:12-14), as also did the nobleman in John 4:46ff, of whom it is said that he "believed the word that Jesus had spoken unto him" and went home to find his son had been healed. This is the kind of faith that always delights the Son of God. He loves to be trusted! Faith in His Word – this is one great lesson for us to learn here. Saving faith is not believing in a historical Figure, but believing the testimony God has given us in His Word concerning His Son, and believing on Him, resting on Him, trusting in Him because we believe what the Scriptures say concerning Him. But we must note the implications of this, so far as the centurion was concerned. He believed that Christ's presence was not needed for the healing of his servant. To him, Christ's word was as good as His presence. That was a faith that far transcended even that of the disciples at this time, for faith to them was generally associated with His presence. It is salutary for us to realise this, for there are many that seem to imagine that some strange 'experience' must overtake them before they can be saved. Not so: it is a matter of believing the word of God, believing the testimony God gives in the Scriptures concerning His Son, and stepping out in faith in Him.

110) 7:1-10

The second point is even more fundamental, if that were possible: he believed Christ's word was with power because He was One, like himself, who was under authority. "I also", he said. That "also" is the heart of all. With the eye of faith he saw that Christ was precisely in the same position as himself. In effect, he was saying to Jesus, greatly daring, "You and I are the same: we are both alike in this: I am under authority, as a soldier; and You are under authority". This is what the man perceived about Christ. Now, the centurion was under the authority of the Roman prince, Antipas; and it was because he had been, as a soldier, obedient to higher authority, that eventually authority had been vested in him, and he had become a centurion, with soldiers under him. And just as he had obeyed unquestioningly the orders he had received from above, so now he could expect his orders to be obeyed. He could say to his soldiers, 'Come' and 'Go', and it would be done. And, knowing how it was with himself, he felt he knew how it would be with Christ. And he was right! This is what so impressed Jesus, for the man had in fact penetrated the very depth and heart of the mystery of His Person and of His coming, and had grasped the real meaning of His Incarnation and of His saving work. For Christ also had received orders from above, and had utterly submitted in obedience to them - obedient unto death, even the death of the cross; and for this reason, authority had been vested in Him, whereby He could say to disease, "Be gone" and it would go, in obedience to His word. This was Christ's authority, and the man saw how and why it was, saw Christ's 'secret'. Well might Jesus marvel, when He saw how clearly the man had perceived Who He was, and what He came to do!

iii) 7:1-10

In principle, in embryo, we have in fact the whole apostolic doctrine and theology in what has been said in the last note. One thinks of the mighty utterance of the Apostle Paul in Phil 2:5-11. Here, pre-eminently, is a picture of a man under authority and in obedience to authority. Christ was in the form of God: He thought equality with God not a thing to be grasped at, but on the contrary made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant - submitting Himself to the conditions of a servant, of the lowliest kind, for the Son of man had not where to lay His head - and being found in fashion as a man He became obedient unto death....Wherefore, says Paul, - and this is the glorious theology of the gospel - God hath highly exalted Him and given Him a name above every name....!! The source of His power and authority - cf "All power is given unto Me....", "made heads over all things to the Church...." - lies in His having put Himself under authority. Authority obeyed leads to authority bestowed! This, ultimately considered, is how He could say to sickness, 'Be gone', and to the centurion's servant, at a distance, 'Be whole'. It was this authority that the centurion recognized and acknowledged, and Christ could do no other than heal his servant.

112) 7:1-10

The third and final point in this story is this: Luke was a Gentile, and he was writing to Gentiles, and from the Gentile point of view. And this story, of faith in a Gentile must surely have appealed to Luke's mind, and to the mind of the Gentile Church, as showing forth one basic principle of the gospel. What we mean is this: Jesus had come to the Jews in person; but to the Gentiles He did not come in person, but only in His Word, in the word of the gospel. And this is how it was with the centurion. For him, Christ's word was as good as His presence: "Say in a word, and my servant shall be healed". This is how the gospel works today. Christ does not come to us in person, in the flesh, but in the word of the gospel, and by the Spirit. And the same faith that was in the centurion can operate in us also.

A final postscript: how can we be like this man, how can we have a faith like this? Ah, we have to be under authority, like him, before it can be possible. Only those under the authority of Christ can ever have authority in Christian life. The hymn says,

My will is not my own
Till Thou hast made it Thine

And this expresses the necessary and glorious paradox that is as true for the further reaches of the Christian life as for its beginning. We shall never know freedom till we are captive to Christ and His will, and shall therefore never know authority and power over sin until we are under authority to Him. John's words in the Prologue of his gospel are very pertinent in this regard: "As many as received Him, to them gave He authority...."

113) 7:11-17

It would be a fair comment to say, in relation to the story of the raising of the widow of Nain's son from the dead, that there are miracles and miracles. What we mean is this: it is one thing to heal a paralysed and palsied man, but it is quite another to raise a man from the dead. And, of course, this really raises the issue and question of the miraculous in its most acute form. The position is this: there are those who might be able to accept in principle the validity of the miraculous, so long as the miracles were worked in the realm of nature, sickness and disease, or even demon-possession; but - well, raising a man from the dead, that is something qualitatively different, is it not? It is precisely at this point that reservations about the miraculous gain the ascendant, and alternative interpretations begin to show themselves, from the idea of the widow's son being simply in a coma or swoon, to the suggestion that this is simply a pious legend inserted by the early Church. But it needs to be asserted yet again that a real belief in the miraculous in Scripture means believing that the miracles happened in just the way they are recorded as having happened, literally, truly, materially, and that the accounts are recording literal, historical fact. Furthermore, the difference between healing the sick and raising the dead cannot be justifiably regarded as a qualitative distinction; for, once accepting the miraculous in principle, that distinction necessarily has to disappear. More of this in the next Note.

114) 7:11-17

One accepts the miraculous in principle simply because, as we have already pointed out in these studies, miracle is what the whole business of the gospel is about, as may be seen from the following considerations: the two central assertions of the Christian gospel – the Incarnation and the Resurrection - are in essence miraculous. To say that God has broken in, in the mystery of the Word made flesh, is miracle. And to say that God (in Christ) has broken through in the Resurrection, is miracle. And if these are true, there can be no problem; for if these are true, they mean that the whole human situation, with all its woe and mystery, is changed and revolutionised, and anything can happen. Furthermore - and as a corollary – to understand Who Jesus is, is to see that miracle is not only possible, but inevitable. For He is God the Lord; and because He is, any problem with any of the miracles is necessarily resolved. For God is a God Who raises the dead!

The validity of this miracle of a man being raised from the dead cannot, then, be in dispute. But what is our attitude to it and what is our reaction to be? Do we simply say, 'This is wonderful', and pass on to the next passage? Something more than that must be our reaction. For the question needs to be asked, "What is this story saying to us? What is its message to us today, its significance in the context of the record of the gospel that Luke represents to us?" The heart of the story, and its message and significance for us lies in the fact that in it we have an encounter between the Lord Jesus Christ and the grim, universal fact of death. To spell out what this means leads us to ask the question 'What is death?', and that must be our next consideration.

115) 7:11-17

To say that death is the dark shadow that comes, soon or late, upon every life, the solemn hand that knocks at every door, is simply to describe the effect of death on human experience, and does not say what it is. One can describe death only by using theological categories. Death, the Scriptures teach us, is the wages of sin, and the coming of death into the world was associated with man's disobedience. Sin entered the world, and death entered by sin. Death as we know it, therefore, in all its horror and distress and sorrow and grief, is not something that is natural to human experience, but something alien, something intrusive, from outside. It can be understood, therefore, only from a theological standpoint. As the wages of sin, it represents man's predicament, not his misfortune and woe. It is an eloquent reminder to us that sin is a grim reality, accountable to God, that guilt before God is no religious fiction, or something that belongs to religious folk to be exercised about, but not others. For death does not knock only at religious folk's doors; it is not only believers in God who die: atheists, agnostics, the scornful, the cynical, the depraved, the debauched - all alike die. Death is a religious matter, however irreligious a man may be or have been. It is in this context that we need to understand the story of the raising of the widow's son. And it will help us in our understanding of it to expand it as fully as possible.

116) 7:11-17

Death is spoken of in the New Testament in almost personal terms. Paul calls it 'the last enemy'. It 'reigns as a king', as he says in Rom 5:14 (such is the force of the Greek word he uses). Death is the king of terrors and all mankind is under this dark, oppressive rule. If, therefore, help is to come to man, that help must consist in delivering him from this dark enemy, death. And the glory of the gospel is that this is what is proclaimed that Christ has come to do. And this is what history is saying to us, and to all men, today: Christ can deal with the ultimate human problem; indeed, Christ has dealt with it! As such, therefore, the miracle of raising the widow's son from the dead is properly to be regarded as a token - a token of the gospel itself. For if death is the wages of sin, and death is dealt with by the Prince of life, it can only mean that the cause of death - sin - is dealt with by Christ. And He deals with it by bearing it in His own body on the tree. This is why it is not only legitimate, but essential, to spiritualise the miracle and take it as an illustration of the spiritual grace of the gospel which raises men dead in trespasses and sins to newness of life. This, in fact, is the truest and deepest understanding of what took place that day. If what we have said is true, then the deepest thing this story has to say to us is that Christ stands over against the deadness of men in their sins, and in His gospel speaks to them the word of life, the life-giving word, that brings them into newness of life.

117) 7:11-17

Christ has come in the gospel to give life to men. To be true, it was not simply by being in the flesh that He was able to do so. It is His life, death, resurrection and ascension that constitute His saving work. And it was in the decisive battle on the cross with the king of terrors that He finally vanquished death and won the victory. But, even before that decisive battle, He was using that power and exercising His Lordship in an anticipatory manner, anticipating His victory, working miracles on trust, so to speak, on the basis of the victory He was yet to win on the cross. As we sometimes go to a store, to get certain goods on account, and do not pay the bill till later, so also Christ went, so to speak, into the dark store of death and said, pointing to the young man of Nain, "I'll take this on account, mark it down to Me, and I will pay later". All His miracles in the New Testament were performed on this basis. And the price was paid fully, and honoured, in the death He died.

118) 7:11-17

We spoke of the miracle being a token of the gospel. In one very particular sense this is so; for the raising of the widow's son was simply a reversion to the status quo. There would, necessarily, come a time when he would die again, and return to dust. And as such, his being raised from the dead, being a token, was only a faint illustration of something much greater, which is Christ's primary purpose in His dealings with men. For death, being the wages of sin, the sacrament of guilt, is what He can come to deal with, not with its physical aspect only, but in its essence. And so, as well as raising the dead in the physical sense, He is also - and supremely - concerned to raise men in the spiritual sense, and to give them newness of life. And this is something infinitely greater than a return to the status-quo, for "if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things are passed away; behold all things are become new." And those who are thus raised to newness of life will never die: death can have no more dominion over them - just as Jesus, being raised from the dead, lives forever more. In a far greater and deeper sense than they could ever have realised, what the people said on seeing the miracle was gloriously true: 'God hath visited His people'. Little wonder that the fame of Him went forth throughout all Judaea and the region round about!

119) 7:18-23

Differing interpretations have been placed on this incident involving John the Baptist. At this time, John was in prison, and had been for some time; and it is thought by some that a dark prison mood had settled down on his spirit, in which black doubts were assailing him about Jesus. Others think that his problem was that Jesus had turned out a different Messiah than he had expected, and that he was somewhat disillusioned; others - and this interpretation was held by the early fathers - that John was sure of Jesus, but that he wanted to convince his disciples that He was the Messiah. But this last is really negated by the fact that Jesus sent them back with the message, 'Go...and tell John....' Others think that John was only now coming to a firm faith in Jesus, and that what we have here is the dawning of faith in his soul. But this raises difficulties with other passages, e.g. John 1:29, 36, where John's testimony is clear and unquestioning. However we may interpret this incident, it certainly represents an attitude of doubt, whether of faith wavering or of faith beginning to form; and this is its significance, in relation to what Jesus says in answer to it.

There are, in fact, a number of reasons why John was in such a state of doubt. His own ministry had lasted only a few months at the most - then he had been cast into prison - and it had been suddenly, and as it happened, finally, cut short and brought to an end. The voice in the wilderness had been silenced, and God had allowed it. Was not this mysterious? Would not this - inevitably - present a dark enigma to him? And would it not be further accentuated by the fact that Jesus Himself seems to have done nothing about it? John had heard of the mighty works Jesus had wrought: healing the sick, cleansing the leper, raising the dead. Was it beyond His power to set the prisoner free, especially such a prisoner as he? There was so much John could not understand; in the circumstances, is it surprising that doubts had begun to assail him?

120) 7:18-23

Furthermore, the Jesus that John saw was not, to his mind, fulfilling his (John's) own prediction of Him as a coming Judge, with fan in hand. And where was the baptism of fire? These were the considerations that made him send to Jesus, with the question: "Art Thou He that should come...?" Our Lord's answer in 22, 23 is significant, and there is much to learn from it. In the first place, Jesus directs John's mind to His words and His works (in Matthew's account this is reinforced: 'Shew him again'). What we may learn from this is that the way to come to faith, or to renew faith, is to consider the deeds and words of Jesus. This is the biblical prescription: to keep on considering them until their meaning and their majesty grip and master us and our doubts, and bring us to a full conviction about Him, and thus into everlasting life. 'Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God (cf John 20:31)'. When faith burns low, and minds are doubting and confused, here is the answer: show men Christ's deeds and words, proclaim the Saviour. Nor is this any new prescription, when hearing does not seem to work at first (as Matthew puts it: 'Shew him again'), but a repetition of what he had already heard (cf Paul also, in Acts 14:3, in face of opposition to his gospel, "Long time therefore abode they, speaking boldly in the Lord"). The Word will eventually come home to the heart. What encouragement to continue patiently and perseveringly in the work of the gospel!

121) 7:18-23

In the next place, we should notice that it is an appeal to reason that Jesus makes. He says, in effect, to John: "Think, man! What is Messiah supposed to do? Is not this, that I am doing, the work of Messiah? Can you not put two and two together, and see that I am He?" In this connection, we need to recognize that Jesus, in giving John answer, couches what He says in Messianic terms. John, in asking, "Art Thou He that should come?", himself used Messianic categories, for 'He that should come' was a well-known Messianic phrase, used to describe the One Who would meet men's deepest needs. In the same way, Jesus answers him in kind, for the words and phrases He uses are all filled with Messianic ideas (cf Isa 29:18ff, 35:5ff, 61:1ff). It is as if He had said, "What kind of Messiah were you thinking about, John? Is not this His work that I am doing?" We should also note something else. Jesus did not answer the questions and questioning in John's mind. There was no explanation of why he was left to languish in prison (although after John's disciples had left, Jesus said something that indicated that the imprisonment was perhaps integral to the divine purposes, and was fruitful in the work of the kingdom. Earlier, John had said, 'He must increase, I must decrease' (John 3:30) and this was literally happening. His imprisonment was perhaps the seed-bed from which the flowers of the gospel were to come in the future. And even when John was bewailing his uselessness, Jesus was calling him the greatest of the prophets, and the forerunner of the gospel. His martyrdom, indeed, was a foreshadowing of that death that was to bring life to the world). But Jesus gave him no explanation of it then, and for this reason: there are some things that will necessarily remain in the dark, some questions that will never be answered, some perplexities that will never be clear. But these are never real barriers to faith! There is always enough evidence for faith to dawn and doubt to depart, in the word that is preached. Jesus, in 23, is in fact implying, "Even if there are things you cannot understand, John, trust Me. There is ample evidence for you to do that."

122) 7:24-35

Our Lord's words about John the Baptist serve to set the prophet's own doubts in proper perspective, and show us in a most encouraging manner that such doubts (as we may often ourselves have, from time to time) do not detract from the Divine estimate of our work and witness for Him. It is as if Jesus were saying, "Doubts notwithstanding, John is one of the greatest and most honoured of all My servants". Is this a word of cheer and heartening to some despondent servant of God today?

What follows in 31ff shows us a very different attitude to Jesus, and may well be summed up as describing the unreasonableness and perversity of unbelief. Jesus compares that generation to children in the market-place, playing at weddings and funerals, complaining to one another because they 'would not play'. It is a familiar scene: the children are tired and bored, and nothing will please them, the one thing or the other. The point of the comparison here is obvious: the joyous and the solemn notes of the gospel. John's message had been solemn enough in its severity and notes of judgment - a searching, piercing word, touching heart and conscience, summoning men to repentance, bringing the terrors of the unseen world as they were made to think of the doom of unbelievers and the awful end of a godless life. Such was John's message and they did not, in the main respond. On the other hand, Christ had stressed the wooing, tender grace of the gospel, its attractiveness, its wonder and glory and still they had not responded. This is the force of Jesus' words in 33, 34, and they are of wide application, as the next note will indicate.

123) 7:24-35

Jesus' parabolic words are significant in a general way, beyond His own immediate circumstances. Those who oppose and resist the gospel and continue in unbelief often tell themselves that they have good reasons for doing so. When a straight and challenging message is preached, they object to it as being too personal, or too severe, or too solemn. 'That is just his idea of the gospel', they think, 'and there are other, different ones'. And, of course, it is always possible to find fault with the preacher: he does, or does not, do this, he does, or does not, do that and so on. And this is made the excuse for the opposition to the gospel. This can always be said about a preacher, just as it can be said about Christians in general: they are not perfect. But this also needs to be said: it is just as often the case that objection is raised against Christians - or preachers - not because of their faults, but because they are faithful, and their faithfulness is a rebuke and a challenge to those who oppose the gospel. Their objection is not to the fault of believers, but to the goodness which they represent and which, in spite of their faults, they show forth. It was the very men who objected to John's ministry because it was too severe that also opposed Jesus' message when it was gentle and full of grace - and He was faultless. The truth is, says Jesus, when men are opposed to the gospel, they will oppose it in whatever way it is proclaimed to them. It is the gospel they object to, attractive or stern in its appeal. What is more - and this is clear from the nature of Jesus' parable in 32 - when men do this, they are playing with the gospel, and trifling with holy things. But it is no idle game when we are confronted with the claims of Christ, nor simply a matter of opinion, but a matter of life and death.

124) 7:36-50

This is a wonderful story, and it contains many lessons for us. Jesus had been invited to dinner in Simon's house. While they dined, a woman came weeping, and anointed Him, washing His feet with her tears. Simon reacted sharply to this demonstration, and Jesus, knowing his thoughts, spoke the parable of the two debtors to him, and drew some very forthright instruction from it. What has all this to say to us? Bishop Ryle very beautifully suggests that the incident follows chronologically upon the passage in Matt 11:28, and the words, "Come unto Me, all ye that labour..." This may well be. It may be that the woman owed her conversion to these blessed words of invitation. At all events, it was the reality of her conversion that explained her actions in this story. And it is the whole-hearted devotion the woman showed to Jesus that lies at the heart of it and of the lessons that Jesus taught, in relation to the contrast afforded by Simon the Pharisee's attitude to Him. We should note our Lord's parabolic method - here was a confrontation with the truth, for Simon, and with the necessity of pronouncing a verdict concerning it. Simon was made, in this story, to pronounce upon himself. The word of the gospel always tests men, and it is men themselves who by their attitude reveal whether they are within the kingdom or outside it, whether they are right with God or not. This is how it was with Simon that day.

125) 7:36-50

There are several possible misunderstandings that could arise here, that require to be cleared up at the outset. The first is this: the woman did not receive pardon for her sins by her tears, or by her anointing and kissing of Jesus' feet. This is to misinterpret 47. It is not her love that is the ground of her forgiveness, but vice versa. It was her forgiveness that begot love for Him in her heart. We love Him because He first loved us. The whole of the Scriptures bear witness to this, as indeed does this passage itself, rightly understood. Secondly, we are not to take from the passage, and from Jesus' words about the big debt and the small 'debt that He was suggesting to Simon, or conceding to him, that his sin was small compared with the woman's. She was not a greater sinner than he was, only a different kind. But he thought she was. This is the point. And Jesus met him there, on his own ground, so to speak. It is the sense of sin in each of them that is important. Thirdly, our Lord did not bestow the gift of forgiveness on the woman then, in Simon's house, as 47 might seem to indicate. The pronouncement of forgiveness there (47) is rather a statement of something that had taken place before that time, and was a manifestation of it. This makes even more clear the truth that it was not her love that earned her forgiveness. And this is confirmed in 50 - 'thy faith hath saved thee'. This is the key to a true understanding of the parable and the passage, as of everything else in the gospel. We need this reminder, in any lessons we are to draw from the story.

126) 7:36-50

The lesson we draw from the foregoing - and it is a principle of enormous implications and importance - is that real faith, living faith, healthy faith, is faith that works by love, and expresses itself in love. And love is the real test. It is the presence or absence of love for Christ, it is the degree or quality of love to Christ that is the real barometer of spiritual health. In the parable itself, it is the matter of gratitude that Jesus underlines: which will love most? And the answer is: he to whom the sense of forgiveness is most keen and most real. Jesus draws a contrast between the outgoing of the woman's heart in warm and unreserved love and devotion to Him, and the formal (cold, almost) attitude of Simon the Pharisee. This is the challenge of the story for us, for it reminds us that there are two possible attitudes to Christ, two ways of entertaining Him, two ways or standards in the hospitality we show Him in our lives. Abraham and Lot were both believers, both called to go out of Ur of the Chaldees to the land of promise; but their attitude to their call was not the same. The whole record of Abraham's life makes it clear that he held back nothing of himself from God; but with Lot - ah, well, it was very different. He had other irons in the fire, which necessitated moderating his attitude to the things of God. There was a dissipation of spiritual energy and power. He was essentially a double-minded man, and this brought him down to the wrong level, in the things that really matter. The same can be said of the contrast between David and Saul in the Old Testament, and Paul and Demas in the New. It is a contrast that bears a solemn challenge to every believer.

127) 7:36-50

Another lesson that we learn from this incident is that Jesus is sensitive to these two different attitudes to Him. It is not all the same to Him how His people treat Him! For He is not a Concept or a Philosophy, but the Lover of our souls. And therefore He knows, with a deep, unerring knowledge, when our hearts are going out to Him in love, and when they are not. Simon was, no doubt, an accomplished host; yet it was the common civilities that had been missed out. True, he had invited the Lord to dine with him, but how formal and aloof he had been with it all! Now, the point is this: those who act like this may not be conscious of how much they are withholding from Christ. There is often a blind spot. It may be they feel they are giving all they can, all that could be asked of them, all that anyone could be expected to give. And they would be nonplussed and mystified at the suggestion that they were lacking in any way. Look at it this way: let us suppose that someone loves, and loves deeply, another. And that other, in the response made to that love, simply offers friendship, companionship, interest. None of these things rise to the real response that matters. And every fresh expression of friendship is simply another turn of the knife in the heart of the one who loves. And - what is more - such an attitude prevents the one who loves from expressing the love burning there, wanting expression.

128) 7:36-50

So it is with Jesus. He is, of course, glad when we are interested in the things of the Spirit, glad when He sees us coming to Church, glad when we try to serve Him, glad when our interest in spiritual things grows, glad when we get a good grasp of the faith once delivered to the saints - yes, He is glad about all these things. But we can show all these things and still be on the wrong level, still be neglecting Him, giving Him the kind of treatment Simon the Pharisee gave Him. It is interesting, is it not, to realise that if this woman had not come in at that time, nothing might have been said to Simon, and his lack might not have been exposed to him or to others, although Jesus would certainly have been conscious of it. And often, it is the chance circumstance that brings such an issue to light.

But He grieves. And He grieves both because love is being withheld from Him, and also because, in that withholding, He is prevented from giving love as He desires to do. One thinks of Simon Peter on the shores of Galilee, after the Resurrection, in that awful encounter with Christ, when He was challenged with the words, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me?" Peter's failure in the denial was not a failure of faith: it was not lack of faith that brought him crashing down. It was a failure of love. There were other loves in his heart, and his loyalties were divided. Do we begin now to see why Jesus responded as He did to the woman's demonstration of love?

129) 7:36-50

It will be useful, before leaving this passage, to look at the spiritual application of the parable itself, and gather its main lessons from the gospel point of view. In the first place, it teaches the utter bankruptcy of all men alike when they stand in the presence of God. We are all of us debtors, without exception. The amount or extent of the debt is irrelevant in this regard, as is whether we feel the sense of it or not. The operative word is: 'They had nothing to pay'. Secondly, there is the glorious fact of free forgiveness in the gospel. The creditor in the parable forgave them both. There was no kind of consciousness in his mind that one was better than the other: to him they were both bad debtors who had defaulted and could not meet their obligations. And he frankly forgave them both. And note well - 'nothing to pay' must have been their words to him; He was not to know this, unless they themselves had gone to him with this confession. They had come, therefore, to a knowledge of their bankruptcy, and it was this that elicited from him the pardon. Thirdly, there is the lesson of gratitude. Which will love most? He to whom the sense of forgiveness is most keen and real. The woman's whole heart went out in love to the Saviour who had blessed her. This is the real fruit of salvation; and where this is not, salvation is not! A cleansed heart becomes a loving heart. Finally, true reconciliation, being right with God, brings us into fellowship with Christ. How faithful the Scriptures are to the central realities! Everything depends on our relationship to Christ.

130) 8:1-3

This is the chapter which records the famous parable of the sower (4ff), with its emphasis on the importance of hearing the word of God aright. It is prefaced in these verses by an interesting comment on the extent and range of our Lord's activity. There was not a city or village in the land but was visited by Jesus and His disciples with the good news of the gospel. It is surely in relation to the considerable expenditure of energy and strength, not to say the natural emotional and spiritual drain that such a ministry must have involved, that reference is made to the women (2, 3) who were privileged to minister to Him on his journeyings. And who would fulfil such a ministry more willingly or lovingly than those who had themselves known the Saviour's healing and delivering power - and who indeed would be a better testimony to that power than they? The constraint of Christ's love in their lives was decisive for them, and they found that a wonderful stewardship was committed to them, in grace and condescension. Bishop Ryle, commenting that the Son of God could have provided for His own sustenance by His own mighty power, adds, "But He did not do so for two reasons - one reason was, that He would show us that He was a man like unto ourselves, in all things sin only excepted, and that He lived the life of faith in His Father's providence; the other reason was, that by allowing His followers to minister to Him, He might prove their love, and test their regard for Himself. True love will count it a pleasure to give anything to the object loved. False love will often think and talk and profess much, but do and give nothing at all". Well where does this find us?

131) 8:4-15

These verses contain not only the parable of the sower but also our Lord's own interpretation of it, and it is inevitable therefore that we should study both together. Although it is called the parable of the sower, it is clear that the soil in which the sower sows his seed is, for us, the critical factor. For the parable throws the burden of responsibility for the yield of the harvest upon men, upon those who hear. It is right hearing, and right reception of the seed of the Word that brings forth fruit to the glory of God. We cannot sufficiently admire the clear indication the parable gives as to what the work of the kingdom and the heart of the gospel enterprise really is: preaching! The seed is the Word, and the sowing is the preaching of that Word. This is the weapon that God has put in our hands - this is that which under God is mighty to the pulling down of strongholds. This is the way - the God-appointed way - that the kingdom of God is to be extended. This is the way in which God speaks to men, and changes and transforms their lives. Many times in Scripture, the coming of the Word of God to a man is spoken of as that which produces the fruits of the kingdom of God - cf 1 Peter 1:23ff, James 1:18ff, Heb 4:2,12 - such passages speak in plain language what Christ speaks here in parable form. In the last of these references there is a significant comment which illuminates the nature of the response that we must make to the Word - it is that the hearing of it should be mixed with faith that is essential for the bringing forth of fruit. Ultimately, faith is the gift of God, and itself comes by hearing; and yet, in some mysterious and incontrovertible sense, it is our responsibility - our response, our reaction, to the Word of God.

132) 8:4-15

It is clear that in three of the four instances mentioned in the parable, the ultimate purpose of the sowing was not realised and fulfilled. Only the fourth part of the seed bore fruit. This in itself teaches an important lesson: it indicates that there is such a thing as failure in gospel work, in this sense, that there are those that will not respond to the word of the gospel. And we need not necessarily assume that when our witness has not prevailed it is because of some defect or failure in us. Some scholars indeed believe that there is an autobiographical note in the parable, and that Christ is speaking of his own ministry, in Galilee, as well as that of His followers, and describing it to us in these words. We should remember that there were places where He could do no mighty work because of men's unbelief. And there was no defect in His ministry. The fault lay elsewhere. For another thing, we see that though the harvest in the end is great, it is only in the end that it is so; and in the meanwhile, there seems to be so much failure and ineffectiveness. This is something to remember when we tend to become discouraged at the seeming insignificance of the work of the gospel. The ransomed Church of God will be a great multitude which no man can number: the roll of God's elect will be made up, as planned, never fear, and His purposes will all be fulfilled. Furthermore - and this also is evident in the parable - persistent lack of success in the work of the gospel is finally followed by a great and mighty harvest. So much work done with bright hopes turns out to be seed falling by the wayside or on stony ground or among thorns; and it is understandable that discouragement should tend to come. But Christ's words promise a harvest in due season, and this is the best and sufficient incentive to continue in the faithful work. We may well interpret Paul's attitude in Iconium (Acts 14:2, 3) as an instance of this. When much of his preaching seemed to fall on deaf ears, we read, "Long time therefore abode they speaking boldly in the Lord" - and in the end, the harvest came!

133) 8:4-15

Jesus' interpretation of the parable - which, of course, is definitive for us - indicates the various reactions to the sowing of the word of the gospel in men's hearts. The seed that fell by the wayside is snatched away by the devil. The implications here are considerable: for one thing, when sown, it lay on ground made hard by the tramping of many feet and that no ploughshare ever touched, and was therefore easy prey for the birds of the air. For another thing, as Matthew indicates in his version, in the words 'understandeth it not' (Matt 13:19), the reason the devil can snatch away the seed of the word is that he blinds the minds of them that believe not, making them unreceptive to the truth (cf 2 Cor 4: 4). This is always one factor in the work of the gospel. The seed that fell on rock (stony ground) refers, not to stubborn resistance to the truth, but to a superficial reception of it, which gives it no chance to take root. One thinks of the crowds in Jerusalem who, one week cried 'Hosanna to the Son of David', and the next 'Crucify Him'. The implication in the word 'withered' in 6 is significant: Matthew explicitly mentions the scorching by the sun as causing the withering; and since the sun always rises on growing grain, the meaning is that tribulation or persecution is an inevitable part of experience. The growth has got to be something that will withstand this. And for this, the seed must have deep soil to grow in. The thorns are the cares and riches and pleasures of this world which grow up around the growing seed, and choke it, taking up the room that the seed requires for true development. This is perhaps the saddest part of the parable: the seed has been rooted in an adequate depth of soil, and has been growing apace, but the 'other things', the competing interests bring about a division of allegiance that proves fatal. To change the metaphor, having a foot in both worlds will never do in the Christian life. Christ's command is to forsake all to follow Him.

134) 8:4-15

The seed falling on good ground is the word received 'in an honest and good heart'. This does not mean that anyone's heart is naturally 'good', or ever can be, without the grace of God. Bishop Ryle says in a note, "The fairest sense of the words is, 'an unprejudiced heart, willing to be taught', such as was peculiarly lacking in the Jews in our Lord's time. The Bereans are an illustration of this expression (Acts 17:11). The hearing of the word is followed by a keeping of it. The word 'keep' has the force of 'hold fast' (cf Heb 3:6, 10:23), and this is what the New Testament elsewhere calls 'the obedience of faith'. It is this - and nothing less than this - that brings forth fruit in men's lives. Ryle makes this final comment: "For ever let us bear in mind that this is the only religion that saves souls. Outward profession of Christianity, and the formal use of Church ordinances and sacraments, never yet gave man a good hope in life, or peace in death, or rest in the world beyond the grave. There must be fruit of the Spirit in our hearts and lives, or else the gospel is preached to us in vain. Those only who bear such fruits, shall be found at Christ's right hand in the day of His appearing. Let us leave the parable with a deep sense of the danger and responsibility of all hearers of the gospel. There are four ways in which we may hear, and only one is right. There are three kinds of hearers whose souls are in imminent peril. How many of these three kinds are to be found in every congregation! There is only one class of hearers which is right in the sight of God. And what are we? Do we belong to that one?"

135) 8:16-21

The parabolic sayings in 16 are clearly a continuation or variation of the theme of the parable of the sower. As one commentator puts it, "When God kindles a light in the lives of men, they must let it shine for the benefit of others. God's revelation begins as a private discovery and ends as a public trust. It grows with sharing, and those who try to keep it for themselves find they have lost even what they thought they had. Israel had been entrusted with God's light, but only in order to be a light to lighten the Gentiles (Isa 49:6); and, instead of allowing the light to shine, she had concentrated her efforts on protecting the flame from extinction." The whole point about lighting a lamp is that it should give light to others. "The responsibility of every Christian is first to be enlightened, and then to shine." What we receive, we must pass on to others. Two lessons are implicit in Jesus' words: on the one hand, it is unnatural to hide the light; on the other hand, it is impossible to hide it - it must out, if it remains alight at all! This is further emphasised - and the link with the previous parable maintained - by what Jesus says in 21: the rich harvest of God's word, and the bright shining of God's light, involves obedience. Those who are brothers and sisters of Jesus must be sons and daughters of God, and to be this they must 'hear the word of God and do it'. Right hearing of the word, therefore (18) is everything. What challenge there is in Jesus' words! But what encouragement also, and what ineffable compensations for those who hear and do, for this brings them into the glad family relationship of the kingdom of God!

136) 8:22-25

Following the parable and the parabolic sayings about the Word, we see in this next incident something of the power of that Word. Again, in a marvellous way, the stories recorded develop from one another in an unfolding way, the one opening up into the next in a profusion of illustration. Here, we have Jesus' stilling of the storm by His Word; then, in what follows, we have three illustrations of how He stills storms in human life: the maniac of Gadara, the woman with the issue of blood, and the raising of Jairus' daughter. Such is the pattern and general outline of what follows. It is almost commonplace - and well-nigh inevitable - to make this story apply to the storms of life, as indeed Luke himself implies, in the structure of the passage in which it is set. But although this is a legitimate application of the miracle, we must not forget that it is true only because something else, and something greater, is also true - the fact of the Lordship and Kingship of Christ. This is the first lesson the miracle teaches, as indeed it is the first lesson all the others teach. Here, then, is the sovereign Lord, exercising His Lordship over the elements He made - and when they got out of order, He rebuked them and put them in their place! The miracle, therefore, as we have seen in earlier studies, demonstrates His credentials as Lord. But it also was, surely, a token of what He will one day do when He returns to reign: the whole creation, disordered and broken by the Fall, will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. And the same voice that stilled this disorder of nature is the voice which will set free a groaning creation and make the trees of the field clap their hands, and the desert blossom and flourish as the rose!

137) 8:22-25

To continue the thought of the previous note: the disorder and chaos of a fallen creation brought into harmony by a word of command - the Christ Whose almighty Word in the beginning 'chaos and darkness heard and took their flight' one day - a great, glad day - speaking the word of power to renew and restore the created order. This takes us right into the Pauline theology expressed in Colossians 1, where the apostle speaks of the 'reconciliation of all things' - not merely mankind, but the universe, in a cosmic redemption great beyond all telling and imagining, through the death of the Cross. It is because this is true, that we can safely apply as an illustration of what He can do with all the storms of life, of whatever kind. There are the disorders caused by sin in our own little world - in which elements in our constitution, God-given and made by His hand, have reared up and got out of control, to cause disturbance and dislocation. These are storms that the mighty Christ can still, and does, when we call upon His name. There are the storms of life caused by others, by the fact that they themselves are disordered, or that belong to the essential mystery of things, and for which there is no human explanation. These also are storms which Christ can control, rebuke and still. But we may also legitimately apply the story as a token and picture of what Jesus came to do to the greatest storm of all, the storm stirred by the revolt of man against God, the storm whose first ominous rumblings began over the Garden of Eden and came to its awesome climax in the rending of the rocks and the thunderings around the hill of Calvary. And what faith sees there is the mighty Son of God lifted up from the earth, the great Master of the storm, towering over the storm of Divine wrath, with hands outstretched over a world's need, speaking, in the precious blood He shed the all-prevailing word: "Peace be still" - to the guilty hearts of men and to the holy heart of God, so making peace. Wonderful, wonderful Peacemaker!

138) 8:22-25

There is something else, however, of great importance to be learned from this story: there is some evidence for supposing that it may not have been our Lord's will to perform this miracle at this point, at least not in this way. Look at the facts: it was our Lord Himself Who directed the disciples over to the other side of the lake (22). He must have known a storm was to come; yet He deliberately directed His disciples into it. Surely He had a purpose in this? Could it be that He was intending them to learn how to pass through storms, trusting in His unfailing presence with them? If this be so, then He stilled the storm not because strong faith called forth His power, but because their faith was weak! He did, in fact, chide them about their little faith (25). What if this was a storm which He wanted them to go through, and in which He wanted to teach them deep and lasting lessons for the gospel's sake in days to come? What if there were lessons that they could have learned only if the storm had not been stilled, and they had had to endure right to the bitter end? And would things have been different for them in another storm - that in Pilate's judgment hall - if they had been able to learn the lesson of standing firm and immovable in time of storm? This may be taught by the symbolism of Christ asleep in the boat, seemingly unaware of the fear and the heart-cries of His people. Ah, we must learn to trust Him. He that keepeth Israel slumbers not nor sleeps. He often delays His help, to test our faith and make it strong. And His seeming unwillingness to work a miracle for us may be an evidence not of lack of faith on our part to elicit it, but of His confidence in us that we do not need one, and will be better served by the storm raging on than by its being calmed. Does this say something to someone today?

139) 8:26-39

The story recorded in these verses is important not only as an illustration of what has been said in the last few notes, but particularly because of its subject-matter of demon-possession, and the problems this raises for modern minds. No one who reads the New Testament could fail to realise that demon activity in general, and demon-possession in particular, were realities for the New Testament writers, for the apostles and for our Lord Himself. But the modern assumption seems to be that what is called demon-possession in the New Testament would be described today in terms of psychiatric illness. In other words, the demonism of biblical times is equated with mental disease and disorder, whether constitutional or neurotic. This contention seems to many an extremely plausible one, especially since the medical profession, and particularly specialists in psychiatric medicine, can give case histories to show that the symptoms which are often regarded as being those of demon-possession are in fact well-defined symptoms of recognizable mental, emotional and psychiatric disorder. Nevertheless some things must be said to dispute this assumption. The first is that the New Testament itself distinguishes between mental disorder and demon-possession as cf Matt 4:24, where three different things are mentioned: divers diseases and torments, demon-possession, and lunacy. Furthermore, the New Testament writers were able to distinguish between possession and illness or disease when in fact the presenting symptoms were the same in both cases. In those days, the two things were distinguished, and not confounded (cf Matt 9:32,33; Mark 7:32; Matt 15:30 - where we have the dumb man who is said to be possessed by an evil spirit, on the one hand, and on the other a dumb man who is not said to be possessed, even though the symptoms are the same in each case). And Christ cast out the devil in the one, and healed the other. More of this in the next note.

140) 8:26-39

Another point must be made: it is undoubtedly the case that confusion in this subject is made worse by the fact that we readily assume that demon-possession expresses itself in mental symptoms and aberrations. But this is not the New Testament point of view: it speaks of deaf and dumb spirits, spirits of infirmity, as well as of mental symptoms. It is not only in the mind that evil spirits can lodge, but in the body also. And not only so: but in the will also, and in the spirit. When Paul speaks in 2 Cor 4:3,4 of minds blinded by the god of this world, he is not referring to mental disease, but to intellectual revolt. Men do not like to retain God in their knowledge, therefore this happens. And this is something as tangible as physical blindness is, and as resistant to truth as the other is to the light of the sun. In this connection, we should not forget what unbelievers tend to say when the gospel challenges them and seeks to break into the darkness of their hearts. Their attitude is suspiciously like that of the demons in this story (28): 'What have I to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of God...torment me not'. It is as if they were saying, 'So soon? Too soon! Leave us for a while, there is plenty time yet'. This is the voice of the devil in the soul of a man, and it has cost many a man his soul's eternal welfare (cf the rich farmer in Luke 12 who kept putting off attending to the needs of his soul until it was too late - can we not discern the work of the evil one there?). And what do we make of Judas Iscariot? He was not a mental or psychiatric case, yet it is said of him that "Satan entered into him" (Luke 22:3).

141) 8:26-39

The association of demon-possession with nervous and mental symptoms is not an entirely wrong one, however, for this is a realm in which it can in fact occur. It is here that the holding of two opposite extremes can be seen to be unwarranted and dangerous. On the one hand, the assertions that all New Testament cases of devil-possession are psychiatric cases simply does not, as we have seen, fit the facts; and only the philosophical assumption that demon-possession does not occur, and cannot occur, could bring one to such a position (significantly, the same kind of false argument is used to discount the idea of the miraculous - i.e., miracles cannot happen, therefore any seemingly miraculous happening must have some other explanation!). On the other hand, however, it is just as clear that an indiscriminate and uninstructed attitude, which sees demon-possession in every conceivable human situation of disorder (like the 'reds under every bed' in the political sphere - which is an absurdity) is wrong and wildly exaggerated, and has done more than most things to discredit the true, biblical teaching. The almost total preoccupation with demons shown in some sections of the Church is not, in our view, a healthy state. At best it can lead to the distortion of true biblical values, and at worst, it can lead to serious disorder in the spiritual life.

142) 8:26-39

The need, in this whole realm, according to the Scriptures, is: know your enemy. Paul says, 'We are not ignorant of his devices'. But the trouble is, we often are. This is a much neglected element in theology, and far too little time and thought have been given to it. We may learn much of the evil one from Scripture, and from the experience of godly men of the past, such as Bunyan, whose 'Pilgrim's Progress' and 'Grace Abounding' are full of deep and illuminating suggestion. Experience and judgment are needed to 'discern the spirits'. It is true that the evidences of demon-possession may be similar to those caused by mental disorder itself, and that sometimes there may even be a working of the devil in a mind that is constitutionally prone to such mental disorder, so that it may be extremely difficult to say what is illness and what is demonic influence. But it should be possible from experience and from a certain judgment in these matters to discern which is which, and seek to deal with it accordingly. 'Recognising the signs', even if it be with a 'sixth sense', is a possibility.

The answer to the question 'How does a demon-possession come about?' may be found in Paul's words in Ephes 4:27: 'Neither give place to the devil'. Concerning this, two things may be said: one is that possession can come about through trafficking with evil and sin - not merely in terms of, e.g., dabbling with spiritualism, although this is one specific and very dangerous example, but dabbling with any kind of sin, for it is this that allows the author of sin into the life. There are two notable examples from Scripture that come readily to mind - King Saul, whose unwillingness to obey the will of God, and whose constant and repeated allowing of unhallowed emotions 'gave place' to the Devil, and he became a disordered soul without hope of recovery or remedy; and Judas Iscariot, who dabbled with forbidden things, until finally Satan entered into him. The second point will have to wait until tomorrow's Note.

143) 8:26-39

The second point is that place can be given to the devil by ignorance. For, after all, he is a deceiver, and an angel of light (2 Cor 11:13ff). Now to discuss at this point whether such ignorance is culpable, it is certain that this can lead people into an awful morass of demonic influence in life that can break their health and lead to despair. And, paradoxically, it is often at the point which is the very opposite of dabbling with evil, viz., that of consecration and commitment, that the attack can come. And if there is an area of ignorance in the mind, depend upon it, Satan will find it, and exploit it to the full. Having said this, however, something else must be said, and said very unequivocally. It is this: contrary to the confident and solemn assertions made by many, there can be no question of Christian people being 'demon-possessed'. How could it ever be thought that a heart indwelt by Christ could also be indwelt by Satan? How could temples of the Holy Spirit (which we are) be desecrated by the presence of the enemy of all righteousness? To say the least, this would be to place an extremely low estimate on the 'company' Jesus likes to keep. Is it likely that He would acquiesce in Satan's being in hearts that He has made His own? No: the victory of Christ over Satan is so real that he can have no kind of authority or power over the Christian. In Christ the believer is safe and victorious. The 'wicked one toucheth him not' (1 John 5:18). Indeed, the most important consideration of all - more important than anything else that has been said in these Notes - is the glad and triumphant testimony of the Scriptures that Jesus Christ has conquered Satan. Nothing - no preoccupation with the reality of the demonic, no concern with the widespread evidence of Satan's power in the world and in the lives of men - must be allowed to obscure this glorious fact. The Lion of the tribe of Judah has conquered, and Christ Jesus is King!

144) 8:40-56

When one recalls that Luke, along with the other Evangelists, is writing from the standpoint of the resurrection, thus proclaiming to us a living Christ Who is the same yesterday, today and forever, it becomes clear that the message he intends to convey to us is that of the powerful and prevailing word of a living Christ set over against all and every kind of human need, and more than able to meet it. This is the good news of the gospel Luke is intent on proclaiming. We have said sufficient in previous Notes to show how justified we are in 'spiritualising' these miracle stories and applying them as analogies of spiritual need. This is particularly evident in the case of the raising from the dead of Jairus' daughter. And it is here that we see very clearly the 'token' nature of the miracle in the physical realm. There were not many raisings from the dead in Jesus' day, and the three instances recorded are simply tokens that the new order had broken in. They have value for us in the illustration they give of the spiritual predicament of being dead in trespasses and sins. It is from this terrible state that Jesus raises men, by His Spirit, in the gospel. And one of the insights this gives us into the nature of human need is that salvation is all of God. One who is dead cannot cooperate with God in his own salvation. He is passive. Salvation is the imparting of life where no life was before. It is a bringing to the birth in Christ, by the Spirit. This, then, is what Luke means us to understand: the word of the living Christ is a life-giving word, and He speaks that word in the word of the gospel. By the same token, the woman with the issue of blood illustrates another aspect of human need - again beyond human aid, in desperation, calling forth the pity and compassion of a loving Saviour.

145) 8:40-56

The fact that the two stories - Jairus' daughter and the woman with the issue of blood - are inextricably intertwined in the record is surely a clear indication that there are lessons to be learned in this direction. For one thing, it would seem that a contrast is being indicated in the fact that Jairus' daughter was twelve years old, and the woman had suffered twelve years from her sickness. It is very true that one half of the world does not know how the other half lives! Twelve years of joy turning to sorrow; and twelve years of sorrow about to turn to joy - the two extremes, yet it is possible to see how two extremes merge and unite in their common agony of need. There is only one level when it comes down to the basics of life. And, just as, in the spiritual realm, there is no difference, because all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God, (Rom 3:22,23) so also there is no difference, for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon Him. And whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved (Rom 10:12, 13)!

146) 8:40-56

It seems clear also that Luke means to underline a contrast in 48, 49: 'Daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole' and 'your daughter is dead'. While Jesus was speaking the one word, the servants of Jairus was speaking the other. And it was when Jesus heard the word that was spoken, He spoke another word, a word of power, to Jairus: 'Be not afraid, only believe'. Always there is the emphasis on the word of Christ.

Here is another point. The healing of the woman is represented almost incidentally, in the by-going, so to speak, while Christ was on His way to Jairus' house. "A wayside miracle", as Spurgeon puts it, "an extra of grace, a sort of over-splash of the great fountain of mercy. The cup of our Lord's power was full - full to the brim - and He was bearing it to the house of the ruler of the synagogue. This poor creature did but receive a drop which He spilt on the way". How often our Lord works that way! One thinks of how, in a service designed for the deepening of spiritual life in the Lord's people, and for their building up in grace, one woman who had known much suffering in life, suddenly seeing the application of the word to her condition, opened her heart to Christ and entered into life and peace. An over-splash from the fountain indeed!

147) 8:40-56

We now look at the stories separately, beginning with the woman with the issue of blood. It is a moving picture that is presented. Here is a woman at her wits' end, in extremity, and ready to despair. But something else is presented also: the good news of the gospel is that there is a compassionate Saviour, ready to help. And, despairing though she was, she found help and salvation, and was sent away into peace, because she was ready to come to Him, and was not prepared to let anything stop her. This is really the whole pattern of the gospel - and when these three conditions obtain, the same kind of miracle can happen today as then.

There are two points in particular to note: the first concerns how this poor woman was there in the crowd round about Jesus. Luke does not tell us, but Mark does (5:27) that she came because she had heard of Jesus - heard of the miracles He had performed up to this point in His ministry, and on hearing, faith had been born in her heart concerning Him, and a conviction that here was Someone Who could help her and bring her relief. This has surely something to say to us in the Church today. We hear about the importance of 'non-verbal' forms of communication, but one begs leave to wonder whether this poor woman would ever have learned about Jesus if people had not spoken to her, and told her about His mighty works. Here is the function and significance of true Christian testimony - to noise abroad the Saviour's Name, to speak well of Him in such a way that news gets round that there is a living Saviour who is great and wonderful, and able, willing and ready to help and save.

148) 8:40-56

The second point is this: though she had heard of Christ, and heard truly, her grasp of what she had heard was pretty frail, for her faith, real and authentic as it was, was mixed with a kind of superstition, and she thought that touching His garment would bring her healing. Jesus' response was, not 'Who touched My garment?' but 'Who touched Me?' Her faith was real, though mixed with superstition and misunderstanding. Not that Christ was content, or ever is, that this should be so. Indeed, part of His confrontation with her after the healing was to correct that misunderstanding. But look at the reality of it! What she was convinced about was that power resided in Him, belonged to Him, and that it would be communicated to her if only she could touch Him. It could flow to her, and would, if only contact could be made. This, in fact, means that she had discerned the principle and purpose of the Incarnation, for in the Incarnation Christ has come into contact with needy humanity, and in His Cross and victory He has accomplished in the absolute sense what can best be called a great, divine exchange, in which all that is His becomes ours, and all that is ours He takes on Himself. And personal faith is the 'bridge' over which this 'exchange' is made, whereby His power and grace are given us, and our sickness given to Him. He took this woman's need, and took it with Him to the Cross. The exchange did take place, for 'virtue went out of Him'.

149) 8:40-56

There was more misunderstanding still, however. She made to slip away unnoticed, and would have done so, if Jesus had not called her back and into the open. The misunderstanding was her false idea that the healing was something separate from Him and could be had without Him or without any relationship to Him. But it is futile to want forgiveness in isolation from the rest of the gospel. We receive forgiveness when we receive Him. We must beware of looking for the benefits of Christianity without Christ. It was after she was brought into the open by Jesus, after the healing of the body, that Jesus said, 'Daughter, go in (to) peace: thy faith hath made thee whole.' The 'daughter' emphasis is very significant: she who by her disease had been ostracised, despised, shunned, held in suspicion, was welcomed into the family of God. 'Go', said Jesus - and it was into a future bright with hope, and into a new life. And surely the confrontation, by which she was brought out into the open, was infinitely worthwhile, however traumatic it may have been for her! So often, we are unwilling to have ourselves 'put right' in this way, and so often, in thus withholding ourselves, we miss God's best. Is not this a lesson worth learning?

150) 8:40-56

What must Jairus have been thinking all the time this was going on? He would hardly have been human if he had not felt impatience, even resentment, at this interruption which delayed Christ when his daughter was at the point of death. But this is not how Jesus looked at it. He said: 'Be not afraid; only believe'. And therefore, we must assume that this delay was a necessary experience for Jairus, needful for him, to test faith and strengthen it. There is something important here. It teaches us: 'Do not fret when others' needs seem to be met, while the answer to yours is delayed. Only believe. Think rather, for your encouragement, that if He can help the other He can help you too, and meet your needs.' Jairus' faith was tested to the uttermost. It was one thing to believe Jesus could do something, while she was dying, but quite another to believe He could do it when she was dead. It was surely the darkest hour in Jairus' life - and over against it, Christ gave him a simple word: 'Be not afraid, only believe'. And Jairus was sustained by the bare word of Christ. An old Scottish divine used to speak of the need to 'trust in the bare word of a promising God'. This is how it was with Jairus, and this is how it often must be with us also, in spiritual life.

151) 8:40-56

Another point in the Jairus story relates to something that was said in the account of the stilling of the storm (8:22-25). That storm was stilled, and Jesus could still it, only because another storm was to be stilled - that of Divine wrath - in the death He was to die. The same can be said in this situation also: the raising of Jairus' daughter from the dead was possible only because of, and on the strength of His victory in His own resurrection from the dead. Before the decisive battle of His death on the Cross and His rising again, which sealed to Him His power and authority (cf Phil 2:9ff, Matt 28:18), He was already using that power, and exercising that Lordship in an anticipatory fashion, anticipating His victory, working miracles on trust, as it were, on the basis of the victory He was to accomplish on the Cross. Sometimes, on buying goods in a shop, we say, 'I'll take these on account', and pay later. This, so to speak, is what Jesus did. He went into the dark store of death and said, pointing to the dead body of Jairus' little girl, 'I'll take this one on account. Put it down to Me, I'll pay later'. All the miracles He performed were performed on this basis, on the strength of the death He was to die and the price He was to pay.

152) 8:40-56

The raising of Jairus' daughter is, however, something else also: it is an illustration of something much greater, which is Christ's primary purpose in His dealings with men, and indeed in His having come into the world. Death, as we know it, is the wages of sin, and He has come to deal with the terrible problem of sin itself. And so, as well as raising the dead in the physical sense, He is also, and supremely, concerned to raise them in the spiritual sense, and to give them newness of life. And this is far more like His resurrection than the raising of Jairus' daughter was. For spiritual resurrection - regeneration - is not a return to any 'status-quo', as hers undoubtedly was, but a new kind of life altogether: 'If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation; old things are passed away; behold all things are become new'. This is salvation - spiritual resurrection, being raised from the dead, given new life, new birth –

He speaks, and listening to His voice
New life the dead receive.

The miracle here is therefore, in its deepest message, an illustration of our Lord's own words in John 5:25, "The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live."

153) 9:1-9

This is one of the passages in the gospels in which we can get a good deal of help in interpretation if we compare it with the parallel passages in Matt 10 and Mark 6 (Matthew's account especially is much fuller than Luke's), looking also at the contexts of these accounts in the other gospels. By so doing it is possible the better to see the message that this passage has for us today. Our concern must be to understand the meaning and significance of this sending forth of the disciples. What part did it play in the scheme of the gospel at this point? Does it constitute a problem for us today, and if so, in what respect? Very different answers have been given to these questions. Some take these verses literally, and have sought to fulfil them to the letter; others have insisted that they have no relevance for us as a pattern of ministry today, that they applied only to the disciples, and that only on this specific occasion. Calvin says that we have here not so much 'perpetual apostleship' as 'temporary preaching, which was fitted to awaken and excite the minds of men that they might be more attentive to hear Christ'. 'Christ employed them as assistants only, to secure attention to Him where His voice could not reach - to arouse expectation that the time of the promised restoration is at hand'. We continue in this thought in tomorrow's Note.

154) 9:1-9

Let us consider this idea of Christ's sending the disciples out to assist Him in the spreading of His message. This is where the context can help us. According to Mark, the sending out of the Twelve follows immediately upon the verses which record the unbelief of Nazareth and Galilee. In Mark 6:6, we read that Jesus marvelled because of their unbelief; and His reaction to this was to go round the villages teaching. Then He sent forth His disciples, two by two, to do the same. It was firstly, then, because of the unresponsiveness of the people, and the unbelief of the district, that He sent forth the disciples. The unbelief was a challenge, and this is how the challenge was met: the patient teaching of the Word of God - under that influence there is always the possibility of a change, and that the light might break through to men. In Matthew's version, we see that the sending forth is grounded in the compassion of Christ (9:36-38, 10:1ff). He saw the people as sheep without a shepherd, and this drew His compassion (seeing them, as He did, as a harvest to be reaped for God), and prompted Him to send the disciples out to do the reaping. The implication of all this? Since the disciples were sent forth because of Christ's compassion, they were therefore being commissioned to be channels of that compassion, and the way they were to be channels was through the preaching of the kingdom of God. They were channels of Christ's compassion and power - in face of the lostness of the people and of their unresponsiveness and unbelief. This is the light in which we need to understand the specific instructions which our Lord gave to them.

155) 9:1-9

We do not think there is any need to assume a literal interpretation of these instructions, as some have done, to make them an invariable rule of conduct. They were not so, even in the early Church itself, and this is not the pattern we see in Acts, *except in principle*. And in Luke 22:35, 36, we have an express contradiction of Jesus' words here. The words in italics, *except in principle*, however are important; and it is the principles inherent in these instructions that we must heed. The disciples were to be instruments of Christ's compassion, and therefore anything that would hinder them from so being must be ruthlessly and faithfully forsaken. This is the point of the three considerations that we now underline.

First of all, one basic keynote in these verses is simplicity. One is reminded of Paul's familiar metaphor of the athlete. The athlete is in training, and he is stripped of anything that might hinder him from attaining his objective and winning his event. There is a great challenge here, both for personal life and for the corporate life of the Church. If we have a work to do, and a message to proclaim, everything must be subservient to the one over-riding aim of getting it across and getting it done. Anything that might prove an encumbrance to its proper and worthy fulfilment must be resolutely cast away. We must, as the Apostle says, lay aside every weight. One has only to look into Acts to see that the Apostles measured up very truly to the spirit, if not the letter, of these verses. And the Church has always been most effective in the world when she has been content to be simple in this sense. It is when many encumbrances have obscured her real task and purpose that she has lost ground and lost influence among men.

156) 9:1-9

What is true of the Church in general is also true of believers in particular. It is possible to be beguiled from the simplicity that is in Christ (cf 2 Cor 11:3), both as to doctrine and as to conduct. One has known many who in their early Christian days were devoted and dedicated soul winners and evangelists and burned with holy conviction, who in later years have become expansive and broadened, with many new ideas that they would once have regarded - and with good reason - as dangerous and wrong; and a glory has departed from their lives and their testimony. As to conduct, one does not think of 'bad' or 'questionable' things, as such, but simply things, good in themselves or in different circumstances, which the believer simply cannot afford to indulge, if he wants to win the race. The fact is, worldly interests, worldly considerations, worldly people, compete and battle for our allegiance and for our time; and there is nothing so sad as to see the shadow of the world's hand coming over a Christian's life, gradually, steadily, imperceptibly, and see them becoming beguiled from the simplicity of Christ by a way of living in which there is nothing that could be called wrong as such, but things that in the light of his calling are unwise and ill-advised, things that matter where training for a race is concerned. The confectionary of life! The issue is this: the compassion of Christ is to be let through, and His power is to reach out to men through us - but the channels get clogged up - by the confectionary!

157) 9:1-9

The second keynote in these verses is the undoubted note of urgency. This is implicit also in the metaphor of the athlete. There is a great sense of urgency about him; he is always racing against time. And this is one of the things that enables him to put first things first. It is not a question of anything hysterical, but rather a steady, pulsing consciousness that destiny is involved - eternal destiny. It is not all the same whether or not the message is obscured by the half-heartedness of lives cluttered up with worldliness, lives with too many other irons in the fire - business, cultural, recreational irons - for them ever really to tell for Christ.

The third keynote in the passage – and this is made explicit in Matthew's version (10:8) - is that of utter self-giving: 'Freely ye have received, freely give'. One thinks of Paul's words in 2 Cor 12:15, "I will very gladly spend and be spent for you..." Paul literally gave himself away. He lived out John 3:16 in his experience, laying himself on the altar (cf Phil 2:17), becoming broken bread and poured out wine for the life of the world. As one famous missionary once put it, "Blood of our own must attest our faith in the precious blood of Christ if we would share and show forth the victory of the Cross". Does this spirit characterise our life and testimony?

One wonders what is the significance of the reference to Herod in 7-9. It may be to underline what has just been said about the sense of urgency and destiny that fills the passage. For here was a man for whom the sands of time finally ran out, and he became a lost soul.

158) 9:10-17

The account of the feeding of the five thousand stands in marked contrast to the reference in the previous verses to king Herod's unbelief, as if to underline that such unbelief (leading to his rejection) takes place in the context and in the face of the grace of God that is able to meet all and every need. It is the only miracle recorded by all four gospel writers, and this must be a measure of the importance it had in the mind of the early Church (cf Mark 6:34, Matt 14:13-21, John 6:1ff). There are different ways of studying the miracle. One is to take it quite simply and in and by itself, as a miracle of Christ's power. This yields its own important lessons. But the more one studies it, in its context and in its associations, and in the significant pointers that some words and phrases give to interpretation, the more one sees that there is more to this story than at first meets the eye, and more to it than a simple story of miracle working. What we mean is this: in Mark's account (6:39) there is a graphic detail that commentators are quick to seize upon - green grass is mentioned, and it is observed that this would make the time of the miracle that of the Passover season (later, the grass would be withered by the hot sun). This is confirmed explicitly in John 6:4. This is a highly symbolic fact. For the Old Testament Passover itself was a shadow of things to come, and illustrates Christ's death on the Cross. Christ is the Passover Lamb, as Paul tells us in 1 Cor 5:7, and it is by His death that He becomes the bread of life to men. It was the eating of the Passover Lamb that symbolised the setting free of the children of Israel from the bondage of Egypt; and it is the partaking of the flesh and blood of the Son of God that sets men free from the dark bondage of sin and brings them into the glorious liberty of the children of God. Jesus was therefore saying something in this symbolic miracle.

159) 9:10-17

Furthermore, there is a significant association of ideas between these verses and the previous ones. We spoke of Christ's compassion for the multitudes as being the basis of His sending out His disciples; and here we read that 'He spake unto them of the kingdom of God' (11). This, then, was His way of shepherding the lost sheep - by His Word. And when we take this with John's straightforward interpretation of the miracle in the spiritual terms of Christ as the bread of life, we get a wonderful picture of the meaning and purpose of the miracle as being to show that Christ, Who is the bread of life, is made available to men in the word of the gospel. It is in the preaching of the Word that the living bread is given to men.

We have already spoken of how the miracles of Jesus demonstrates His Lordship and Kingship, and this was surely never so graphically seen as here. But it was not only a manifestation of power, but of creative power. There can be only one adequate explanation of it - it was the action of a God! The miracle has been a problem to many, but it can be difficult only for those who do not understand or realise Who He is. When we realise that this is He by Whom all worlds were made, and by Whom all things are maintained in existence, then there can be no difficulty in believing that He multiplied the loaves and the fishes. He created the world out of nothing: why should this be difficult for Him? Why, indeed!

160) 9:10-17

A further strand may be added to the pattern, to fill it in. There was a Jewish belief that the coming of the Messiah and His kingdom would restore again the gift of manna from heaven (cf John 6:33). The association of ideas here is surely significant and unmistakeable: Passover - manna - divine provision for the needs of the people of God - and here it is all enacted before their very eyes - bread from heaven indeed, as the symbol of everlasting salvation. The miracle was therefore a proclamation of fulfilment, that the kingdom of God had come, and the Messiah was here. But - what a Messiah! Not the servant of God only, but God Himself, in the Person of His Son. It is the Creator Himself (multiplying loaves and fishes, demonstrating His creative power) Who comes to be the Messiah and Saviour of His people. He Who made all worlds, steps into His bent and broken creation, to re-make it, to re-create men in His own image. This is the glory of the Christian revelation, and its scope and power.

There is another kind of symbolism also: there was so little to work on, it seemed – five loaves and two small fishes. Yet, there was enough and to spare. There is an important lesson here. To many, the preaching of the gospel seems weak, feeble and foolish. Men want to see the spectacular in the work of the kingdom. But the Lord is not in the earthquake or the whirlwind. Not so does the kingdom of God come. The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and His weakness stronger than men, and the preaching of the gospel will suffice to feed the souls of men till hunger and thirst disappear forever from God's creation.

161) 9:18-27

With these verses we come to one of the climactic points of the gospel record. Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi has a twofold significance: first in relation to the disciples, and their being drawn to faith in Christ, and second, in relation to the meaning, for them and for us, of Christian faith and Christian discipleship. The passage is one of cardinal importance for a proper understanding of our Lord's work and ministry. There were, in fact, two distinct stages in His ministry: up to this point, He had been concerned to manifest Himself as the promised Messiah. Everything that has been recorded thus far was designed to point in this direction. His baptism and anointing with the Spirit had announced Him, to those with eyes to see and ears to hear, as God's Anointed, the promised Messiah. And everything, from that point to this, underlines the steady and consistent development of His claim to be that Messiah - His authority manifested and displayed in the mighty works He wrought - miracles, wonders and signs, which we have interpreted - and rightly interpreted - as credentials of His kingship, and proofs that His claim was not an idle one. Then, having demonstrated in every possible way, by deed and by word, His supreme and unique claim, He put this question to His disciples: "Whom do ye say that I am?" He had, so to speak, presented His case and His claim, and now He waited for their response and reaction to it.

162) 9:18-27

But more: when Jesus had elicited the confession of His Messiahship from Peter, He straightway began to teach them something further and deeper. Having convinced them about His Person, (He now proceeded to teach them about His Work (in the parallel passage in Mark 8:31, it says 'He began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer'). This is the second stage, the second strand, in His teaching ministry. And it was only when the first had been established that He could go on to the second. Briefly, we can put it this way: the earthly ministry of Jesus was occupied with two things - first, to establish that He was the Messiah, and second, that the Messiah must suffer in order to reign. It is impressive to see the new and deeper note in Christ's teaching from this point onwards. It is as if we were seeing the shadow of the cross touching the pass of the disciple band right on to Calvary. It was a note the disciples were slow to understand (as we see from Matthew's and Mark's account of Peter's reaction to that teaching), and it filled them with a great foreboding. From this point onwards there was a chill and dread on them. In thus teaching, Jesus was simply following the Old Testament pattern laid out for Him in His Father's Word. For, in fact, the teaching of the Old Testament concerning the Messiah is in two strands. There are many prophecies which speak of Messiah as the glorious King that was to come, the Prince of Peace, of whom it was said that the government would be upon his shoulder, the one who in the fulness of the time was to be the King of the Jews.

163) 9:18-27

But there is also another strand, which speaks of a Suffering One; and the Jews, by and large, never understood this, which was like a minor motif in the grand symphony of the Coming One. Again and again it breaks out in the Old Testament revelation: but they could not reconcile it with the other. Clearly, to Peter, the idea that the Messiah should suffer was abhorrent. It is clear also that the early Church thought that this twofold teaching was of the supremest importance - the fact that Jesus was the promised Messiah, and the fact that the promised Messiah must needs suffer (cf Acts 17:2,3 - this was ever the burden of Paul's evangelistic message to the Jews and in the synagogues in which he preached). In this connection let us remember that the gospels simply represent what the early Church believed about Christ. They faithfully reflect His twofold ministry and teach that He was the Messiah and that He must suffer. It was the preaching of this that constituted for them the preaching of the gospel, the basis on which God offered a free and full forgiveness and the gift of life to all who believed on His Name.

Here, then, is the relevance of the passage for us: a twofold thrust, first of all, that this Jesus, the historical Figure we see in the record, is the long-promised Messiah, foretold in inspired Writ as the One whom God would send; and, secondly, that the way He was to become the Saviour was to suffer and die on the Cross, and rise again the third day for our salvation.

164) 9:18-27

The 'fulfilment of prophecy' argument was one pre-eminently calculated to impress the Jews, but surely it is impressive to all who think. What in effect it is saying is this: here is a book, the Old Testament, which for centuries prophesied the coming of a King who would establish a kingdom in righteousness, and prophesied that that kingdom should be established through the sufferings and death of the King for the sins of His people. For centuries, that message as a matter of fact and of history was proclaimed. And then - it happened! It came to pass. The King came. In the historical Figure of Jesus of Nazareth the age-old prophecies were seen to work themselves out and fulfil themselves. He lived, and suffered and died, and rose again, according to the Scriptures, as God said He would, and then the kingdom began to be established in the hearts and lives of men. All over the ancient world the promises of God were fulfilled through Him - lives were blessed and transformed, blind eyes were opened, men turned from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God. It happened! The argument from prophecy is one that cannot lightly be set aside or ignored. What do you make of that, it says? This is the thrust, for us, of the question Jesus asked His disciples that day at Caesarea Philippi.

165) 9:18-27

It is true that the disciples did not understand Jesus' teaching about the necessity for His death, and that they could not fathom the connection between His death and their salvation. But when the Spirit came, as He did, to them, enlightening their eyes, then they understood. And their whole message became centred on the Cross. It became their glory, their joy, and the power that changed their lives (cf Gal 6:14, 1 Cor 1:23, Rom 5:8). And when we, in turn, having listened to the gospel word about Christ, begin to be gripped by a persuasion and conviction concerning Him, and about the truth and reality of the gospel, we must also recognise that this is not something that we have come to by a process of reasoning and understanding, though it comes through that. It is the work of the Spirit of God to produce in us such a conviction (cf Matt 16:17). The eyes of our understanding are opened by Him, so that we see the truth. But, having said that - and it needs to be said - we must go on to say something else also. For by itself it is not enough. Light in the mind is not the same as life in the soul. And the essence of true Christian experience - that which makes Christian experience authentic and real - is that the illumination of the mind leads, in a genuine work of God, to a wholehearted committal to all that that illumination implies. It is significant that Jesus not only proceeded at this point to teach the disciples that He, the Son of man, must suffer: He also said that they, His disciples, must be associated with Him in His sufferings. In other words, for Christian experience to be real, the response, under spiritual illumination, to confess Christ as the Saviour and Lord from heaven, means, implies and involves a total commitment to Him, which brings us into union with Him in His death and resurrection, a dying to sin and a living unto God. This is what Caesarea Philippi meant.

166) 9:28-36

The story of the Transfiguration of Jesus is a marvellously deep and mysterious one, full of symbolic meaning and allusion. It is the kind of passage that repays long and careful contemplation, and the more one ponders it, the more it yields up different kinds of lessons on different spiritual levels. It took place a week after the great confession at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus took the three disciples, Peter, James and John with Him up Mount Hermon, and as He prayed, the fashion of His countenance changed, and His raiment became white and glistening. He 'appeared in glory', and all the hillside glowed as it was bathed in His light. In the midst of this astonishing, supernatural manifestation, two other figures appeared, whom the disciples recognized as Moses and Elijah, who spoke with Him of the death He was to fulfil at Jerusalem. Peter wanted to build three tabernacles to commemorate the occasion, but a voice from the cloud bade him be silent and listen to Jesus: 'This is My beloved Son: hear Him'. What are we to make of all this, and what is its significance, not merely as a phenomenon, but in its context in the gospel record, as a part of the witness of the early Church to Christ? First of all, there is the association with Old Testament ideas - and indeed with New Testament ideas also. We have in previous Notes referred to the fact that the gospel writers (particularly Matthew) regarded Jesus as 'a second Moses', and how both Christ's baptism and His temptation have borne allusions to the experiences of Israel of old, crossing the Red Sea and battling in the wilderness, Moses also ascended the Mount of God at Sinai. The words of Exo 24:16ff are too obviously similar to Luke's to avoid the claim of an association of ideas. We shall look at the significance of this association in tomorrow's Note.

167) 9:28-36

The voice speaking out of the cloud to Moses, the shekinah glory coming down on the mount, the 'unto him shall ye hearken' in Deut 18:15, the appearance on the Mount of Moses and Elijah - all this surely indicates that the Transfiguration is not something that stands in isolation from everything around it, but is integrally related to the whole of the Divine revelation of redemption. Indeed, Moses and Elijah by their presence on Mount Hermon bore witness to the fact that both the law and the prophets find their fulfilment in Him, and leave Him in His unchallenged supremacy as the alone Saviour of men - reminding Him withal, so to speak, that the salvation of the whole of the old economy depended on the death He was to die at Jerusalem.

But there is also an association of ideas with other New Testament events which seems to be significant. On the one hand, the voice that spoke 'This is My beloved Son' is also the voice that spoke at Jesus' baptism - so that there is necessarily a common significance in the two events. And since, at the Baptism, Christ took His place by sinful man, identifying with man in his need, and since, in the second place, Peter, James and John, who shared this experience with Christ, were also the three who were to share in the experience of the Garden of Gethsemane, it seems clear that we are meant to associate the Transfiguration with the sufferings of Christ. This is further emphasised by the fact that the story is linked with Caesarea Philippi, and our Lord's teaching about the Cross. The words 'about an eight days after' in 28 are a decisive link with the previous event. In relation, then, to what we have said about the twofold nature of our Lord's teaching, we see now that each part of His teaching is, so to speak, introduced by the words 'This is My beloved Son...', and in each case it was the Divine seal on His willingness to walk the way of the Cross.

168) 9:28-36

But there is more, much more, to be said yet about the Transfiguration. We may look upon it as God's seal and imprimatur on Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi, as if to say Amen to it. How truly Lord He is! Here, for a moment, the veil was drawn aside, to show Him as He is. Already, and all along, it had been gleaming through, in His mighty works and words (cf 'What manner of man is this?', 'Never man spake as this man'), and now, for a moment, it burst through. If, then, it was God's seal on Peter's confession, we may think of it as His bestowal on the disciple's faith: 'to him that hath it shall be given'. Having confessed by faith, faith was rewarded, as it so often is, by sight. But if it was thus the outshining of His glory, we have still to ask: 'Why, at this particular point in the story?' The key to the answer to this question must be found in the words 'This is My beloved Son'. For what we have here is a glimpse into the Godward, Divine side of redemption. What we mean by this will be discussed in the next note.

169) 9:28-36

God's great and overmastering preoccupation is to have His will done on earth as it is in heaven. Only in Christ is that will fulfilled. No one else had ever perfectly fulfilled the will of God on earth. But it was ever Christ's delight to do that will (cf Luke 2:49, John 4:34, 6:38, 8:29, Heb 10:5-7). He knew the intense yearning in the heart of God that His will might be done, and doing that will became a passion for the Son of God, and on this occasion it was so intense that it became incandescent, so to speak, and blazed forth in glory, the body no longer able to contain it. What the disciples saw was holy fire, moral glory, breaking forth in a grand oblation to the Father of lights. Furthermore, it was in prayer that the glory burst forth, for prayer was the supreme expression of Christ's devotion to the Father's will. Campbell Morgan suggests that the mountain fastnesses of Galilee and Judaea may often have witnessed such sights, when the Son spent whole nights in ineffably sweet communion with the Father. This may well be; we do not know. What we can say is that on this occasion the Son's delight in the Father, and the Father's in the Son, broke away beyond words, in the cloud of glory that came down to hide that ineffable, awesome fellowship. As the Old Testament says, 'the secret things belong unto the Lord our God'!

170) 9:28-36

Finally, we may see the Transfiguration, and what followed it, as an 'acted parable', so to speak, an enactment in dramatic, symbolic form, of our Lord's whole purpose on earth, and the meaning of His coming into the world. As such, it was manifestly an instruction to Peter on the lines of Jesus' words at Caesarea Philippi about the Cross. What we mean is this: The Transfiguration shows us who He was, His intrinsic Godhead; but the whole story, the rest of the story, shows us what He did. For He came down from the Mount, turned His back on the glory, came down to where we were, where we all are, gripped by dark powers, torn by deep and tragic mysteries, and broken by sin and shame. This is the point of the miracle that He performed on the demon-possessed boy that His disciples could not help. As Paul puts it in the famous passage in Philippians 2, "He was in the form of God...and equal with God...but made Himself of no reputation... and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross". It is as if He had said to Peter, "Peter, you say 'Not so, Lord', when I speak of suffering on the Cross. But this is the whole purpose of my coming down from the Father. Not to do so would be to deny My calling". In other words, the message to the disciples was that this is the true way of discipleship: the Cross comes first, and the glory follows. The voice from the cloud said, 'Hear ye Him'; and He had said, 'Take up the Cross and follow Me'. And this is the source of His power in the world today – not that He is God, as such, but that as God He came down and was obedient unto death.

171) 9:37-45

We come now to the story of the healing of the demoniac boy at the foot of the Mount. The important words here are "and they could not" (40). The powerlessness of the disciples is underlined implicitly, and is explicit in Matthew's account (17:14-20). The reason why they could not cast the demon out is that they were not the right kind of men. They had not grasped the principle that Jesus had unfolded at Caesarea Philippi, namely that the path of suffering was the road to power. Jesus Himself had embraced that path, and made it His own; but they, in their lack of understanding of it (45 - but who shall say that there was not at least some element of willing blindness in them?) had not; and it was because they had not - which means that there was a death that they were refusing to die - power was withheld from their lives. In Matthew, Jesus is recorded to have said they could not cast the demon out 'because of your unbelief' (Matt 17:20); but faith has a moral content, and it is associated with obedience to the will of God. For Jesus, that obedience meant walking in the way of the Cross, the acceptance of the Cross as the basic principle of His life; and it could not be otherwise for His disciples. It was precisely this that was lacking in the disciples at this point in the story. They had yet to learn that the faith that moves mountains and casts out demons lies on the other side of the Cross. The power of Christ's resurrection in the experience and testimony of believers is the fruit of the fellowship of His sufferings.

172) 9:46-56

If there were any doubt as to the moral state of the disciples, these verses would certainly dispel it. It is quite something, in view of the events and circumstances leading up to this point - the confession at Caesarea, the Transfiguration of Christ, the casting out of the demon at the foot of the mount, all calculated to impress upon them a sense of awe and solemnity - to see these much-favoured disciples quarrelling among themselves as to which should be greatest. That they should vie with one another, and jockey for position at this point, is surely a sorry commentary on the state of their hearts, and the clearest kind of indication as to why they could not cast the demon out. They were, verily, far from being the right kind of people to be casting demons out of any one. There was no kind of greatness about any of them (46), but they had ideas and ambitions about the matter, and our Lord's teaching in these verses is designed to be an answer to them. The point, therefore, about the 'child' illustration (47,48) is that the way to real greatness is by becoming like a little child - i.e. unless there is this 'coming down', this 'stooping low', this denial of self, this 'dying' process, there can be no entering into the kingdom at all. The other two incidents in this passage are of a piece with the first, for they betray in the bigoted and illiberal spirit the disciples expressed just how far they were from the spirit of Christ. It is impressive, is it not, how chance attitudes serve to expose a whole position and betray a basic and fundamental lack!

173) 9:57-62

The three incidents recorded in these verses continue the theme of discipleship, and further stress what Jesus has already said about the spirit which must characterise those who follow Him. First of all, there was the scribe who offered Jesus unconditional discipleship. He had clearly been gripped by the glory and attractiveness of the gospel. But Jesus' reply in 58 indicates that He questioned whether the man really knew what discipleship of this nature involved. The second was a disciple to whom Jesus said 'Follow Me', and his reply was the effect that family responsibilities would have to take precedence of discipleship. This is put in its starkest form to put the point as unequivocally as possible. As someone has put it, "this disciple needs to be told, not of the privations of the calling, but of its lofty and imperative character. The opportunity must be embraced directly it comes, or it may be lost; and therefore even sacred duties must give way to it. The third man's heart is still with the past. He must enjoy it just once more, before he gives it up. But a man who aspires to God ought not to be of two minds, nor must he cling to human interests. "I accept no lukewarm service", says Jesus to him. The point that is being made in all three incidents is that we must reckon with the conflict of loyalties that discipleship inevitably brings. There is a matter of counting the cost - always.

174) 10:1-16

These verses give the reason for the radical and uncompromising stand and attitude on discipleship underlined at the end of the previous chapter. Nothing less, we are meant to see, will suffice for the quality of work that the situation demands. For one thing, there is harvesting work to do (2); this means that 'the time is at hand'. The farmer cannot just leave the harvest when it is ripe; it has to be cut and harvested in time, otherwise it will go to waste and be lost. By the same token - and this is the second point - there is no time to waste (4) on even normal civilities, because of the over-riding consciousness of the urgency of the situation. Furthermore - and the lessons all belong to one another - those involved in the work of the kingdom must sit light to the things of the world (8). A spirit of detachment is essential, in order to give heart and spirit wholly to the things of God. Above all, eternal issues are involved in hearing the gospel (11-16). It is literally a matter of life or death; hence the need for disciples to be 'windows', not 'blinds'. One thinks, in this connection, of Lot's ineffective witness in Sodom, whose inhabitants regarded him as one who mocked when he spoke of God's coming judgment. His life was a 'blind', instead of a 'window' through which God's word could be seen.

175) 10:1-16

On the subject of the eternal issues involved in the work of the gospel, Dr James Denney's words are solemnly impressive: "If the gospel, as conceived in the New Testament, has any character at all, it has the character of finality. It is God's last word to men. And the consequences of accepting or rejecting it are final; it opens no prospect beyond the life on the one hand, and the death on the other, which are the results of obedience and disobedience. Obey, and you enter into a light in which there is no darkness at all: disobey, and you pass eventually into a darkness in which there is no light at all. What God says to us in all Scripture, from beginning to end, is not, 'Sooner or later?' but, 'Life or death?' These are the alternatives before us; they are absolutely separate; they do not run into one another at any time. It is necessary to speak the more earnestly of this matter, because there is a disposition, on the plea that it is impossible for us to divide men into two classes, to blur or even obliterate the distinction between Christian and non-Christian. Many things prompt us to make the difference merely one of quantity - a more or less of conformity to some ideal standard -in which case, of course, a little more, or a little less, is of no great account. But that only means that we never take the distinction between being right with God, and being wrong with God, as seriously as God takes it; with Him it is simply infinite. The difference between those who obey, and those who do not obey, the gospel, is not the difference of a little better and a little worse; it is the difference of life and death. If there is any truth in Scripture at all, this is true - that those who stubbornly refuse to submit to the gospel, and to love and obey Jesus Christ, incur at the last Advent an infinite and irreparable loss. They pass into a night on which no morning dawns."

176) 10:1-16

We should not miss the significance of Jesus' words in 3, 'lambs among wolves'. The implications of these words are considerable. The metaphor of sheep is a common one in Scripture, and is used in a variety of ways, now teaching us about the nature of sin, about the nature of man, about the relation of believers to the Saviour, and so on. Common to all these usages, there is the thought of weakness or frailty. And when Jesus speaks of sending out His disciples as lambs, He means us surely to think in terms of what Paul expresses so graphically when he says that God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the mighty', and that 'the weakness of God is stronger than men'. Why is this principle so firmly imbedded in the gospel? Well, human weakness is the 'door' through which God can come to bless the world He longs to save. The metaphor also tells us that the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but spiritual. The servants of Christ do not resort to fleshly means and expedients in order to fulfil His will, but to weapons that the world counts as impotent and irrelevant. Furthermore, the metaphor indicates, as Calvin points out, that the disciples have no means of defence. They are vulnerable. This is where a great part of the cost of discipleship comes in, for to go forth as channels of the love and compassion of Christ is to open oneself to the possibility of being hurt. We cannot do Christ's work in the world without exposing ourselves thus.

177) 10:1-16

Furthermore - still on the metaphor of the lambs among wolves - the lamb is above all a sacrificial animal. "Christ suffered, leaving us an example, that ye should follow in His steps" (1 Peter 2:21). To go forth as 'lambs' is to go forth to sacrifice - living sacrifices, and this is what makes the witness prevail. "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus", cried Paul, and souls were born into the kingdom of God all over the ancient world. It is this sacrificial note that is the real point in the many references in Scripture to our Lord's redeeming work, and it is to miss the mark to suppose that the 'lamb-metaphor' speaks of the gentleness and meekness of Christ. For example, the reference in Isaiah 53:7 to His silence in being brought as a lamb to the slaughter does not so much speak of His gentle and submissive spirit in face of suffering as of the fact that, in standing as a sacrificial victim He was bearing our sins away. As Paul puts it in Romans 3:19, to be guilty before God means that every mouth is stopped; and Jesus took upon Himself that guilt, for us; and, condemned in our place, there was nothing He could say. His mouth was stopped, as our Substitute and Sin-bearer. That is why He was 'as a sheep before her shearers...dumb' - not because He was 'lamb-like', but because He was a sacrificial Victim.

178) 10:1-16

We must consider now the contrast between unbelief and faith shown in these verses and in those that follow (17ff). In 13ff, it is not merely the fact of unbelief, but its unreasonableness and inexcusability, that is in view. And there is always a price to be paid for this, as the woe pronounced on Chorazin and Bethsaida makes clear. These were places where many of Christ's mighty works had been wrought; and He means that the works done in them were an invitation and a summons to them to repent and believe in Him, for these miracles were, as we have said before, the credentials of His Kingship, and bore testimony to it. Here, as earlier with John the Baptist, Jesus points to His mighty works as the way to faith. Chorazin and Bethsaida had had the way to faith opened to them, and they had refused it. Hence the pronouncement of judgment. What could there be left for them but judgment? We should not miss what is being said here: every work wrought by Christ in a soul, every man born again of the Spirit, changed and transformed by His grace, is a witness to others to the gospel, and an invitation to faith. When we refuse the gospel in face of this kind of evidence, we are in big trouble indeed. Why did these cities refuse to believe? We may have an indication of the answer to this in 15. Capernaum was exalted to heaven, and lifted up in pride. This, ultimately, is always the issue. The gospel challenges the basic pride in every man, and this is what causes the trouble, for it tells men that they are in the wrong, that they are all wrong, and that they must humble themselves, confess that wrong, and take the lowly place. And to so many, this is a death that they just will not die, it is too humbling, too hurtful to human pride. And what a terrible verdict on a human life - lost eternally because he is too proud to repent! This is why the gospel is regarded as the ultimate enemy, to be resisted at all costs: because it intends to replace self with Christ on the throne of life. And, as has been said, 'if you refuse the King, can the Kingdom be yours?'

179) 10:17-24

Happily, the response to the disciples' message was not all resistance. They saw real fruit from their ministry. The terms of their remit were to go forth as labourers into the harvest field, to preach the kingdom of God and heal the sick; they were to say 'the kingdom of God is come nigh unto you' (9, 11) - that is, in their preaching and proclamation of the good news, those to whom they preached were brought to a moment of destiny in their experience. God has come to them, and was confronting them with Himself. This is always true of the preaching of the gospel. And these disciples proved it. They found multitudes in the valley of decision, and they thrust in the sickle and reaped them for God and for Christ. It was a time of joy (17) for them, and for Jesus (21). There is always joy in the presence of the angels of God over sinners repenting and coming to life in Christ. Jesus' words in 18 to the disciples on their return are intriguing and mysterious. What did He mean? First of all, we may see in them a reference to the effect produced on Satan's kingdom by the preaching of the Seventy. If so, then the meaning is that it is a prophetic statement - that is, Satan's defeat is bespoken in the victory Christ was to win on the Cross, and His sending them forth was on the strength of that victory, and 'borrowed' from the virtue of that victory. And when, in the fulness of the time, the apostles would be sent forth at Pentecost, that fall would be seen to be real and complete. What encouragement this is to Christian work and workers! This is how to defeat the dark powers that tyrannise the world - preach the gospel!

180) 10:17-24

There is, however, another interpretation of Jesus' words in 18 about Satan. The reference may be to something pre-temporal, to Satan's fall and being cast out of heaven through pride, before the creation of man. That is to say, Jesus reminds the disciples of this because He detected a note of pride in the disciples' comments about their success in 17. It is as if He were saying to them: "Be careful lest you become puffed up at this success; it is true that I have given you power over the power of the enemy (19); but Satan fell through pride, and you must beware of falling into the same snare. Besides, the fact that the spirits are subject to you is not the most important thing: far more important is the fact that your names are written in heaven". Who shall say that this is not a legitimate interpretation of Jesus' words, in their context here? How needful for us to recognise the distinction between gifts and grace! The gift they had received was not nothing, to be sure; but it was inferior to grace. There is something greater than the casting out of devils, and that is being converted and pardoned men, and to have names written in the book of life. And Jesus' joy in 21 seems certainly to be derived from that 'something greater', for He speaks there of the spiritual illumination that the gospel brings to darkened minds and hearts (cf 2 Cor 4:4ff). Indeed, this is the whole theme of 22-24 also - the sovereignty of God in the work of illumination and regeneration, and the blessedness of those whose eyes are opened by grace. As Bishop Ryle says, of 23, "The full significance of these words will probably never be understood by Christians until the last day". Indeed, who could ever compute such blessedness, such privilege? Well might we bow down, in awe and worship!

181) 10:25-37

These verses record one of the best known stories in all Scripture; but it is one - with the question that gave rise to it - that gives rise to major problems of interpretation, which will have to be looked at before we can come to a meaningful exposition of the parable. The first problem concerns the question the lawyer asked Jesus, and the answer our Lord gave. How to obtain eternal life - this is the question of questions, indeed! We should notice first of all that Jesus refers the man to the Scriptures for the answer to it (26 - cf also Matt 19:17, John 5:39). There is deep significance in this. It is basic to everything in the Christian Faith. God has revealed Himself in His Son, and that revelation is inscripturated, in the sense that all we can ever know of Christ, and therefore of God Who has revealed Himself in His Son, is known through the Scriptures. The inevitable place, therefore, and the only place, to turn to for an answer to this question, is the Scripture. But, that having been said, we are faced with a real perplexity. For the Scripture seems to give two different kinds of answer to the lawyer's question. On the one hand, as here, the question is answered in terms of law(27); while on the other, it is answered in terms of faith alone (Acts 16: 31). Nor is this disparity one that can be said to represent a difference between the teaching of Jesus and that of the apostles - for we find both emphases in Jesus' teaching and in the apostles' alike (cf Luke 18:20, contrasted with John 6:28,29; Acts 16:31, contrasted with Rom 2:7). And we must concede to our Lord and the apostles that they were consistent, not only with one another, but also within their own teaching. They would not say one thing on one occasion, and contradict it on another. It must be possible to regard these apparent contradictions as complementing one another. We shall look at this possibility in tomorrow's Note.

182) 10:25-37

We must not misunderstand either the lawyer's answer to Jesus (27) or Jesus' parable (30 ff), to mean salvation by works. For (a) the parable of the Good Samaritan, which does lay such a stress on works, is an answer to the question 'Who is my neighbour?', not to the question 'What shall I do to inherit eternal life?'; and (b) the answer 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God....' is an answer spoken within the context of the covenant of grace, to the redeemed people of God, and we need to understand these words as spoken to believers, to those who are disciples. As such, they express what true faith really does, and how it expresses itself. It is the same emphasis as we see in 2 Pet 1:5-7 - 'Give diligence to make your calling and election sure by supplying in your faith....brotherly love', as the Good Samaritan did. We could put it another way, in terms of the proper interpretation of the passages in Romans 2:6 ff, and Matt 25:31 ff: salvation is by faith, but judgment is by works. In this connection, we may well see a link between this and what we saw earlier in the chapter, in the account of the sending forth of the disciples -they were to be, as we saw, instruments and vehicles of Christ's compassion; while here, we see that the mark of true discipleship is to be -compassion. As Jesus said, at the end of the parable, 'Go, and do thou likewise'.

183) 10:25-37

The second problem of interpretation concerns the allegorising of the parable, and making it a picture of the gospel of grace. If we look into almost any of the early Fathers' works, we shall see that they take it entirely as an allegory. According to them as Ryle points out, "the .traveller represents human nature - the falling among thieves, Adam's fall - the lying naked, wounded, half-dead, the condition of mankind -and the failure of the priest and Levite to help, the inability of ceremonies and forms to raise man from his low estate. The Good Samaritan is Jesus Christ. The oil and wine are the blood of Christ and the Holy Spirit. The inn is the Church. The host is the ministry. The two pence are the two sacraments. The promised coming again to repay what is spent more, the Lord's second advent." What are we to say to such interpretation? First of all, this: the parable was undoubtedly spoken by Jesus in the first instance in answer to the question asked by the lawyer, 'Who is my neighbour?' And, clearly, no interpretation that fails to give due weight to this fact can be regarded as adequate. We may say this without prejudice to any possible allegorical interpretation or application that can be afterwards made. And we owe it to Jesus' plain words to take it in the first instance like this. Indeed, it is too like other parts of His teaching on this plain, moral emphasis for us to doubt it (cf Luke 16:19ff; Matt 25:31 ff) and nothing must be allowed to blunt this tremendous challenge, in the interests of allegorical or any other kind of interpretation. But, having said this, it is open to us to go on to say something else, and this will be the subject of tomorrow's Note.

184) 10:25-37

We spoke earlier of the fact of the compassion of Christ, and that this parable illustrates the kind of compassion we need to show if we are to be true Disciples of Christ. But what we must recognize is that compassion in disciples has a source, and that source is the compassion of Christ. And, whether it was intended or not, Jesus, in the parable of the Good Samaritan a perfect description of Himself in the words He uses of the Samaritan: "When he saw him, he had compassion on him, and went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine". Look at the sequence: He saw - He had compassion He came. That is the gospel, the gospel of redeeming grace. These simple words underlie the whole mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God. It was not man's, merits, but his misery, that drew Him forth, from the glory into the brokenness of the world. It is surely fanciful to seek an allegorical meaning for every single phrase of the parable, but this message about compassion is, at all events, scarcely open to question. For one thing, it stands in what is almost a direct line of succession to a notable passage in Ezekiel 16:5-14 (which see), which also mirrors the redeeming grace of God in the gospel, and the faithful, covenant God reaching out, in love and compassion, to lift up broken lives and transform them. As for the self-regarding attitude of the priest and the Levite, which prevented them acting with the compassion that the poor victim's need demanded, it is the gospel alone that can deal with such self-centredness. This is why He came to die for us, to break the power of self in our lives, to give us a new heart and a new spirit, to plant a spirit of love and compassion in us, to live His life of compassion in us. And that is a more important lesson for us to learn than to be able, with whatever ingenuity, to find improbable allegories in the simple words of Jesus.

185) 10:38-42

The story in these verses serves to underline and highlight some of the problems that arise in the interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan. It is, as we have seen, possible to misunderstand what is being said in that parable; and often the misunderstanding has been very considerable, in the sense that compassionate service for one's fellowmen is assumed to be the heart of the Christian message and the Christian Faith. Perhaps Luke saw the danger of this wrong assumption being made, and this made him record the incident now before us in such close proximity to the parable. At all events, its following immediately after it does have the effect of correcting any wrong impressions that might be formed. For it precisely presents the contrast between compassionate service and the fellowship of worship, to the detriment of the former and the vindication of the latter. This is an important and significant emphasis. J. B. Phillips, in his Introduction to 'Letter to Young Churches', makes this comment: "...Christianity is only seriously considered in many quarters because of its social implications...." Well, it is for this viewpoint that Martha stands in the story before us, as over against Mary; and it is this that received correction in Jesus' gentle rebuke to the good woman. That is thought enough for one day's meditation, and we shall continue with further considerations in tomorrow's Note.

186) 10:38-42

It is clear that Mary and Martha stand as contrasts and complements to each other; and this is one of the things that lead to the story being misconstrued and misinterpreted. It is often said - and out of context it may fairly be said, if we are thinking in general terms - that if Martha had had more of Mary's attitude, and Mary more of Martha's, both would have been much better women. But here, on this occasion, this is not the interpretation that Jesus put upon the situation: Mary's attitude was commended, Martha's gently but firmly rebuked. And we are best to think with Jesus in this, rather than with any general moralising. Of course, it is not good when someone neglects the chores when they need to be done - this is not in dispute. But let two things be said: for one thing, Mary had not neglected her duties - the 'also' in 39 seems to make this clear; for another thing, Martha was not only serving, she was 'cumbered' with it, and in a state of distraction. It had assumed for her an importance and a preoccupation which had excluded other, more important things. And Mary was not prepared to allow the more important things to be excluded. She 'sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word'.

And of this situation, Jesus said, 'One thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.' This is the heart and crux of the story, as it is the heart and crux of the Christian gospel. The picture we have here is that of a woman at worship, in fellowship with the Son of God. Mary was probably not theologically minded, but her attitude demonstrates the ultimate essence of the Christian experience. We are made for fellowship with God - this is the purpose of creation - made in the image of God, and one of the things this means is that we cannot be ourselves by ourselves, but only in fellowship with Him. This is what Mary's attitude embodies and illustrates. It is not surprising, therefore, that Jesus so commended it.

187) 11:1-4

We come in this chapter to our Lord's teaching on prayer, and particularly, in the first instance, to what is known as the Lord's Prayer. This is perhaps the most familiar part of the New Testament, and it suffers, like most other familiar passages, the fate of being taken too much for granted. It is only when we examine what is being said that we see the immense implications of Jesus' words.

By way of introduction, it will be useful to remember that for some time now, Luke's theme has been that of discipleship. We are therefore to understand prayer here as an expression of discipleship. This, in itself, necessarily qualifies our understanding of the prayer, as being a pattern, not for men in general, but for those who are committed to discipleship. For example, the first words, 'Our Father' presuppose a certain relationship to God - not, indeed, a relationship which is natural to man, in the sense that God is Father of all, for He is not, except in the general respect of His being Creator of all men, but rather a relationship into which we enter through repentance and faith. All Christ's teaching presupposes having come to terms with the gospel and its challenge, and therefore, being able to say 'Our Father' means to have come into a right relationship with God. Prayer based on a relationship to God - this is a centrally important principle in all this study, as we shall presently see, in the Notes that follow.

188) 11:1-4

The appellation 'Our Father', rightly understood, is an exclusive one. Not all can say this, and it is not true when all say it. Jesus once said to the Pharisees, 'Ye are of your father the devil'. John says, 'As many as received Him, to them gave He power to become sons of God....' And Paul, echoing this idea, says, 'Ye have received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry Abba, Father'. Clearly, to be able to say 'our Father', something needs to have happened to us, to bring us into a true filial relationship with Him. If, then, true prayer is based on a right relationship to God, clearly to be in a wrong relationship to Him disqualifies a man from prayer. Indeed, the only prayer that such an one can pray is 'God be merciful to me a sinner', for this is the only way for them into that right relationship with God.

Matthew includes the Lord's Prayer in the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, in a passage in which true and false attitudes in spiritual life are contrasted. There, Christ deals with, and exposes, a real error and danger in prayer -vain repetitions and much speaking. What does this mean? It is that the emphasis is shifted from the real heart of prayer to something else. Something else is made the ground and efficacy of prayer than a true relationship to God the Father. We are not heard for our much speaking, says Jesus. Then for what are we heard? It is this question that is answered for us in the Lord's Prayer, and it is in this light that we need to understand it.

189) 11:1-4

The whole subject of prayer is a big and prominent one in Scripture, both in Jesus' teaching and in that of the apostles. In this teaching, two things in particular can be noticed: one, the emphasis on 'prayer in His name', and on the relationship between the Father and Himself, and between the believer and God; and the other, a remarkable 'double strand' of teaching, now stressing simple asking in prayer, and now stressing importunacy, wrestling and agony. We need to assess and explain the significance of this. In Scripture, a name is a revelation of character; and to pray 'in Jesus' name' is to pray in line with Christ's revelation of Himself and of God, and of what they seek to do in the world - i.e. in line with the redemptive purpose of God. It is to pray as one who is identified with Christ in His purposes of redemption. It is to enter into the infinite yearnings of eternal love for the souls of men, to pray in fellowship with a suffering God.

Clearly, therefore, such prayer has to do not so much with the prayer, what is prayed, as with why one prays. This kind of prayer means a certain kind of attitude, and it is possible only for one who 'abides in Christ'. This is where the idea of the relationship with God comes in. As D. M. McIntyre says, 'Prevailing prayer draws its virtue from a disposition that has been brought into conformity with the mind of Christ' (cf John 15:7, 1 John 3:22, 5:14). But a filial relationship of fellowship with God is not something that is natural to men, nor is its continuing existence a natural, automatic thing. It costs, to maintain a close fellowship with Christ. This brings us to the second point, that of the 'double strand' of teaching, and we shall continue to discuss this in tomorrow's Note.

190) 11:1-4

It costs, we said in yesterday's Note, to maintain a close fellowship with Christ; and often, human nature, even redeemed human nature, being what it is, there are battles to be fought to maintain the lines of communication between us and God, to bring ourselves to, and keep ourselves in, a true relation of one-ness with Him, aligned with His will and with His redemptive purpose in the world. Satan knows how deadly this position is, for him, and so he seeks to mar and harm the relationship, and often it is a question of battling against the snares he puts in our way, or stirs up within us, and it may mean dying a thousand deaths in the process.

Overcoming the moral and spiritual hindrances in order to maintain the relationship, and so be enabled to pray in His Name, in line with His purposes, bringing oneself into the true attitude of submission to the Divine word and will, into our rightful place before God -this is what is exemplified and set forth in the Lord's Prayer. The prayer has two sections, one dealing with the Godward attitudes, the other with the manward - first of all the purposes of God for the world, then human and temporal needs. One thinks of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you" - this is undoubtedly the pattern in the Lord's Prayer.

191) 11:1-4

All the first section of the Prayer, then, has to do with a right relation to God, in terms of what we have already discussed the past two Notes (2). It has to do with the disciple's utter submission to God, his acceptance of the Cross, and his submission to its disciplines, and his stepping out on its way. And the simple asking that follows (3, 4) - bread, forgiveness, victory - is prayer that flows from the agony of the cross, on the basis of the intimate relationship established through acceptance of its challenge and its demands (we shall see, in the teaching that follows the Prayer, both the importunacy and battling of prayer and the 'simple asking' aspect are wonderfully combined in 5-10 and 11-13). The words 'Our Father', as we have already seen, imply the relationship we have been speaking of, a relationship which comes about only through Christ. The word 'hallowed' is the same as that used in 1 Pet 3:15, and means to sanctify God's Name in our hearts, that is, set Him on a solitary throne, give Him the preeminence (Col 1:18). This is the first step in the life of prayer. We must have a life in which God's Name is hallowed, a heart which magnifies Him as our Saviour and Lord. To pray for His kingdom to come is to renounce the kingdoms of the world, and to align ourselves with His redemptive purposes in the world. It is to let Him have His way in our lives. And what revolutions this might mean - to give Him full, undisputed sway in our hearts: To have His kingdom paramount in our thinking, as a consuming passion - this is the prerequisite of true prayer. To pray for His will to be done implies two things: on the one hand it means submission to that will, and this always means the Cross, for our will is not naturally His will. Our will must be surrendered. On the other hand, there is the possibility of seeking that will, not shrinkingly, fearfully, but gladly and joyfully, exulting in it. 'Thy will be done' is not a dirge, but a battle-cry: "I delight to do Thy will, O God".

192) 11:1-4

The petitions in the second part of the Prayer - daily bread, forgiveness, victory - indicate to us how we shall pray when we are living near the Cross, and have the first part of the Prayer in a true perspective. First of all, there will be simplicity in asking - all the simplicity and directness of a little child asking his father's help. All depth has a true simplicity. One thinks of giants like Abraham, Moses, Elijah, with their simple asking and few words after, and out of the long discipline and battle for character and stature in spiritual life. With these warrior saints the intimate relationship was established that made long speeches unnecessary and irrelevant. But there will also be a simplicity of asking. The three petitions here relate to present, past and future - that is, the whole of life is covered by them. Each is a daily need; but basically they are simple wants, simple needs, elemental and elementary. Is it too much to read into them to suggest that acceptance of the Cross, and of the demands of discipleship, qualifies prayer, and limits it? We are made to see what things are most important in life. There are two underlying reasons for this, which we shall look at in tomorrow's Note.

193) 11:1-4

The first reason has to do with what we may well call 'battle order'. Christian discipleship is warfare in the spiritual sense, and what we have here could well be described as 'the iron rations of the Christian'. One has only to recall how many things we had to do without, during the second world war, and were content to do without, in the interests of the war effort, and final victory, to realise what a relevant idea this is. In a war effort, and where a victory is to be won, one is glad to make sacrifices and one has to make them (cf 2 Tim 2:3, 4 Heb 12:1, 2). The life of the soldier and of the athlete is essentially and of necessity a ruggedly simple one. In the second place, simplicity comes to one under the discipline of the Cross for this reason: he has access to the bread that satisfies, and by his very calling to a heavenly citizenship he is weaned from the things that the world holds dear, and they hang lightly about him. He does not need to ask for them. He is, in the deepest sense, indifferent to them. Thus Paul, in prison in Rome, could say, "I have learned....to be content. I know how to abound, and how to be abased". The secret? Paul's life did not lie in either having or not having things. He was drinking at a deeper and fuller fountain. Such do not need to ask much, because they have been given something so much better and fuller in the things unseen and eternal. There is a real and pointed lesson for us here. So often, in our desires for 'many things' we are really at odds with our true destiny, and our true constitution. The Cross, and the real life of discipleship, makes a man rich towards God - and bread, forgiveness, victory, are among the things that He adds to those who seek first His kingdom and righteousness.

194) 11:5-13

As has already been pointed out, in the teaching that follows the Prayer, both the 'importunacy and battling' of prayer and the 'simple asking' aspect of prayer are wonderfully combined. In the first parabolic illustration, it is importunacy that is stressed. The request is met, not because it is a friend who asks, but because the asking is insistent and importunate. One of the implications of this is that if it is like this with a human and fallible friend, how much more by contrast, will it be with a living and loving God! The message is clear and plain: we will be heard! Ask, seek, knock, says Jesus. But we do need to bear in mind all that has been applied in the Lord's Prayer: when we come in that attitude therein exemplified, this will surely work. We must also note the implication in the idea of importunity: in the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman (Matt 15:21 ff) it is clear that Christ was testing her faith in the battle she had to get through. With her, it was triumph through testing.

The second illustration (11-13) it is the idea of 'relationship' that is stressed. "If an earthly father, with all his faults and follies, provides for the needs of his child, the heavenly Father, in all the perfection of His love, can be relied upon not to play bad jokes on His children! The Father is worthy of absolute trust, and Jesus is prepared to say this without qualification." (Caird).

Finally, we would hardly be out of order in reading the reference to the Holy Spirit in 13 back into all that we have said, about the simple life, about the knowledge of forgiveness, and about victory; for it is surely He Who makes all of them a possibility for us.

195) 11:14-26

It is instructive, in looking at this passage, to compare it with the parallel one in Matt 12: 22-30, for we thus see that the phrase in 14, 'the people wondered' indicates something more than mere astonishment. Their reaction of amazement represents, almost, a hope and a dawning of faith, and a realisation that Jesus must be the promised Messiah. "Is not this the son of David?" (Matt 12:23). This is significant: for it is precisely this reaction that the miracles were meant to evoke and produce. It is against a background, therefore, of faith struggling to form in these hearts that we need to view the Pharisees' reaction, and see the seriousness of it. For they took immediate steps to negative and crush any possible dawning of faith in the people by suggesting that the power by which Jesus was performing His miracles was from Satan, not from God. We see, then, how dastardly and abominable it is to try to undermine and undo the work of the Spirit in men's hearts (cf Matt 18:6 - terrible words indeed, and that they are no exaggeration, see what Matthew and Mark follow them with - the warning about blasphemy against the Holy Ghost. The sin of undermining the work of the Spirit is not unpardonable sin, but it may be associated with it, and lead to it; and it is a measure of its seriousness that it is associated with it in Matthew's and Mark's accounts. Let us recognize that the preaching of the good news of the kingdom is ever attended by reaction and opposition, sometimes of a very devilish nature; and it sometimes extends to a determined and malevolent attempt to prevent the work of the gospel spreading in the hearts of others. And Jesus says: Offences must come: but woe unto him through whom they come (Luke 17:1)".

196) 11:14-26

Our Lord's answer to the criticism of His enemies was a threefold one, and is worthy of careful study. First of all, He exposed the unreason of their unbelief. If He were casting out devils by Satan, it would mean civil war in the kingdom of evil - which is an irrational and improbable fantasy - and even to state it thus must surely have exposed the impossibility of their claim. In contrast, we next have our Lord's own views about His work, in 20, and 21, 22. This world is the 'strong man's house', the kingdom of Satan, and Satan is the 'strong man armed'. Jesus is the 'stronger than he', who enters that house and kingdom, in His Incarnation, and who by His spotless life, His resistance of temptation in the wilderness, and above all in the death of the Cross, binds the strong man, overcoming him, stripping him of his armour, and dividing his spoils. This is the gospel - the breaking into the prison-house. The word of Christ is a liberating word. It is as a great Liberator that He stood among men, and every miracle He performed was evidence of His power to set men free. And it was in face of this that these men were committing final blasphemy. The finger of God was at work, and they had no eyes to see it. The captives of the mighty were being delivered, and they thought He had a devil! This is the tragedy. It was so then, and it is so now. Men so often will not see that it is God that is at work!

197) 11:14-26

Finally, the parable of the home swept and garnished (24-26). What is its message? The consequences of being 'against Christ' have been dealt with in the previous verses, and in 23 the situation is adequately summed up. Now we are shown that incomplete or partial belief is, for all practical purposes, much the same as being 'against Him'. And the one who does what is described in the parable proves the impossibility of being neutral - either you are with Christ, or against Him. There is no halfway ground of being 'delivered' yet not 'committed'. Sympathetic interest, benevolent neutrality simply meant that the house has been swept and garnished, but no new power has come in to take over, and can only lead to a worse state than the first.. This, then, is the situation: grace had come to these men, and the kingdom was come upon them (20). And they had refused it. Their blindness was a willing blindness, that no amount of 'signs' would convince or correct. They were so willingly blind as to accuse Jesus of complicity with Satan. It is a parable, therefore, as Calvin says, of the condemnation that awaits those who, despising the grace offered to them, again open the door to the devil.

198) 11:27-36

These verses contain a series of incidents and comments which further underline the challenge of faith and expose the nature of unbelief. The first incident contains what appears to be a sincere and moving utterance and expression of praise, which Jesus however dismisses as an irrelevance. "The words of the woman in the crowd were a common form of extravagant compliment; but Jesus dismissed them as sheer sentimentality, for the danger of pious effusions is that they are readily enjoyed for their own sake and become a substitute for the one proper response to God's word, By placing the story in its present context, Luke has registered his opinion that sentimentality is a form of unbelief" (Caird). Ah, sentimental reaction will not do duty for real obedience, which is the important thing. The woman in fact missed the point: it is not the natural relationship to Jesus, represented in 27 by Mary, His mother, but the spiritual one which expresses itself in obedience to the word of God (28) that is the real heart of Jesus' teaching. Peter's attitude to Jesus is a good illustration of this contrast: he was the disciple who always made protestation of his love to Jesus, yet when the crunch came, his particular kind of loyalty and enthusiasm was seen to be woefully lacking and shown up for what it was. Hence the radical dealing with him by our Lord on the shores of Galilee after the Resurrection (John 21). It is never enough to be enthusiastic about Jesus. The real question is: Do we hear the Word and do it?

199) 11:27-36

The reference to 'signs' in 29-32 has deep and far-reaching implications that need to be looked at with care. First of all, the demand for a sign was, in this instance, the demand for something so unmistakeable that faith itself would be abolished and made unnecessary. And, of course, such a demand was necessarily refused. They had had so many signs! Jesus' signs and wonders had been designed to lead men to faith - and would have led to faith, if they had had any will to believe. But this was a demand which in its very nature was impossible - and for this reason: to have faith means that you submit yourself, and give over your independent existence to Christ (it is the will to independence that constitutes our sinnerhood); it is to burn your boats, to give yourself 'away. Only thus can a man enter the kingdom of God. The signs wrought by Jesus are designed to give us confidence that the One to whom we are thus to commit ourselves is worthy of our trust and faith. But this kind of demand - for an unmistakeable proof that would make faith unnecessary - means that, deep down, we want the kind of knowledge, conviction, assurance, that can come only by making this surrender, without making that surrender, without entering in. And it is an impossibility. It is the desire to be a Christian without being a Christian, to have the blessings and benefits of Christian experience without making the commitment which alone enables one to enter these blessings. It is, of course, true that one seeks as much evidence as possible on which to make up one's mind about Christ; but there comes a time when not only no more evidence is needed, but also no further evidence is possible, and the only thing left to do is to make that committal and taste and see that the Lord is good. When this point is reached, and still a man does not enter in, then we must conclude that there is no will to be converted, no desire or intention to believe.

200) 11:27-36

Our Lord's reply to the demand for a sign is full of significance and meaning. On (the one hand, He refused them a sign, for the reasons we have already indicated; on the other hand, He promised them a sign. And both these things are connected. They had no will to believe on Him, in fact were so set against Him that they were bent on crucifying Him. And yet, mysteriously, that death He was to die would constitute a sign to them - this, in fact, was the only sign that could possibly have influenced them. And it did, some of them, as we see from Acts, following Pentecost. We see here, then, even at this critical stage, the appeal of mercy, and the open gate, for these evil men.

The connection between the parable of the candle (33) and what precedes it is twofold: on the one hand, there is a reference to the calling that God had given the Jews - 'this generation' -to be a light to lighten the Gentiles. Instead, however, of allowing her light to shine, Israel had covered it up, refusing to shine, and had 'become blind (this is the force of the reference in 34ff to the body being full of darkness, because of the evil eye of refusing to believe); on the other hand, there is a connection with the asking for a sign. Those whose spiritual sight has not been darkened by indifference and impenitence, have no need of a sign from heaven, Their whole soul is full of the light that is all around them, ready to be recognized and absorbed.

201) 11:37-54

It would be easy - all too easy – to interpret these 'woes' uttered by Jesus as a swingeing attack on, and condemnation of, Pharisaic religion. They are that, of course, and the condemnation was surely justified, for Pharisaic religion in our Lord's day was a terrible and frightful parody and caricature of reality, and a horrible and blasphemous affront to the name of God; and of all the hard and terrible things Jesus is recorded to have said during His ministry, none was ever harder or more unsparing than His words against the Pharisees. But there is a very real temptation, in such an interpretation, for us to be taking a swipe at the things and people we may regard as Pharisaic. And it may be questioned whether this is the real function of the passage, or its real lesson for us. If it were, we would essentially remain outside it: it would be for 'them', not for 'us'. And this would be to miss one supremely important point in the passage. In the verses which immediately follow it - 12:1, 2 - we read that Jesus warned His disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees - that is to say, a warning of something that could happen to us, and become true of us. This sets the passage in a much more critical light: its point is that it is a message 'for us', not 'for them' only. This is how we must examine it.

202) 11:37-54

Let us take the passage, then, in its context. Jesus has been describing the nature of true discipleship, from chapter 9 onwards, and we have seen this to be a rigorous, thoroughgoing challenge that makes no concessions to the flesh, The standard has been high - inexorably and shatteringly high - and therefore alternatives to it are obviously going to be on the market! One alternative is to abandon it altogether and 'walk no more with Him' (as indicated in John 6:66). Another is, to develop, perhaps unconsciously, certainly imperceptibly, a form of godliness which denies the power of godliness, like the Pharisees and formalists of our Lord's Day. This is always a danger, where the form of religious observance is something men still want to retain, but the cost of reality is too great for them to pay. To take a stand for some needed truth - as the Pharisees, in their origin, did, - is a good and necessary thing; but it is also fraught with peril, for if the initial virtue that led to it spends itself, and it becomes a thing in itself, without power or grace, Pharisaism will inevitably result, with its subsequent harshness, inhumanity and barrenness. Harshness (42), inhumanity (46 f), barrenness (52) - are these not the very characteristics that Jesus exposes in the woes He utters in these verses? How tragic - and frightening - that what began as a movement ended as a disease! And, this being so, is it not much more to the point that the passage should be taken as a solemn message 'for us', rather than 'for them'?

203) 12:1-12

One of the problems inherent in seeking easier alternatives to true discipleship, with the attendant danger of Pharisaism, is that there is a natural and instinctive tendency to conceal this sad and sorry state from the gaze of men, and even from ourselves too. This is where the first lesson in these verses comes, for in 2 ff, Jesus warns the disciples that there will inevitably be an exposure of living lies in men's lives, and in the lives of His people. This exposure can be taken in two ways: in reference to 'the last days' (cf Paul's words in 1 Cor 3: 13, 'the day shall declare it'); and also in reference to a day of the Spirit's power (as cf the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5). It is a simple fact of Church history that in days of revival power great exposures of hypocrisy and sham do take place, with all manner of hidden evil uncovered. The second lesson in the passage concerns 4 ff. Jesus stresses the need for courageous testimony to the truth in matters of discipleship, however strong the temptation to take lower ground. The thought is certainly that it is pressure and persecution that might make the disciples succumb to this temptation. We should also bear in mind that He is speaking to them in the presence of a crowd, some of whom at least were very hostile to Jesus, and were pressing upon Him (11:53, 12:1) and threatening Him and them. Here, then, is the issue: persecution and pressure may well tempt true disciples to become 'hypocrites', in the sense that they may take lower ground, for safety's sake. Hence the striking words in 4,5, about the fear of man and the fear of God.

204) 12:1-12

The fear and dread that can come when the pressures are great upon us as disciples are very real, and the temptation is often very great to tone down our witness, for safety's sake. The fact that we do not know a great deal about outward persecution in our land today should not make inconceivable to us that Christians might yet be called to such a challenge in the future, as other believers are in different parts of the world. And if Christian witness can be fulfilled only on pain of hurt, danger to life and limb, or even death, then we must not flinch or hesitate. Fear of hurt, persecution, and even the loss of all our hopes, may be very real; but it is more fearful to disobey God than to lose life for His sake. Nothing that men can do to us can 'kill the soul'. That is sacrosanct from their bitter hatred. But God can destroy both body and soul in hell. He is the One to fear, not men! It is better to suffer the loss of all things, all earthly prospects, hopes, comforts, than to live with a conscience that has been violated by doing something we know has grieved and displeased God. That is the only thing that can really hurt us, not the other, Our Lord's concern here is clear: it is to get things in their proper perspective, and to live in the light of the eternal world. Satan can do only so much, and go only so far. There are some things he cannot harm or hurt.

205) 12:1-12

There are, however, very wonderful compensations and rewards for true discipleship. For one thing, there is the reality of the care of God (6, 7), The personal, guardian care of God for His people passes all understanding in its tenderness and sweetness.. There is such a thing as the fellowship of His sufferings, and in that glad and intimate relationship we prove in ways otherwise impossible that He does care, and take note of all that we suffer for His sake. We can trust Him to look after our interests. He will not fail us, or let us down. Every detail of our lives is a concern to Him. For another thing, we are assured of final vindication: confession before the Father, and the divine accolade, 'Well done, good and faithful servant....' - these are not fanciful matters; in the end, they are the only things that will matter! And, in the meanwhile, there will be the constant and timely help and support of the Holy Spirit (11, 12). He is promised as a Sufficiency to all who are true to Jesus. No crisis will find us unprepared or unsupported. He is the Mighty Advocate of the people of God. Well, this sets the sufferings of believers in their true perspective, and sends shafts of glory gleaming through every kind of darkness! Be of good cheer, suffering pressurised child of God: you are on the victory side!

206) 12:13-21

It is the context and background of this parable which highlight its real message and significance, although of course it can also stand on its own as a forthright challenge on eternal issues. Our Lord's theme in the previous verses has been discipleship, and the need for living with eternity's values in view; but here was a man whose mind was very much on other matters, and who had so slight an interest in what was being said that he could break in at such an inopportune moment with his request to Jesus to bid his brother divide the inheritance with him. This is the force of the parable, and its real point: it was told by our Lord because here was a man who gave himself away as being so preoccupied and obsessed with the material that he had become utterly unreceptive to the things of the Spirit. The man may well have had a case, for injustice may well have been done; but Jesus refused to countenance his request. For preoccupation with even a just grievance, especially in view of the subject of Christ's teaching, and the emphasis He was making in it, really put the man into the class of the Rich Fool. We should particularly take note of the fact that Jesus deliberately introduced the dimension of eternity into what was, for the man, an ordinary situation! This is surely something as relevant today as then. And Christ's point in 15 is clear: Better to be a victim of injustice than to fall into the error of thinking that abundance of life is to be found in material possessions (cf 1 Cor 6:7,8).

207) 12:13-21

As to the parable itself, it is a remarkable study, on any interpretation. Here is a man who had, as we say, 'got on'. It is not that he was a bad man, or that he had gotten his wealth in any questionable manner; but everything he touched had turned to gold. There is nothing wrong in that; but it is a situation that is not without its dangers. In his prosperity, he not only became ensnared in worldliness, but also all the selfish tendencies of his heart came into their own. He is shown as being perplexed (17) as to what to do with all his produce, but this is in terms of storing it up for himself. There is no outgoing of his heart in generosity to others. Indeed, the striking thing about the parable is his own isolation - no one is allowed to break into his self-absorption to share anything of his life with him. And - even more sinister than the hardening power of riches - we see also their deceitfulness, for (a) he thought to feed his soul on the mammon of unrighteousness (19b), and (b) he thought that his riches would make him secure for many years to come (19a). He could not have been more wrong, but he did not see it. That is the point: he was deceived. Because materialism is a deceptive creed!

208) 12:13-21

For all that, however, we may discern a real uneasiness in him, and distinct traces of a conflict and struggle that was never very far from the surface. He knew he had a soul, and that he was responsible for it. He knew the claims of God on it. But always, he kept that whole question at bay. It was always "Wait till tomorrow. Tomorrow I will pay heed to the claims of my soul". The truth about his was that he was running away from God, and seeking to dodge the claims of that other world that were pressing upon him. God has His own ways of pressing His claims upon men. In a hundred different incidents and circumstances these claims come at us - the crises in home or family, the misfortunes that beset our way, the numerous contacts with men - all are voices from the other world urging us to pay heed to eternal things. It is not possible to ignore such challenges - but it is only too possible - this man found it so - to put them to one side, to postpone attending to them to a more convenient season. The speech he made to his soul (19) was simply a sop to the conscience that was whispering to him that the time was now short. But no man has the privilege of deciding the time when he will pay heed to his soul's eternal welfare. It is God Who calls the tune. And He said, "No, not tomorrow. Tonight!" And his complacent eventide and euphoric dreams became a solemn hour of reckoning before God. Jesus' words in 21 point the unavoidable lesson, and we wonder what the man in 13 thought of it!

209) 12:22-34

From this verse on to the end of the chapter Jesus returns to, and elaborates the themes He had earlier touched on in His discussion of discipleship in 1-12 (the incident that led to His telling the parable of the rich fool was clearly an interruption of that discussion). Thus, the subject of God's care for His children, spoken of in 6, 7, is elaborated in these verses, the subject of confessing Christ, spoken of in 8-10, is returned to in 35-48; and the subject of persecution, spoken of in 11, 12, is amplified in 49-53. All the same, the teaching of the parable is certainly not lost sight of, as discerning readers may see in, for example, the reference-in 24 to storehouses and barns, and in 25 to the thought of the prolongation of life (as scholars take the phrase to mean). Indeed, it is almost as if our Lord were taking the story of the rich fool as His 'text', on which to base the rest of His message on discipleship. We have already seen how Jesus introduced the dimension of eternity into the situation, and this seems to be the key to a proper understanding of these verses (as cf 21, 31, 33). What is being underlined is that Christian discipleship is not simply a question of improving one's life in measure, changing a little here, a little there; a being less preoccupied with material possessions, or a being less anxious about life. It is to belong to a different world, to be a different order of being. This is the light in which we need to view our Lord's statements here.

210) 12:22-34

There are two, issues: one's attitude to treasure, to superabundance; and one's attitude to the necessities of life. As to the first, we are to be without covetousness; as to the second, we are to be without anxiety. And the reason in both cases is the reality and pressure of eternity upon life. The solemn light of eternity must be brought to bear on all we are and all we do in the Christian life. Christ, then, is indicating two alternative ways of living: with treasure on earth in view, or with treasure in heaven in view. There is an absolute distinction between them. But even within the context of the Christian life itself, there are these two levels of living: there are believers who mind heavenly things, and there are believers who mind earthly things, (cf Phil 3:18-20). Now, Jesus presents these two possibilities as 'either/or'. They are mutually exclusive, and there can be no judicious blending of the two, as the man in the parable vainly tried to do. This is the force of the words in 34 about where your treasure is: whichever has our secret love will claim our hearts. Our treasure is our master. This is the same emphasis we saw earlier in Jesus' teaching about 'the single eye', which sees things in their proper proportion and in their relative value and importance. Happy is the man who sees that eternal things are the really important things, and that in the light of eternity it matters little whether he is rich in this life or not!

211) 12:22-34

'Take no thought' in 22 does not advocate an improvident attitude to life, and Jesus is not suggesting that we should be careless or decrying careful provision for the future. There is no thought here for the 'eat, drink and be merry' attitude with not a concern as to how the needful things of life are to be come by. The point is that we are to distinguish between proper, legitimate, necessary foresight and anxious worry and fretting about the future or about the many burdens and concerns of daily life. It is the latter, not the former, that is forbidden. The force of the reference to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field is not: They are cared for without toil, therefore we also will be cared for without toil, but: They are cared for without toil, therefore much more will we, as intelligent beings, who can work and toil, who have been given ability to do these things, and the means whereby to work for our living. It is God Himself Who has instituted work as a means of grace: will He not much more bless this means of grace to us? - that is, honest toil will be blessed by God without our being worried or anxious about it. The 'therefore' in 22 is also important: it is on the basis of what He has already said that He now says these things - that is, He bases His appeal on the presupposition of a rightly ordered life, a life set in the context of an eternal dimension.

212) 12:22-34

To put it another way, the kind of faith and trust of which Jesus speaks here is possible only to those who have taken 31 seriously: 'Seek ye the kingdom of God....' Seeking the kingdom first brings both the kingdom and the necessities of life; whereas putting the necessities of life first puts both these and the kingdom at risk - a man may lose both, as the rich farmer in the parable did: There is a great challenge in all this, but we should not, in over-preoccupation with the challenge, miss the sheer attractiveness of it all. For the challenge in 31 is followed immediately by 32, with its insistence that it is the Father's good pleasure to give us the kingdom, that is, the inexorable summons to put God and His kingdom first really conceals an incredible offer - the Father of glory is eager to burst through to overwhelm us with benison and benediction beyond all we could ask or think. God pledges Himself to those who believe in Him as Shepherd (of His flock), Father (of His children) and King (of His subjects), and all the riches of the Godhead are waiting to break through in blessing to the souls of those who trust in Him. This is the prescription and cure for anxiety, restlessness, rootlessness, and insecurity in the life of man, the faith - and knowledge - that God rules the world with a Father's heart, and that He delights to name us as His children:

213) 12:35-48

Our Lord now takes up the subject of confessing or denying Him, which He touched on briefly in 8-10 (see Note for Thurs, 7th Sept. for analysis of chapter). Faithfulness to Christ in one's testimony, and the fulfilment of the solemn stewardship committed to us in the gospel is the theme of these verses, and it is in this connection that we see the forthright emphasis on the dimension of eternity, for Jesus sets the disciplines of discipleship against the backcloth of His second coming and the dawning of eternal day: 'loins girt and lamps burning, as men waiting for their master to come' (35, 36). We are to live life as a stewardship committed to us by God, and as those that will give account on the great day, living as those who are making their future now, What Jesus means is that we need more 'eternity' in our lives and in our thinking! And we see from what is said just how practical this is for daily life. There is no thought here of being 'so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly use', but rather the opposite. The tragedy about so much discipleship is that it is so earthly minded that it is of no heavenly use! These verses make clear that such an emphasis is a most salutary and practical stimulus to faithfulness and diligence in daily living. In the parabolic saying in 36-40 and 42-48, the fact of the Master's expected return is an incentive to watchfulness and industry, and to the servants being diligently involved in the work committed to them. This is the whole point. We should note, in passing, Peter's interruption in 41. Jesus says, in effect: "Whether I am speaking to you or to the crowds depends. I am speaking of, and to, My stewards. Of course you are My stewards, but the door is open. Others may come into My kingdom, if they will, and accept the stewardship as from Me, and become My servants and stewards".

214) 12:35-48

Look, then, at this threefold emphasis made by Jesus. Life is a stewardship committed to us by God. 'Use it for Me', He says. It is difficult not to think back to the parable of the rich fool earlier in the chapter. What sort of stewardship did he exercise? What a tragic, prodigal squandering of a precious commitment! This bids me ask myself the question: 'What have I done, what am I doing, with my life? Life is something for which we will have to give account. This is why we are to live with eternity's values in view. Jesus' parables are all unequivocal in this: there is a uniform emphasis on the day of reckoning (cf also 2 Cor 5:10, 1 Cor 3:12-15). If we waste our lives, we may depend on it that we shall suffer loss. We are making our future now. This is made plain in Jesus' words in 37 and 44, in the divine approbation on the one hand and the divine commissioning in the other. Faithfulness here will mean responsibility bestowed there. The future holds unimagined prospects of responsibilities, duties and privileges, and service, for which we are being prepared, and are preparing ourselves, now, in this probationary time, by being faithful, by living with eternity's values in view, by living as those that will give account of their stewardship. Faithfulness creates capacity for future service. And, as a postscript to that - if we live in the light of eternity, if by so doing we are ready for that Coming and that day of reckoning, we will also be ready for anything in the meanwhile! And that is a worthy way to live, indeed!

215) 12:49-53

These verses take up, in more detail, what Jesus has already said in 11, 12, about persecution. The general sense and link with what has gone before is surely clear: Jesus has been enjoining faithfulness to Himself (35-48); here, He makes it plain what the context of that faithfulness is likely to be - division, turmoil, opposition, and even persecution. There is ample challenge here: Jesus does not mean that anyone contemplating discipleship will get the false idea that it will all be great fun. It will cost, and at times it will cost a very great deal. Not peace, but division, not harmony, but disunity within families. Fire, however (49), does not refer to this disturbance. It is the fire that causes it, ultimately, but it is not itself the disturbance, 'Fire' sent by Jesus refers to the fire of the Spirit of God, and the fulfilment of this word is seen in Acts 2, in the events of Pentecost. Here, once again in the context of the challenge of discipleship we have the immense encouragement of grace, It will not matter how hard and tough the situation will be, if the fire of God is burning in it!

216) 12:49-53

In 49, the RSV rendering is clearer than the AV 'what will I, and it should certainly read 'would that it were', The 'But' in 50 seems to suggest that before Jesus' longing can be fulfilled the baptism must be accomplished - i.e., the baptism of His passion on the Cross. Until that takes place, He is straitened in Himself, and there are things He cannot do. Well might He say, 'Would that it were already kindled! Heb 12:2 says 'Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross....' This is the joy that was set before Him, the coming of the fire of the Spirit upon the earth. And so, today, this is 'repeated' and 'reflected' in the lives of His disciples. Of every contemporary situation He says, 'I am come to send fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled!' He is straitened in us, because, so often, there is a death we have refused to die, a baptism we are not willing to undergo. One recalls the word used by Luke in 9:31 to describe the death Jesus was to die at Jerusalem - it is 'exodos', which means 'a way out'. Here in the context of Jesus' words, we must surely see that the 'death' He calls us to die in discipleship is also 'a way out', out of straitening, out of barrenness and ineffectiveness in service, into fruitfulness for Him. This is the true aim and purpose of discipleship (cf John 15:16).

217) 12:54-59

The primary reference in these verses about 'the signs of the times' is to the Jews. What was in process of happening was that they were resisting His word, and the offer of His kingdom. They did not realise the consequences of their action; they did not see that in Him lay their only hope; if they did not receive Him, divine judgment would come upon them, as it did some years later, in the sack of Jerusalem (70AD). To Jesus the signs were telltale clear, just as the signs of the weather were clear to them. Their need to discern the signs of the times was urgent. This is the force of the illustration in 57-59. The insolvent debtor makes every effort to settle his case out of court, rather than face the utter ruin of being jailed for debt, with no prospect either of earning money to pay his creditor or of being released till the debt is paid. Similarly Israel, faced with the Great Assize, would do well to settle her account with God by admitting her spiritual bankruptcy and casting herself on His mercy. Jesus thus dramatically takes up the request in 13 about the inheritance, and passes to something infinitely more solemn than that earthly inheritance, the heavenly. And what need there is here to judge what is right! What He is saying to them is this: "You are going (the course of your life is the journey) with your adversary (the just and holy law of God) before the magistrate (God Himself); therefore by the way take pains, give diligence, to be delivered from him (by repentance and faith) lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge deliver you to the officer...and the officer cast you into prison". It is a forthright appeal to them to get right with God, while there is yet time, And, indeed, the time was short for them!

218) 13:1-9

The opening verses of this chapter continue the solemn note of what goes before them, and there are a number of obvious links between what is said here and what we have already noted in the previous chapter. For one thing, the emphasis in the parable of the rich farmer in 12: 16 ff is on life being a stewardship we receive from God and for which we will be called to give an account; and here, in the parable of the fig-tree the emphasis lies precisely here: the tree (which represents Israel) is called to give an account of its 'stewardship', and when found barren, judgment is threatened. The vinedresser pleads for a little longer time, and further opportunity is given to it to become fruitful. It is this parable that affords the distinctive lessons here, for it underlines so much in God's dealings with men, in mercy and in judgment. But, first, we need to look at the encounter that precedes it, and our Lord's answer to the Jews who spoke to Him about Pilate's barbarous dealings with the Galileans, This we shall do in tomorrow's Note.

219) 13:1-9

What is the point of this being introduced here, and what is its link with what has gone before? The connection is twofold: on the one hand Jesus, in the closing words of chapter 12, had spoken of the idea of judgment, in the picture of the magistrate and the law court. On the other hand, He had just chided them for being blind to the realities of life: they were able to discern the signs of the weather in the sky, but they were not able to discern the signs of the times and the principle of judgment operating in history. And now some of them came forward to Him with the account of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. It is as if they had said, 'We are not so blind as you think we are'. They held up the incident to show that they could see that God had brought judgment upon the Galileans. They implied that some terrible guilt must necessarily have rested upon those Galileans, which turned the very sacrifices they were offering into sin, and brought the judgment of God upon them. The historical reference is uncertain, if not unknown. There had been some sort of hot-blooded insurrection on the part of some Galileans, and Pilate had set his soldiers on a punitive expedition, who had slain the Galileans even in the act of making sacrifice. Now, the Judaeans had little sympathy with the Galileans; and they would tell this story against them with pious satisfaction and smug complacency. But they were in error on two counts, as we shall see in tomorrow's Note, and Jesus deals with them one by one.

220) 13:1-9

In the first place, Jesus deals with their complacency and their smugness by citing a similar incident of disaster that had befallen Judaeans, not Galileans, in the falling of the tower of Siloam on eighteen of them, killing them instantly. Jesus is saying, in effect, that God shows no partiality in His dealings with men: when men outside the pure worship of God sin, they are dealt with; and when men inside the pure worship of God sin, they are punished also. There is no respect of persons with God, and no favouritism either, where sin is concerned. On the other hand Jesus also deals with their over-simplistic analysis of the issues, 'Suppose ye....'(2), 'Think ye....' (4). He does not deny that they were sinners; He does however deny that the disasters that overtook them marked them out as sinners above their fellows. And He draws from this the solemn message, 'Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish (3, 5).' In other words He means, 'You are blind to the signs of the times; for these signs speak of judgment for you; yet all you can think of is judgment falling on others. You do not see that judgment might well have fallen on you also, for your sins, That it has not done so is not due to the fact that they were greater sinners than you, but solely to the patience and longsuffering mercy of God (which the parable proceeds to underline)'.

221) 13:1-9

What Jesus was saying, in the words of one commentator, was: "These victims of tragedy, whether due to the severity of Pilate or to the unforeseeable accident, must not be regarded as outstanding sinners specially singled out for divine retribution, but they provide a salutary reminder that the whole nation is heading for a more comprehensive disaster, like the unfruitful fig tree which is given one last chance to respond to special treatment. Israel must use the respite which God in His mercy has given her (their not suffering the judgment of God as yet) to bring about a national reformation, or find that there is a limit to the divine forbearance" (Caird). In other words, Jesus says, 'Don't turn the idea of judgment to 'the other man', Think of yourselves.' He thus turns what they say into a warning to themselves to repent, and to recognize that whatever falls on others may very justly have fallen upon them. We always have to say, 'There, but for the grace of God, go I'. Nor is it always the most wicked man who is first dragged to punishment, as Calvin says, "but when God selects a few out of a large number to be punished, He holds out in their person a threatening that He will take vengeance on the remainder, in order that all may be alarmed."

222) 13:1-9

It is also to be noticed that in the general teaching of Scripture, and in the words of Christ, "an intimate connection between suffering and sin; but it is the sin of the whole race which is linked with the suffering of the whole race; and not of necessity the sin of the individual with his particular share and portion in this the world's woe....Christ affirms, and all Scripture affirms, that the sum total of the calamity which oppresses the human race is the consequence of the sum total of its sin; nor does He deny the relation in which a man's actual sins may stand to his sufferings. What He does deny is, the power of other men to trace the connection and thus their right in any particular case to assert it" (Trench). The message, then, is clear: they were to see, in these sudden and unlooked for catastrophes, and recognize, a call to repentance - partly because these things should remind them of the uncertainty of life, and partly to awaken in them a sense and consciousness of sin. Such was the word of warning to the Jews of Jesus' day. And it is significant, perhaps, that the two calamities mentioned in these verses as happening to the Galileans and the Judaeans, were reflected with remarkable and graphic unusualness in the judgment that did finally fall on that generation, when it refused to repent. It was indeed 'likewise' that they perished, for the very same forms of violent death overtook them. "As the tower of Siloam fell and crushed eighteen of the dwellers of Jerusalem, exactly so multitudes of its inhabitants in that last siege and assault were crushed beneath the ruins of their temple and city; numbers also were pierced through with Roman missiles...in the courts of the temple, in the very act of preparing their sacrifices, so that literally their blood, like that of the Galileans, was mingled with their sacrifices" (Trench).

223) 13:1-9

As to the parable itself (6-9) the fig-tree is the Jewish people. It is they who were planted in the world by God, that they should bear fruit for His glory. But, of course, by analogy, the parable is also of universal application; for as Israel was the representative of those who afterwards should be chosen by God as His people, there is a warning here also for the Church, and also for the individual believer, And indeed, in even more general terms, for nations and communities, in terms of the stewardship committed by God to them. Let us look first at the message for nations and communities, in relation to Jesus' application of the parable to His own people. His complaint against them was that they did not read the signs of the times, and that they could not see the ominous indications of impending judgment. What, then, of our own nation? In the light of the teaching of this passage, can anyone doubt how Jesus would interpret our crisis-time? The story of the decline and fall of great powers is only too historical -far too historical to allow us to suppose that it is simply melodramatic to suggest that judgment is impending for our nation and the nations of the west. It may be that the present recurrent economic crisis will be resolved, that unemployment will be reduced, that violence will be restrained, that the breakdown of law and order will be healed. But if so, it will be because, unseen, a Hidden Intercessor will have said, "Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it; and if it bear fruit well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down".

224) 13:1-9

The message of the parable for the Church is just as compelling. After all, it was Jesus Who warned the churches in Asia (in Revelation 2/3) that unless they repented, He would remove their candlesticks out of their place, Jesus said, of the Church of His day, "Behold your house is left unto you desolate, because you did not know the time of your visitation". The story which follows this, of the healing of the infirm woman, and the leader of the synagogue's criticism of the healing because it was done on the Sabbath day, is an evidence of how much and how tragically it had 'lost the place', and become barren and unfruitful. Well, the Church's history in the 20th century gives cause, surely, for solemn pause. How many appeals of grace have come to it! How many warning signs - falling attendances, shortage of candidates for ministry and mission-field, lack of finance, failing influence. And if there have been times when God has raised up prophets to speak, and men after His own heart to proclaim His Word, is it not simply the evidence of His patience and long-suffering, and His willingness to bless, if only His people will repent and turn in new obedience to Him? And if, as the parable suggests, the special digging round and dunging of the fig-tree represents divine grace being provided, is this not an indication of the multiplication of the means of grace which is so often granted to men and nations in the last period of their probation, and just before these means are withdrawn from them forever? Is it not possible to view much that is happening in spiritual life today in this light - the quickening in many places, the indications of movement in many organisations, among young people, in the student world and elsewhere - a gathering of fruit from the Church, almost in spite of itself, before the day of probation is over. What if, at the end, and there is no real repentance, the day of grace should pass from the West, and dawn elsewhere (as has happened before in past history - think of N. Africa, or Turkey, where once the gospel flourished so gloriously). It could happen again!

225) 13:1-9

The application on the individual level is so obvious as almost not to need statement. Trench quotes the early Father, Theophylact, as saying: "Christ came thrice, by Moses, by the prophets, and thirdly in his own person; He comes, when application is made to the individual, - in childhood, in manhood, in old age". But the appeal of the gospel does not always stretch into old age. God often gives a man an appointed time, a span of years, then calls him to give an account. A limited time of opportunity, a period of years, for example, in a certain place, then He takes us somewhere else; a period of years in a certain job, or at university - then comes the accounting, the reckoning, and opportunity passes, never to return that way again, in that particular place. How very solemn this is! But we must note this: although the thrust of these verses is undoubtedly the idea of reckoning and judgment, we must recognize that divine judgment is never harsh (though it is frightening); and it is a caricature of reality to think of God as simply a vengeful Deity. The opposite is true, in the parable, and in all Scripture (cf 2 Pet 3:9b, Ezek 33:11). Here, the great Vine-dresser pleads for the life of the tree and would fain avert its doom, When one thinks of how the door of repentance has been opened by the preaching of the Word, by the influence of godly lives on those for whom it pleads, by the providences that have shaped and guided all their way - in face of all this, one wonders just how much more digging and fertilising such lives are going to need, before they turn to Christ and commit themselves to Him for salvation!

226) 13:10-17

There are three points that require our attention and consideration in this story: the nature of the miracle that was performed, the reaction of the synagogue leader to it, and the ultimate significance of the miracle in the context of the gospel. As to the miracle itself, we are told that the woman had a spirit of infirmity. Some take this in general terms as simply descriptive of illness in the physical realm; others, more accurately, and in line with what Jesus Himself says in 16, as a work of Satan. It is true that all illness is ultimately traceable to Satan, as all sin is: illness is simply a shadow, a foretaste, a part, of death, and death is something that Satan is responsible for, and has the power over. It is true also that dealing with demons is not usually referred to as healing (as it is referred to in 14), and that the casting out of demons was not performed by the laying on of hands, but by the word of command. But it was in fact the synagogue ruler, not Jesus, who spoke of it as healing. Jesus loosed her from her infirmity (12). Also, the laying on of hands followed the casting out (12, 13) (cf also Mark 9:27). Also, when a 'spirit of infirmity' is spoken of, it is generally indicative of some supernatural influence or power. This is not to say that illness was a psychological one, and 'all in the mind'. This demon-possession was physical, and real. Beyond that, we cannot say. But we should not be afraid of the implications of this word, namely that human lives - minds and bodies - can be assailed by alien powers, which can do them terrible despite. Here, it was for a period of eighteen years. But the power of the Lord was present to deliver, and that in a sovereign way. It was an unsolicited miracle. There was no expression of her need: the initiative was all with Him. And it was by His Word that the miracle was wrought. It was a word of power. This is the glorious picture of the gospel, this is what the gospel is about: every miracle He wrought was the gospel in microcosm; for every one of them was possible because of what the gospel is - the power of God unto salvation confronting the human situation! Here is the Stronger than Satan loosing the captives!

227) 13:10-17

The synagogue ruler was moved with indignation! We need to see in this the end-product of a process which was perverted and twisted in its interpretation of the Sabbath law. Here is legalism at its worst and most inhuman and ugly! Yet - and this is surely the supreme tragedy - Pharisaism in its origin was a spiritual movement, which stood for godliness as against unrighteousness and godlessness, in a time when the prevailing atmosphere of the Church was political and secular. It was a protest movement of the best kind. But somewhere along the line the Spirit's seal was 'institutionalised', and lost. Then hardness set in; and a form of godliness lacking the power of godliness, and the humanity of godliness, took over, leading to this, Is it really possible to stray so far from the spirit of the law? Seemingly! What a parody and caricature! But more: it had driven the ruler of the synagogue to an enmity against the good. To be so utterly absorbed in legalism that the good is missed and opposed - this is the danger, and the tragedy of the situation!

Jesus was angry too! This is seen in His words in 15: 'Thou hypocrite...!' It was a twofold hypocrisy: that of pretending to address the people (14) while all the time getting at Jesus: and also that of professing to have a zeal for the law, when his motive was hostility against Jesus.

All this should not, however, make us too afraid of taking a true stand for the sanctity of the Lord's Day. We are not within a hundred miles of this kind of legalistic bondage in the Church today! Our opportunity is to show forth the beauty of holiness by a true and glad observance of the Day as one of joy and blessing and spiritual refreshment.

228) 13:10-17

If we look behind the story to the fundamental considerations, we must realise this: the gospel means that the kingdom of God has broken in upon the kingdom of Satan, to undo the devil's work and restore God's original order to creation. And in all this, the Sabbath, which was the day God had given to Israel as a weekly release from the bondage of labour, was also a weekly foretaste of the rest that awaited the people of God in the kingdom, the final release from all bondage. To liberate men and women from the reign of Satan and to bring them under the gracious reign of God was therefore to fulfil the purpose of the Sabbath, not to profane it. This takes us back to Genesis 2:1-4, and to the rest of God. God blessed the seventh day, and part of that blessing was to include man, His creation, in the fellowship of His heart (see Hebrews 4). The invitation of the gospel is to enter into and share God's rest - not merely the rest God gives, but the rest He experiences! And that rest is the rest of complacency, and well-being. Salvation is entering God's well-being! One thinks in this connection of the earlier story of the woman with the issue of blood and of what Jesus said to her: "Go in peace - nay, into peace" - i.e. into the rest of God. The words of the old hymn express this well:

Out of the depths of ruin untold
Into the peace of Thy sheltering fold,
Ever Thy glorious face to behold,
Jesus, I come to Thee.

This is the real meaning of the Lord's Day. How should it ever be distorted into a legalistic bondage?

229) 13:18-21

In these verses, Jesus proceeds to describe what the kingdom of God is like - how, so to speak, the kingdom becomes a reality in human experience. The word 'then' in 18 is a connecting particle, which means that the reference to the kingdom must follow either from the incident of the miracle in 11-17 or from the previous passage (6-9) about the fig-tree. Either way, the connection holds: in the earlier verses, in relation to the fig-tree, it would be the possibility of a seed germinating in the 'this year also' given to the unresponsive when 'space to repent' was granted; in the later verses, the meaning would be that in the healing of the woman we have a 'token' - small and insignificant, perhaps, in face of evil and sin everywhere, but a 'germ' of the kingdom of God and its power, that holds a guarantee of future results out of all proportion to its size. At all events, the two parables belong together, and in each the message is the same: it is the contrast between the smallness of the beginning and the end-result seemingly out of all proportion to it. The fact that from small and insignificant beginnings the Church of God grows and develops into something which by contrast is great and considerable - this is the message of both parables: the development of the kingdom of God, in one from without, and the other from within. Externally, the kingdom of God will reach widespread; internally, it will transform the whole of human life.

230) 13:18-21

It is fair to point out that there is another and differing interpretation of these parables which takes both the mustard seed and the leaven in a bad and evil sense - the great tree with birds sheltering in it as the picture of a false Church, and the leaven as being the entrance of corruption working secretly in the Church to produce ultimately an apostate Church. It is true that the vast organisation we know as the Church is in some ways an unnatural growth, and that corruption does spread within it. But, after all, Jesus does say that it is the kingdom of God, not a false kingdom that is represented by the mustard seed; He does say that it is the kingdom of God, not the principle of corruption that is like leaven. He is telling us about the real kingdom, not about an evil principle at work in the Church. To interpret these parables in a bad and evil sense seems therefore to do violence to our Lord's own intention. As to the mustard seed, the contrast is between the smallness of the seed and what it becomes. The seed, after all, is a living thing, and, small and insignificant as it may seem, it has within itself the virtue and power to issue in blessed and extensive fruitfulness. This, in fact, enshrines a fundamental principle of the gospel, which states that the weakness of God is stronger than men. This is seen in the mystery of the Incarnation - who should have thought that God's answer to the woe and need of the world should be - a Baby? - in the death of the Cross - an object of shame, contempt and reproach to the world, foolishness to the Greeks, a stumbling block to the Jews, but the power and the wisdom of God, and the real Throne of the universe - and in the method of the Church's proclamation - the foolishness of preaching is still the divinely ordained means for the spread and the triumph of the gospel, and God's Word shall not return unto Him void.

231) 13:18-21

The two parables, while belonging together and having the same message essentially, stand in contrast in one respect: the mustard seed, though an insignificant thing, is seen to grow, but the leaven is not only insignificant, but hidden, invisible. In this, the latter corresponds to the 'salt' of the earth' aspect of the Church's work, whereas the former corresponds to the 'light of the world' aspect; the one an indirect influence, the other direct, and both to be fulfilled by the people of God. The gospel has, in fact, this other, indirect function in the world, as well as the direct one of winning men to Christ. There are many in society who will not come to Him; but society itself is influenced for all that, and in spite of itself, by the presence of the saving gospel. In times of spiritual awakening, for example, it has been known for whole communities to be raised to a new moral and spiritual tone, even when large numbers within them have not themselves turned to Christ. And it is a simple fact that in countries that have known a Christian civilisation have had qualities and standards 'built into them' and have regarded them as natural attributes, when in fact they are entirely due to the leavening process in society by the Christian gospel. The gospel is a living thing; and not only does it contain within itself that which can make it branch out like a tree, but also it has the power of penetrating a foreign mass in such a way as to permeate the whole thing with its influence.

232) 13:22-35

The remainder of the chapter consists of a warning exhortation (22-30), a word about Herod (31-33), and a lament over Jerusalem (34, 35). We look first at the warning exhortation. The solemn words were spoken by Jesus in answer to a question asked by someone who had listened to His teaching (23). Perhaps the man had really begun to think that, in view of the challenge of Jesus' words, no one could be saved; perhaps he was concealing and disguising anxiety about his own salvation by the general terms in which his question was couched; perhaps it was simply a speculative question such as is dear to the hearts of all theorists. Whatever the motive, it is important to see how Jesus answered it. If it was a doubt as to whether anyone could be saved, so high was the standard, Jesus speedily makes it clear that it is our responsibility to become disciples, however hard it may be to do so. If it was a disguised personal enquiry, it is immediately drawn out into the open. If it was simply a speculative quibble, it is exposed for what it is, and turned into a personal challenge and confrontation. This last is important. There is no room in the Christian Faith for theoretical discussion and disquisition. It is not possible to 'play' at religion. One is not allowed to 'discuss' Christ and His salvation, as if it were a subject for debate or philosophical argument. It is as if Jesus had said to him, "Do not waste time debating the question 'Are there few that be saved?' Look to yourself. Are you saved? That is the question you should be asking, the question all should be asking."

233) 13:22-35

The reason why Jesus spoke as He did is seen in 24b ff. So far from being a matter of theoretical discussion, salvation has eternal issues at stake. And it will not be all the same in the end whether or not we come to terms with the gospel. There will be an eternal difference between the man who follows Christ and owns His Lordship and the man who does not. There will be a great divide, and a final one - between those who are in, and those who finally are not in, the kingdom. The way is left open for long, but not for ever. There is a limit to opportunity. The door will one day be shut - in the final, eternal sense, when the end comes, and time shall be no more (here represented by the coming of the master of the house to shut the door); and also in the sense that the limit of opportunity can be reached before the end time, when men pass the point of 'no return'. This was already true of Herod, it would seem, for his day of grace had passed, by his wilfully having refused grace and resisted the Spirit. Furthermore (26), entrance into the kingdom will not be through familiarity with Him, 'eating and drinking in His presence' and His 'having taught in our streets'. What does this say to us? Here are people who clearly have an association with Christ, in the sense that they knew about Him, had 'a nodding acquaintance' with Him, something akin to a 'kirk-going association' with Him - an association without any real commitment to Him. Entrance will not be, either, by privilege of birth (28, 29). It is not because a man is the son of godly parents, or brought up in a religious tradition. The Jews assumed, as a matter of course, that they would enter the kingdom because of their tradition as Jews. How frequently and solemnly Jesus disabused them of this tragically mistaken attitude (cf Matt 8:11, 12, John 8:33-44)!

234) 13:22-35

The word about Herod in 31-33 tells us two things. First of all, Christ's reference to him is one of the most scathing words ever spoken by Him of mortal man. It represents something so terrible that it makes one afraid, for it underlines the fact that Herod was now past the point of no return, with conscience seared and stilled forever. How awful, when this is the only thing that even the compassionate Christ can say! The second thing is this: what they were to say to Herod is full of significance. It is a marvellous word, full of dignity and majesty. Nowhere is the work of Christ in its sovereign aspect more plainly put. Christ was conscious that He was walking a divinely ordained pathway, carrying out a programme with which no power in heaven, earth or hell could interfere. The course of the Messiah is determined, mapped out, in Scripture, and will not be abbreviated or changed because of the threats of a Herod! There is something majestic here in the purposeful going forward of the work of the gospel (cf Acts 28:31, 'none hindering'). The meaning of 33 is: "It is ordained by divine decree that I go on My way hence, as Herod desires: not, however, because you (or he) may desire it, but because My work at this time requires it". 'Perfected' in 32 refers to His coming 'into His own' as Saviour and Lord - and this would happen, whatever men might do or decree. God's decree is all decisive here!

235) 13:22-35

No more tender or more moving appeal is to be found anywhere in Scripture than these words, spoken from a heart bursting with grief. The contrast between Jesus' "would I" and their "would not" is very moving, and is itself a proclamation of the grace of the gospel, and of the fact that the heart of the Eternal is inexpressibly hurt by the stubbornness of men. The 'how often' takes us back through our Lord's entire ministry to the many times, and the many different ways in which He pleaded with men to come to Him. Every miracle He wrought, every parable He taught, was a call, an invitation, to come to Him for rest and salvation. A well-known hymn says 'Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide', but this is not how it was in our Lord's ministry. Not once, but again and again, was opportunity given to them to taste and see that the Lord is good. And since this was so, their 'would not' cannot be construed as mistake, or misunderstanding, or ignorance. In face of such repeated opportunity, it could only have been a settled and determined attitude of rebellion and rejection. Hence the die was cast, and desolation was pronounced upon the Jewish nation. And all that happened following this point simply confirmed both their rejection of Him and His rejection of them. The point of no return for the nation had been reached and passed.

236) 14:1-6

The first 24 verses of this chapter record some very penetrating and incisive teaching given by our Lord at a Sabbath-day dinner party. We look here at the first incident, the healing of a man with dropsy. Some think Jesus was invited to the meal with an ulterior motive, to see how He would react to the presence of the sick man. They watched Him (1) to see if He would violate the Sabbath by healing him. This, indeed, is a likely suggestion, since it says in 3 'Jesus answering spake...' What did He answer? The question implied in their trap. We should note how our Lord took the initiative, passing some very forthright strictures on both guests and host. It is as if He were saying, "You have tried to embarrass Me, and make Me uncomfortable: I will now embarrass you and make you uncomfortable" - not, indeed, in the sense of 'paying them back in their own coin', but rather in the sense of Psalm 18:25, 26, 'With the froward Thou wilt show Thyself froward'! He can be difficult too, when occasion demands it; and this occasion assuredly did!

The healing miracle - one of seven Sabbath healings recorded in the gospels (cf Luke 4:31, 4:38, 6:6, 13:14, John 5:10, John 9:14) was the fulfilment of the meaning and purpose of the Sabbath day. This we have already seen in our studies of the others (see Notes on these passages). And if the miracle is also a parable of the gospel itself - the bringing of healing, restoration, life, renewal - the question that arises for us is to ask whether our Sabbaths serve to reflect the glory of the gospel we proclaim, Well, is this what our Sundays are about?

237) 14:7-11

In these verses Jesus frankly criticises the guests at the party for seeking out the best seats. He 'observed', or 'marked' their behaviour, and uttered the parable in 8-11 to deal with them. The fact that it says it was a parable indicates that there is a spiritual lesson here. That lesson is not one on good manners - although clearly the words do in fact teach us something about this - whether at a marriage feast or on a Corporation bust - but behind the words about good manners there is a deeper lesson. As in social etiquette, so also in the spiritual realm, recognition eludes those who demand it, and comes to those who think more highly of others than of themselves. One commentator remarks, "True dignity is always unconscious dignity, and true honour, whether conferred by man or God, is always unexpected" (Caird). Another says, "Every man before God ought to feel that the lowest place is the proper place for him" (Plummer). Our Lord's point is: The place of honour is not something you can claim or take; it is something given you by others. To seek it, therefore, or believe even secretly, that it is your entitlement, is simply to demonstrate how dishonourable you are. A man who struggles for the place of honour proves thereby that he is dishonourable.

238) 14:7-11

It is a remarkable thing that people who are greatly gifted are often the humblest of men; it is generally those not so gifted and who overestimate their abilities that make a parade of themselves. This is a pattern seen in many walks of life. The real aristocrat is not a snob; it is the would-be social climber that gives himself airs. And there is such a thing as spiritual snobbery also. This has been called by other names, with great effectiveness, as may be seen from the following quotation, from G. K. Chesterton's Essay on Vulgarity: "There is the man who wishes first to prove that he is a gentleman, and only proves two things; first, that he is vulgar enough to prefer being a gentleman to being a man; and second, that he has a hideously stunted and half-witted notion even of being a gentleman. There is the man who wishes to show that he has lived in the best society; and shows even in showing it that he does not know the best society from the worst.... There is the man who tells stories of the wonderful affability and friendliness of very rich men he has known, and thereby reveals his secret religion - that rich men are gods and that he is a fortunate favourite of the gods. All these men have the mark that I call for convenience vulgar; the mark that they give us their own moral and spiritual measure by stretching themselves to their full stature. If they have been a little lax and casual and humble, we might never have found them out. If they had not been so clever, we might never have known that they were fools. If they had not been so gentlemanly, we should not have seen that they were cads." How different, by contrast, are Paul's words in Phil 2:3, 4, 20, 21!

239) 14:12-14

Jesus now turns to the host of the dinner party, and His word to him is equally penetrating and devastating. We need to be clear, however, as to what He is saying. He is not condemning social fellowship with friends, as such - that would be to misunderstand Him but rather that kind of entertaining that is done with an ulterior motive is a species of dishonesty; it is acting a lie; it is a form of hypocrisy, for at heart it is saying something different from what is being said on the surface. It may be that all or most of the guests that day were wealthy, well-to-do people, and that this is what prompted Jesus to utter this warning. Be that as it may, Jesus points out that extending hospitality to the poor creates a situation in which selfish and self-regarding motive is necessarily excluded, whereas hospitality to the rich can have very real ulterior motives involved. For example, to ask someone for dinner only in order to be able to say to your friends 'We had so and so for dinner last night' is a kind of one-up-man-ship that insults the person you crow over, and also the guest you 'used', to feed your own selfish and snobbish 'ego'. This reveals a principle, a very disquieting principle which extends far beyond hospitality and dinner parties. It is so critical for human relationships that we must spend more time discussing it, and we shall do so in tomorrow's Note.

240) 14:12-14

The principle referred to at the end of yesterday's Note involves the hidden and subtle tendency often shown in human relationships and attitudes, in which we may simply make use of people for our own selfish ends, often riding roughshod over them, sometimes very ruthlessly and callously, then tossing them contemptuously aside when these selfish ends have been accomplished. One has known people 'using' friendship with another in this way, to gain selfish ends - being not in the least interested in the friend for his or her own sake, but only for the advantage that friend and friendship can bring. We recall the deep hurt and pain a fine Christian girl felt when she discovered that a girl friend of hers, who had become very much a close confidante of hers had simply 'used' her in order to further an interest in a young man she was set on attracting to herself. One has sadly known of people 'using' a whole series of friends in this way for various ulterior purposes - personal ambition, emotional attachment, the furtherance of one's family's interests or careers - people with their 'eye on the main chance', and who would not hesitate to trample someone else's feelings if it meant gaining their end. Such people have no real interest in others: they simply 'use' them. They are dangerous, and, alas, their danger is often not discerned till the harm is done and others deeply hurt.

Thus penetratingly does Jesus expose the devious and subtle motives of the human heart!

241) 14:15-24

While Jesus spoke, one of the guests was obviously listening intently to Him, and applauding in his mind what He was saying. He saw that if this was the kingdom of God whose principles Jesus was enunciating, it was something eminently to be desired, hence his exclamation in 15. It was in answer to this exclamation that Jesus told the parable. Jesus did not deny the blessedness of the kingdom of God in the story -indeed, He emphasised it supremely. But what in effect He did say was this: You admire the ideal I have set before you, but are you prepared to embrace it, and act upon it? Yes, men admire the ideal, but they will not enter into the kingdom, in spite of their admiration. When it comes to the point of invitation, men begin to make excuses. Confronted with the personal issue, which involves them in a personal decision, a personal commitment, they react against it, and will not come to Christ. In this sense, to use the words in 13:23, there are few that be saved because so many refused to come: The invitation into the kingdom is refused because the cost of being made the kind of people who can inhabit that kingdom is too great. This is the point. It is one thing to agree with its message in theory, but the rub comes when men see what it really entails. We shall continue this thought in tomorrow's Note.

242) 14:15-24

Lip-service to the ideal while all the time living for self - this is the crux of the matter, and the point that Jesus was making in the company in which He found Himself that day. Throughout the past several chapters, Jesus has been setting out the challenge of discipleship, and the need to deny self and take up the cross and follow Him. And now, in effect, He says: "There are certain kinds of attitudes, and certain ways of life, which are just not permitted to those who would follow after Me" - such as the attitudes embodied in 7-11 and 12-14, the pride and self-seeking, the ulterior motives. It is not possible to be a disciple and still leave these real and basic defects of character to continue unchecked and unchanged. This is the real challenge of discipleship: so often there is a death we are not prepared to die. We are not prepared to be made into different people, to have our pride changed into humility, our self-esteem into self-forgetfulness, our consuming concern for our own interests displaced by interest in others. Rightly understood, this is a terrific challenge to us all, and it forcibly reminds us of the radical nature of discipleship, going far beyond the conventional ideas about sin. The fact is, the more overt sins - the world, the flesh and the devil - can well disappear from a man's life, while basic attitudes like selfishness, pride, ambition, snobbery, remain unchanged and still reign in a man's heart. This is what really lies behind the excuses men make.

243) 14:25-27

The theme of 'counting the cost' which runs through the parable of the great supper (16-24) is continued and further defined in the remaining verses of the chapter. The enthusiasm of the multitudes that followed Jesus (25) was uncomprehending and based on misunderstanding; they thought of Him as a Messiah going to Jerusalem for victory, and He here disabuses them of this false idea. His business in Jerusalem was the winning of a victory, but very differently from their notions of it: it was an exacting and dangerous task, calling for men who would be disciples indeed, who would let nothing stand in the way of absolute loyalty. Like the guest in 15, they had not realised what the invitation to enter the kingdom implied. There are two dangers inherent in the interpretation of our Lord's radical words in 26, however. One is to take them with harsh literalness - as alas is sometimes done, to the immeasurable hurt and damage to family relationships. The other danger is so to deny the literalness of the words as to take the sting out of them, and the tremendousness of their challenge. It is not necessary, in fact, to fall into either danger. On the one hand the context, and the parallel passages (Matt 6:24 - 'hate the one and love the other' -and Matt 10:37 - 'he that loveth father or mother more than me....') show that what is meant is that a choice must be made between natural affection, and loyalty to Christ. More of this in tomorrow's Note.

244) 14:25-27

To hate father and mother as such be monstrous (cf Matt 15:4 ff). "Christ", says Calvin, "does not enjoin us to lay aside human affections, or forbid us to discharge the duty of relationship, but only desires that all the mutual love which exists among men should be so regulated as to assign the highest rank to piety. On the other hand, to exclude from Jesus' words any idea of literal hatred does nothing to blunt or compromise the terrific thrust of His challenge. The challenge remains, and it is this: Ties of kinship must not be allowed to interfere with absolute commitment to the kingdom. To 'hate' means to give the family second place in one's affections. In this connection we should remember Cowper's words

I hate the sins that made thee mourn
And drove Thee from my breast

- and if these 'sins' should be family or family loyalty, then 'hate' is the word: G. Campbell Morgan comments: "It is arresting that He did not name a low thing, an ignoble thing. He was facing the possibility, which often occurs, of a conflict between that which is beautiful in itself, and loyalty to Him. Nothing is fairer, finer, more beautiful in human life than love of father, and love of mother, love of wife, and love of children, love of brothers, and love of sisters; and yet these fair things can, and often do, challenge our loyalty to our Lord, Thus He was declaring that if ever an hour strikes when there is a conflict between the call of the highest earthly love and the call of Christ; then there is only one thing to be done, and that is to trample across our own hearts, and go after Him, without any compromise and any questionings". The 'good' and the beautiful' are often the worst enemy of the 'best'.

245) 14:28-33

The subject-matter of these verses is clearly 'conditions of discipleship', and the two parables must be understood in relation to what Jesus has said about taking up the cross and following Him. The keynote is: it is folly to begin (in the life of discipleship) without much consideration of what it is going to cost. Only those who are prepared to go through with it can be His disciples. Opinions differ, however, as to what precise meaning we should place on our Lord's words, and three distinct interpretations are given, which are not necessarily exclusive of one another. According to the first interpretation, what Christ means to point out is that no man has adequate resources in himself to engage in discipleship, and that when he really begins to count the cost, this issues in the discovery that he is utterly inadequate and unable to 'build' a life of discipleship or wage a war for the kingdom, and that he must look outside himself for resources with which to do so. Thus he must renounce all self, and cast himself utterly upon Christ, renounce everything - even father, mother and family - that would prevent his dependence on Christ alone. In this respect the parables illustrate the cost of beginning Christian discipleship. This makes very good sense as a general observation. Men are so often determined to be disciples in their own strength. What they do not realise is that this is never sufficient, or possible (cf Romans 4:5).

246) 14:28-33

Another interpretation of these parables maintains that they refer to Christ Himself. According to this viewpoint, what is being said is that Christ has laid down extreme conditions for discipleship in 26, and His hearers are saying, so to speak, "Why is discipleship so severe? Can it not be made easier than that?" And the parables are told in answer, so to speak, to that silent query: "I am building," says Jesus, "and I need to count the cost of building, lest I find before I am finished that I am short of materials, and the work goes by default. I am battling with a powerful enemy, and I need to be sure that My soldiers are of such a sort as will stand in the day of battle, and having done all, still stand." It is pointed out, in support of this interpretation, that Christ had previously used these very metaphors in another connection. At Caesarea Phillipi He had said, "On this rock will I build My Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it". Building and battling once again! And at that time also He uttered the challenge, "If any man will come after Me...." Christ, then, is declaring that in order to complete the building and win the battle, He must have resources and men on whom He could absolutely and utterly depend. To follow Him is to commit oneself to His enterprises, to stand by Him in the battle, to stand with Him in the battle, till the building is done and the battle won. It is therefore the quality of the disciples rather than their quantity, that is important. This is why He did not hesitate to thin out their ranks with His heart-bruising ministry.

247) 15:28-33

The third interpretation of these parables is that they refer to our counting the cost, and therefore represent the obverse side of the parable in 16-24 which emphasises the gracious offer and invitation of the gospel. This should teach us that we should look at all sides of the gospel message, in order to get a balanced view of its meaning and implications. There is a cost to discipleship. The Christian faith is a blessed invitation to life, but there is challenge too, and it will not do for anyone on the crest of a wave of emotion to give himself impulsively to discipleship without realising it is going to cost him everything; for to do so is to land oneself in the impossible position of being unable and unprepared to go on, and make oneself the object of scorn and derision to the outside world.

Lest it be said that the ruthlessness of such a challenge is too great for people to face, we should look ahead to what is said in 15:1: "Then drew near unto Him all the publicans and sinners for to hear Him". The paradox is that men in fact are drawn by a total challenge, and respond to it. We have all too often made the gospel too easy in our evangelism. We have preached 'cheap grace', and lowered the price, presented a 'tamed' Christ. Let us not forget our Lord's dealing with the rich young ruler: He let him go rather than lower the price of discipleship.

248) 14:34-35

The parable of the salt that has lost its savour underlines a threefold function given to those who are Christ's disciples. Salt preserves against corruption; salt gives flavour to food; salt helps to fertilise the land. Jesus' followers "are called to be the salt of society - preservative, seasoning, fertiliser; and there is no room in their ranks for those who lack the distinctive qualities of discipleship, any more than there is room in the kitchen cupboard for savourless salt, which like other rubbish in the east is thrown out into the street." There is much here for us to consider. The notion of preservation against corruption presupposes that in itself the world has, within itself, the seeds of decay and corruption. The world through sin has 'gone bad', and there is, therefore, no depth morally or spiritually, to which it might not sink. To prevent this, to stay this process, Christ has left His Church in the world, to act as a moral disinfectant. This both defines and indicates the limitations of the Church's work in the world. For salt will not indefinitely prevent decay, and not even the presence of the Church in society will ultimately prevent the final moral disintegration of the world. This should give the lie very decisively to the idea that the Church's task is to win the world for Christ, to Christianise society. This world is death-doomed; it refuses to bow the knee to Christ. The presence of the Church is meant to be a stay against the over-quick corruption of the world, so that Christ, through His Church, might call out a people for His Name. This 'negative' influence is therefore seen to be a very important and integral part of Christian testimony. And where the distinctive qualities of discipleship are lacking, that testimony is not borne.

249) 14:34-35

The other functions of salt – seasoning and fertilising - are equally significant in relation to Christian testimony. Just as without salt food can be insipid and tasteless, so the presence of true disciples in society acts as a very necessary conditioner. The sickness and boredom and frustration everywhere evident around us is due to the decline in spiritual values. It is the Christian message that brings life and meaning, vitality and flavour to life. History itself has shown the truth of this -the effect on society of spiritual awakening in the 18th and 19th centuries, not only spiritual, but material, were simply enormous, inspiring all manner of movements of social and cultural vitality.

The function of fertilisers in agriculture is to facilitate and promote the germination and growth of the seed that is sown; and a true Christian testimony is the likeliest thing to make a harvest of souls possible. Think of the influence of prayer in the work of the gospel! When times of refreshing come, it is ever those places where there has been faithful witness that know and experience the showers of blessing!

In view of all this, it is surely clear why Jesus uttered the solemn warning about the salt losing its savour - why, also, He stressed the need for true and total commitment in those who would be His disciples. Ah, there is a price to be paid for real effectiveness in spiritual life!

250) 15:1-3

There are some who would say that this is the greatest chapter in the whole Bible. Certainly that part of it known as the parable of the prodigal son has made a greater impression on men's minds than almost anything else Jesus ever taught. It is a wonderful chapter, full of rich and profound teaching. What we ought to do first is to look at it as a whole - for, we should note, Luke says in 3 that 'He spake this parable unto them' - that is, the three stories -the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son -all belong to it and constitute the one parable. To view the chapter this way will serve to obviate one very real misunderstanding of the third story, that of the prodigal. Is it true, for example, to say, as some do, that we have the whole gospel in this one story? For if so, the implication is that forgiveness from God is a possibility and a reality without the necessity of a cross and an atonement for sin, and that therefore the latter are additional accretions which simply serve to confuse the 'simple gospel' of Jesus. No; the message of the story of the prodigal is the freeness and fulness of God's grace; it says nothing as to the method of that grace. That is spoken of in the two stories that precede it: the shepherd seeking the lost sheep, the woman searching diligently for the lost coin. We shall continue our thinking about all this in tomorrow's Note.

251) 15:1-3

We should note first of all the occasion of the parable. After the forthright challenge to count the cost of discipleship at the end of chapter 14, we pointed out that this radical challenge has a great drawing power (1). It is almost as if our Lord were indicating that this -the finding of the lost sheep, the recovery of the lost coin, the return of the prodigal - is the fruit of responding to the claims of discipleship. What encouragement this should be to us! But the scribes and Pharisees murmured, saying, 'This man receiveth sinners'. It was an expression of reproach, criticism, distaste on their part. It condemned Jesus, so far as they were concerned. But in reality it was His supreme commendation! They spoke more truly than they knew. Indeed, God has used their contemptuous words, and they stand for all time as the greatest commendation of the gospel. And Christ took their words, using them as a text, so to speak, and preached the best sermon ever preached on any text. What we have in what follows is therefore an exposition of the Pharisees' contemptuous utterance, and we are given two sets of pictures - one, of what it is to be a sinner, the other of the Man who receives them; and then an insight into what was involved in that receiving. There could hardly be a more comprehensive theological statement of the gospel! But it is important for us to realise that no single parable of the three is adequate in itself to portray the full message of the gospel: the shepherd seeking the sheep is one aspect of the gospel, but not the whole; the lost sheep is one aspect of sin, but not a complete or adequate picture. In principle, these pictures say the same thing, but in actuality they are different, and complement each other.

252) 15:1-10

There are, in fact, two kinds of sinners portrayed in this chapter, represented by the Pharisees and the publicans respectively. Jesus did not receive the former, because they did not come (to hear Him), and they did not know they were sinners. This sums up something of decisive importance: you need to know, and you need to come! In fact, there is a good deal of misunderstanding about the meaning of sin. "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, then 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" (Temple). This is emphasised in two of the parables - the coin was lost in the house, not in the wilderness; and the prodigal was a prodigal before ever he left home!

The picture given of sin in the story of the lost sheep stresses its pathetic and tragic aspect, and calls forth the compassion and pity of our hearts for the weakness and waywardness of the human heart. A lost sheep, bleating in distress, is a pathetic sight, conscious that something is wrong, but not knowing how serious the position is. It does not know where it is, and cannot find the way back. The contemporary Russian writer Solzhenitsyn makes one of his characters cry out, "History is a farce from beginning to end. It's not even a matter of truth or error. There are no signposts to anywhere, and there's nowhere to go". Surely this is the 'lost sheep' aspect of human sin!

253) 15:1-24

In the next story, the figure changes, and there is now a different emphasis. Here is a coin bearing the image and superscription of the king, yet failing in the very purpose for which it was minted, for it is out of circulation, and therefore useless. It is good for nothing, and fulfilling no kind of useful purpose. Being lost, it has lost its purchasing power. This is what it means to be a sinner: life's purpose is wasted: there was a plan for that life, but...¹ It is the inertness of the coin that is underlined here. A sheep can bleat, to reveal its whereabouts, but a coin is inert. This is meant to teach us that to be a sinner means to be dead, and therefore unable to do anything for oneself. The coin cannot bring itself back into circulation, it must be brought back by another hand. Some outside power needs to break in, if its predicament is to be remedied.

In the third picture, that of the prodigal, the characteristics of the first two pictures are graphically blended in a human life. It is as if Jesus were saying "This is what I mean when I speak of a lost sheep wandered from the fold, and of a lost coin, failing in the function for which it was brought into existence". But the prodigal story adds still further insights into the nature of sin, in particular two: firstly, the element of rebellion and revolt in his attitude. The boy was determined to go, and nothing would budge him, even if it meant (as it did) a broken heart for his father. As the prophet says. "We have turned everyone to his own way" (Isa 53:6). And, secondly, the heart and essence of sin, expressed in the prodigal's words, 'Give me'. All sin flows from this evil root, a self inverted and perverted against God.

254) 15:1-24

Just as one single parable does not give an adequate picture of human sin, so neither does one parable give an adequate picture of salvation. It is together that the three stories give us a meaningful portrait of 'this Man'. First of all, there is the good shepherd. This is the picture Christ paints of Himself, shepherding the sheep who have no shepherd. This is how He invites men to think of Him. We could hardly find a better illustration of this than the story of His encounter with the woman of Samaria, which is prefaced with the words 'He must needs go through Samaria' (John 4:4). Here is the Shepherd of souls, with the compulsion of grace upon Him, seeking that which was lost! Then there is the woman searching. Patient, exhaustless search is indicated, and it is just possible that in the figure of the woman we are meant to see something of the tenderness of the heart of God. His is the hand that reaches out to find the lost things, and draw them out into the light and into usefulness. This is what I am doing, says Christ, with these publicans and sinners! The picture of the waiting father in the third part of the chapter represents the eagerness of the Divine pity to welcome the returning sinner home to the Father's house. It is this composite picture - shepherd, woman, waiting father - that conveys the full picture of the gospel, and its implications, as we shall see in tomorrow's Note, are very considerable.

255) 15:1-24

What in fact we are given in the threefold parable is a picture of how the gospel works, and what it accomplishes in men. Here is the real answer to the question why there is no mention of 'sacrifice for sin' in the 'prodigal' story. The latter certainly portrays 'a waiting Father', but God is a waiting Father only because He did not always wait, but once went into action for us men and for our salvation. The threefold parable is a parable of the activity of the Triune God on behalf of men. The suffering of the Son is first spoken of. The Shepherd passed through the dark night of sin and through deep waters to find the sheep that was lost. "Christ suffered...to bring us to God" (1 Pet 3:18). The good news of the gospel is that the good Shepherd has come - a long, long way, leaving the glory of heaven, humbling Himself, becoming obedient unto death -to seek and to save that which was lost. Then, in the second story, it is the activity of the Holy Spirit that is delineated. God the Spirit broods on the darkness of the life of sin. Christ by the Spirit, working in the Church, seeks out the lost. The candle in the story is the word of God, held by the Church, in its proclamation of the good news. Then, there is the love of the Father - and what a picture it is! Never a day passed that he did not watch the road, and look at him now: He ran, he kissed -kissed the dirty, ragged prodigal. That is how God loves!

256) 15:1-24

This same pattern is evident in the appeal of the gospel. First of all, the good news of Christ crucified is preached to men. Then, the Holy Spirit applies the message, so that it 'comes home' to our hearts with grace and power. When it does, we are thereby constrained to arise and go to the Father, Who waits for us now, because He already has done all for our salvation. All we have to do is to come! Only thus - through the hearing of the Word, and the quickening of the Spirit, are we moved to come home. As the hymn puts it, 'He drew me, and I followed on'. Such is the miracle and mystery of redeeming grace. Would that it were true of all preaching! Shall we not pray that it will be so, more and more, in a day which so desperately needs it?

257) 15:11-24

But let us look more particularly at the story of the prodigal, for it has depths that we have by no means yet exhausted. There is a sense in which it gives us, in pictorial form, our Lord's version of the Garden of Eden story, His interpretation of the tragedy of the Fall of man. It is when we look at it like this that we see how essentially superficial the general understanding of this parable has been when it makes us think of a prodigal as one who 'wastes his substance in riotous living'. The form and expression of the younger son's sin is simply incidental to the main issue of the parable's teaching. It could just as well have been any one of a number of different expressions of sin. You do not have to go away from home to be a sinner; you do not have to 'live it up' in a permissive society to be a sinner. And the most sinister expressions of the human malady do not necessarily belong to the gutter, the pigsty or the farmyard. The message that comes across in this story is that sin is a wrong relationship to God. To be a sinner means to be wrongly orientated to God. This was the heart, and the hurt, of the prodigal's condition. It is the father, not the son, who suffers most. It is always so. The boy's sorrow was long in overtaking him, and even then it was soon turned into joy by forgiveness. But the father's heart was broken the day he went away, and remained broken for many days, and every day it bled afresh at the thought of him.

258) 15:11-24

Consider three things the parable underlines about the prodigal: he wanted away from home; he wanted away from home because he wanted to be independent; he wanted to be independent because he was essentially self-centred. These are the authentic notes that ring out in the Garden of Eden story also. The satanic temptation to Adam and Eve was to throw off the spirit of dependence on God, and become independent of Him. It was the incitement to 'go it alone', without God, in independent existence - and to this is, of course, linked the becoming 'self-centred' instead of 'God-centred', and therefore getting away and being away from God. But this involves something else, inevitably. Sin has a great blinding power. The work of Satan was a work of deception, and the truth about this boy is that his heart was deluded by the god of this world into believing that life for him - "life with a capital 'L'" - lay in throwing off the yoke of home, family, father - especially father - and going off to 'do his own thing'. This is the tragedy about sin: it deceives and blinds. Not only is a sinner a stranger to grace - he is also a stranger to himself. And so he must 'come to himself'. That is the first and greatest need. For until he comes to himself, he cannot and will not come to the Father. In the story of the prodigal, everything in his renewal and rehabilitation began when 'he came to himself'. It was then that he began to see clearly and think clearly, to see in perspective. It was not that his situation had changed; it was not that the situation at home had changed, either. The change was in him. This is so important a consideration that we must spend time in tomorrow's Note thinking further about it.

259) 15:11-24

The theological teaching that lies behind the words 'he came to himself' is this: In the beginning, God said, Let us make man in our own image and after our likeness.. The image of God in man means two things: on the one hand, it is that which characterises man as human, as distinct from the rest of creation. Man is a responsible being - he is capable of making a response to God; and this is in no wise changed by his sin. Even when he makes the wrong response - when he says 'No' instead of 'Yes' to God - he still is, and remains, a responsible being. This aspect of the image of God is never lost, even in the tragedy of the Fall. But on the other hand, the image of God 'consists in that man, as a spiritual and moral being, gives expression in a creaturely way to the inward characteristics of God'. And this was lost in the Fall. Man's original righteousness is now no more. Furthermore, man was made for communion with God - and this not as an option which he may or may not exercise, but as part of the basic structure of his being. Since, then, man is thus created for God, it means that he cannot by himself by himself, but only in relation to, and in communion with, God. Man is himself only as and when he says 'Yes' to God. But the tragedy is that man loses by his sin all ability of will to say 'Yes' to God. He is no longer free to realise his divine destiny, to be himself. By asserting his determination for freedom and independence, man lost both. This is what is illustrated in the story of the prodigal. The boy was involved in a 'crisis of identity'. He was trying to find himself; that is why he went off to the far country; but in fact he did the opposite; he lost himself. And therefore had to 'come to himself' again.

260) 15:11-24

And he 'came to himself' to some purpose: In a new blinding reality of self-revelation, he saw himself as he really was: 'I perish!' It was this that led to his resolute action that brought him back to his father's house. It is surely significant, as an indication of how complete this 'coming to himself' was, that the story which begins with his 'Give me' ends with his 'Make me': And - still more significant - all that he went to the far country to find, he found when he came home! He was back to where he belonged: And this is what salvation really means: our right place, as those made in the image of God, is in fellowship with Him. Salvation is being brought back into fellowship, into dependence on Him, and therefore into belonging. This is the only real answer to the fragmentation and disintegration of life caused by the loneliness of sin.

261) 15:25-32

Now a word about the elder brother. Christ certainly brought him into the story to speak a word to the Pharisees, who did not know that they were sinners, and therefore would not come to Him. What we need to see is that there was another lost son in the home. He had never left home or his father's side, yet his reaction shows how far he was from his father's spirit. He was further away from him than his brother had been. How contemptuous he was of his brother's sins, and how blind he was to his own! He did not come to himself or see himself as he really was. He was full of good works (29), but his heart was miles away from his father. It is perhaps not without significance that in the story there is no sign of change in him: he remains the sullen, self-righteous one, while his brother became very different.

One final word before we leave the chapter. There is another Son in the story - the Son who told it! And there is a gospel to proclaim only because He took our place in the far country of sin, at every point standing in for us, going out into the dark night of sin for our sakes, tasting its bitter dregs - the loneliness, the woe, the desolation, in all their horror and mystery. The cry of dereliction, 'My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?' came from that far country, from God's 'lost' Son. G. K. Chesterton's words are a fitting conclusion to our study of this chapter:

To an open house in the evening
Home shall men come
To the place where God was homeless
And all men are at home,

262) 16:1-13

The message of this chapter is so different from that of the previous one that the transition from the one to the other comes almost with the force of a shock. Yet it seems clear that what is said here was spoken at the same time if we are to take the first few words in 1 at their face value. The implication is that there is a connection in thought at least between the two chapters. Prominent in the thought of the parable before us is the idea of money - the mammon of unrighteousness. One cannot fail to be impressed with the large place Christ gives to the subject in his teaching. Over and over again, in His parables and elsewhere He deals with the dangers, deceitfulness and hardening power of riches. Here, it is the right use of money that He underlines. It is here that we may well see a connection with the previous chapter. There, we have the story of a young man who 'wasted his substance'. 'Give me', he said, assuming the portion of goods as his right, and as his own. And here, we have the emphatic assertion by Jesus that nothing that we have is our own, but given as a stewardship from God. We may also see the link that this parable has with the one that follows (19 ff), for there again it is the question of stewardship that is at the heart of it, and from it we learn that being called to give account of one's stewardship is a solemn reality indeed, in which eternal issues are involved. Also - and this further indicates the continuity of thought between the two chapters - the story of Dives and Lazarus shows us that sometimes men do not 'come home' to the Father, that they do not 'come to themselves' until it is too late, and irreversible, eternal consequences result.

263) 16:1-13

'All that we have is a stewardship from God' - this is the theme Jesus deals with. It might almost seem as if He were pointing to the deep, underlying lessons in the story of the Prodigal, saying, "It is this that he did not understand, and it is this that you must not miss." The story is as follows: the factor or steward of a rich man's estate has been careless, criminally careless, and his books have got hopelessly out of order. And things caught up with him, and he was called to account. In reaction to this crisis, he took a very bold course of action. He called a meeting of all his master's clients, and began to change their accounts, marking them down in a lordly manner as if he were the master. One assumes that he did it in such a way that the benefit to them was real and irreversible. He made himself very popular that day, with these men. And this was, in fact, the point of the exercise. For he needed friends - friends that would support him in the hard days that lay ahead, so that when the crash came, he would not stand alone. And Jesus holds this man up as an example of boldness, skill and prudence - not, of course, to be copied in his dishonesty, but in the diligence and thoroughness with which he made provision for the future. What are we to learn from all this? First of all, Jesus thrusts upon men the reality of eternity. Behind and beyond the world that is seen, there is the unseen, eternal reality. "Live, then, with eternity's values in view", says Jesus. Secondly, life is a stewardship concerning which we shall all, without exception have to give an account. And, if we read this parable aright, this man was called very suddenly and without warning to give an account of his. It had all the force of a bombshell. He was called unexpectedly, and unprepared, to the bar of justice. Solemn lesson indeed!

264) 16:1-13

We must not, of course, press all the details of the parable, and make each of them mean something. It is, after all, a parable, not an allegory, and it is of the essence of a parable that it has one main theme, not many, and the details of the story do not necessarily have significance at all. Thus, attempts to say who the steward represents - the Jewish hierarchy, tax collectors, Pilate, Judas, or whatever, are really beside the point. What Jesus says in 9 is the real key to interpretation. This is what Jesus says the parable is about - making friends for yourself by means of the mammon of unrighteousness. The steward showed great prudence and foresight in the use he made of present opportunities as a means of providing for the future, and energy and forethought in making preparations for it. How much more ought men to make earnest and thoughtful preparation for their eternal future. The believer ought to exhibit similar prudence in using material advantages in this life as a means of providing for the life to come. And if Christians were as sagacious and persevering in using wealth to promote their welfare in the next world as worldly men are in using it to promote their interests in this, the kingdom of God would be more flourishing than it is. This is the theme, and this is the point of the parable.

265) 16:1-13

That being said, we need to point out something else. Christ was not, of course, condoning what this man did to make his future secure. How could we think so? The man, in fact, committed further dishonesty upon his employer. The teaching of the parable emerges by contrast, rather than by comparison, as is done also in the parable of the unjust judge (18:2 ff). The argument is: "If an unrighteous steward was commended by his earthly master for his prudence in providing for his future by a fraudulent use of what had been committed to him, how much more will a righteous servant of God be commended by his heavenly Master for providing for eternity by a good use of what has been committed to him". We need, in fact, to disentangle action from energy in this parable, otherwise we shall not see clearly its meaning and message. How did the steward prepare the way for his future? He made friends of his master's debtors by reducing their debts, so as to put them in his debt. It was a thoroughly dishonest thing to do, but it was a very clever move. The action was wrong; but the enterprise was highly skilful, and one calculated to reap considerable dividends in the future. But - we must insist - in the light of the account he was called upon to give, he made provision for the future, effective, material provision. And, says Jesus, how much more ought men to make provision - spiritual provision, for an eternal future!

266) 16:1-13

The tragedy, however, is that so often men do not make provision for an eternal future. In this regard, the children of this world are wiser than the children of light (8). We should remember that these words were spoken to the disciples, to committed followers of Christ, and strictly speaking the application is to Christians, the children of light as opposed to the children of the world. And Christ is warning His disciples that it is possible for them to be too preoccupied with the present, and to forget the future. "Take this man's energy and earnestness and foresight as your example", He says, "and apply these qualities to eternal issues. A German once said, "You Christians do not give half the loyalty and devotion to Christ that we used to give to Adolf Hitler" - that is an example of the 'superior wisdom' of the children of the world. The parable of the rich fool in Luke 12 is another example of wholehearted diligence and acumen in business. "Give Me that in spiritual things", says Jesus. What Jesus means in 9, 'Make to yourselves friends....' is something like this: Money, the mammon of unrighteousness, can be an instrument of good or evil. Everything depends on how it is used. It ought to be used by believers in such a way that there may be those in heaven to receive us when we die, and welcome us into eternal glory. "Use your money in My service", He says, "Do not hoard it or abuse it. Invest it in the work of the gospel, let it win souls for Me; send it to preach the gospel in Africa, India, and elsewhere, win friends there with it who will one day testify before the Father in your astonished hearing what your cheerful giving has meant to their souls". Make mammon your servant; do not be its servant. Obviously, this must be made to refer not only to money, but to everything else that is given us as a trust from God - talents, possessions, time. We must make all these serve God, and not prostitute them to selfish use and ends. This is the only true faithfulness (12, 13).

267) 16:14-18

These verses seem to stand as a link between the two parables recorded in 1-13 and 19-31. It will help us to understand their force and significance if we remember the underlying theme of stewardship that runs through the whole chapter, and the very real possibility of neglecting it. The parable in 19 ff is a story about stewardship, both of money and of one's life, and is a solemn reminder that some do not in fact make friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness, and leave the question of stewardship until too late. It is in this light that the words in 16 about 'pressing into the kingdom' are to be understood: life is an earnest, serious business, and we can never attend too soon to the salvation of our souls, and being in the right with God. The references in 17 and 1.8 also have significance in the general context of the passage. The Pharisees (14) derided Jesus' teaching; they justified themselves before men in spite of the plain teaching of the Scriptures, wresting them (as Paul said later) unto their own destruction. But twisting the Scriptures to suit oneself does not thereby invalidate their meaning or their thrust; the integrity of the law remains indestructible, and the gospel confirms it by giving it a new sanction. The point in 18 seems to be that it introduces an example of the durability of the moral law in spite of human evasions. As Plummer puts it, "Adultery remains adultery even when it has been legalised, and legalised by men who jealously guarded every fraction of the letter, while they flagrantly violated the spirit, of the Law." A much needed reminder today, indeed!

268) 16:19-31

This is a tremendous parable. In some ways it is the most starkly dramatic of them all, with a dynamic in it which brings a profound and even terrifying challenge and warning to those who read it. More perhaps than any other, it thrusts the realities of heaven and hell before us, and speaks of them in concrete, personal terms that bring these realities home in unmistakeable fashion. Why did Jesus tell such a parable, such a frightening, disturbing story? There can be no doubt that He told it in love - as all His teaching was given - but it is very difficult to escape the conclusion that He was warning His hearers of a terrible danger that faced them, and that He told the parable to frighten them, so that through fear, if in no other way, they might be moved to take steps to avoid it. This is a neglected factor in evangelism today. The moral power of fear is an undoubted element in the biblical scheme of things. We read in Hebrews 11:7 that 'by faith Noah...moved with fear, built an ark to the saving of himself and his house'. That verse speaks of the blessed effects of a true fear. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; and it is often the first step to a knowledge of salvation.

269) 16:19-31

Who, then, is this rich man? And who is Lazarus? Can we identify them, in terms of interpreting the relevance of the parable? Billy Graham once preached a notable sermon on three rich men in the New Testament: the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-30), the rich fool (Luke 12:16-21) and the rich man in this parable, and in it he sought to show the progress and development of the power of mammon in human life. In the first story, it was a man turning away from Christ because money had too great a grip on him. In the second, we see not the same man, but the same principle, in the picture of a soul on the threshold of eternity, being called to give account. In the third, again not the same man, but the same principle, we see a soul beyond time's earthly scene, and in the eternal world - in torment. This is how it ends, this progress and development of the power of mammon in human life! And look where it begins: saying No to Christ, to discipleship, to the offer of eternal life. If only we could see that this is the logical and inevitable end for any man who goes out from the preaching of the Word saying No to Christ. We are told that the rich young ruler 'went away sorrowful': just how great that sorrow becomes we see here in the anguished cry from the rich man in 24. It is this that makes the work of the gospel so desperately serious and critical.

270) 16:19-31

But we can make a further identification in the parable, as one modern writer is careful to point out. It is this: we must not sit back comfortably in the easy assumption that this cannot apply to us since we are not rich and affluent like this man. For "in one way or another, every one of us is rich, and therefore at some point in our life we too face the question whether we too despise our brother Lazarus and, in our thinking at any rate, banish him to the back door," - intellectually and culturally rich, who get so much out of life, over against the drabness, misery and emptiness of so many lives around us - those rich in friendships and love, over against the lonely, desolate, unloved and unwanted people, people with no natural flair for friendship, the awkward, the unlovable, that we tend to be so impatient of and even contemptuous of, secure in our own loved-ness and consciousness of being wanted. In these respects, how like this rich man are we, and how guilty of his sin? What if the point of the parable is just what Nathan the prophet brought out of the parable of the ewe-lamb he told king David (2 Sam 12:7): 'Thou art the man'? One of the very disturbing things about Jesus' teaching is that He seems careless of the distinction we like to make between teaching that seems to apply to unbelievers and teaching that seems more designed for believers. What if, in our assumption that the thrust of this parable is its evangelistic challenge, we should have missed what it has to say to our own hearts?

271) 16:19-31

What, then, was the rich man's sin? Did he perish because he was rich? One recalls Paul's words in 1 Tim 6:9, 10, in this connection (which see). Was this it? Not quite. It was something deeper. It was not riches that damned his soul, but rather what his riches led him into. Indeed, riches were merely incidental -it might well have been something else. The real sin was promoted by the instrumentality of riches - his self-absorption and self-centredness. This is why he perished. It was because he himself remained the centre of his life. This is proved by his treatment of, and attitude to, Lazarus the beggar at his door, one he could have helped, but did not (the crumbs that Lazarus gathered from his table were not given, and moreover they were not help). He could have helped. This is the point. Opportunity was knocking at the rich man's door all the time, opportunity to prove his faith real by deeds of pity and compassion. One way or another, it is given to every man to prepare for eternity - the gate is open to all, and whosoever will may come - and is not this a tremendous illustration of the need to make friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness. And he missed his opportunity because he lived unto himself, and to have done something that would really have helped Lazarus's needs would have seriously interfered with his kind of life. How easy it is to fall into the rich man's sin! We know very well that there are lonely and needy people in the world, but we so often dismiss them resolutely from our minds and consciousness, because not to do so would interfere too drastically with our way of life, and demand self-giving of a sort that is unthinkable to self-centredness. It costs to give oneself away in a truly Christian manner, and when it comes to the point, self so often wins.

272) 16:19-31

The time of reckoning for the rich man makes grim reading (25 ff). "Son, remember...." - these tremendous, terrible words lie at the heart of Jesus teaching about hell and its torments. They are spoken in answer to the rich man's protest that he was now in an intolerable condition. They speak of the quickening and rehabilitation of memory in the eternal world. We forget so soon! It is possible, in this life to quieten and quench the voice of conscience. There are so many drugs in this modern world that dull our memories and hide from us the true nature of reality. But in the hereafter we leave them all behind and, the effects of them having forever worn off, agonising consciousness results, and we remember. This is surely something designed to make even the most careless pause to think.

Let us gather up the lessons of this solemn parable: First, it underlines the certainty of death, and the reality of the eternal world, in which the attitudes adopted and maintained in this life are confirmed and perpetuated, where the No we say to Christ re-echoes from the throne of God in answer to our cries for mercy, where memory awakes and rises up to condemn us. And finally, the parable in its last verses (30, 31) underlines what stands between men and eternal loss - Moses and the prophets - that is, the Word of God. God has given us a Book. It speaks of a way back to God, of deliverance from sin. It is able to make us wise unto salvation, It is the only provision, but it is a wholly sufficient one, able to lead men to repentance and faith. No one needs more than this. O that men might see it!

273) 17:1-2

In the first ten verses of this chapter there are four distinct sayings of Jesus - the sin of causing others to stumble (1, 2), the duty of forgiveness (3, 4), the power of faith (5, 6) and the insufficiency of works (7-10). Some commentators insist that there is no connection between these sayings, or between them and what has gone before; others see a connection between one and the other, and that the one flows from the other. At all events, we may well see a significance in the first two verses following immediately upon the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, with its solemn and unequivocal testimony to the reality of heaven and hell. The association of ideas is quite marked, for here are words which speak of 'little ones', i.e. disciples or 'would-be' disciples being made to stumble in faith and thus be endangered as to their eternal welfare. And it is in this connection that Jesus says it would be better for such an one, guilty of doing this to one of Christ's 'little ones' to be cast into the sea - that is, death itself would be better than to incur the divine wrath for such an offence. We should bear in mind that our Lord is here challenging the falsity of the Pharisees' religion (cf Matt 23:13 and Luke 11:54), where Jesus pronounces woe on them for hindering others from entering the kingdom and shutting its door against them. Perhaps the most frightening thing in all this is that the Pharisees were completely sincere in their attitude, even dedicated (as Saul of Tarsus was, at a later stage). How blind men can be and, in the matter of entry into the kingdom of God, what criminal blindness!

274) 17:3-4

These verses provide a complete contrast with the previous two. There, it was the danger of sinning against others; here, it is what to do when others sin against you. Some think that the point is that cherishing an unforgiving spirit can be a means of causing others to stumble; others that the argument is that if we must avoid doing evil to others, much more we must forgive the evil others do to us. There may in fact be a link with the previous verses in this sense: we have been thinking of those who have been caused to stumble - well, think of some of the misfits, the drop-outs: are they sinners, or sinned against? When one thinks of the chronic helplessness and tragedy of these sinning ones, their fatal weaknesses that have been played upon and exploited so mercilessly by the evil of society, and of the uphill work it is for them to find the way back to wholeness again – how many 'falls' are theirs, and what need of repeated forgiveness and endless and boundless compassion and pity, without which they will never be made whole again, without which we shall certainly be stumbling blocks to them! Not that this means softness and sentimentality, but rather firmness and firm handling, and rebuke too - but always compassion shining through, even if love gives a hammering (cf Matt 18:15 ff, where forgiveness and discipline are associated, and where the hardness and sternness of the discipline not only does not limit forgiveness, but is itself an act of love).

275) 17:5-6

It is difficult to believe there is no connection between these words and what precedes them. Jesus has been speaking of the danger of being a stumbling block to others, and of the duty of continued forgiveness; and His disciples see the challenge in such a way of living, indeed its impossibility apart from resources that are supernatural, hence the request: 'Increase our faith'. This was a true insight on their part. And we should also notice how Christ substantiated this, even in correcting them. They did not need increase of faith so much as reality of faith. The point about the mustard seed illustration is that the seed has life in it, and would therefore germinate and develop. Where there is real life from above, it will express itself in love, for faith always works by love. Those born of God are taught by God to love (cf 1 Thess 4:9). And such faith laughs at impossibilities. Faith in God is a power that takes impossibilities in its stride. From this we may see the danger of emphasising love that is not built and based on faith. Faith, real living faith is ever the need. With such faith, nothing is impossible.

276) 17:7-10

The parable, or parabolic illustration contained in these verses is a most important one, far-reaching in its implications. The connection with what precedes it may be the sense of radical challenge that the disciples perceived in Jesus' teaching about the implications of true faith and discipleship. Certainly there is a most radical note in what is said in 7, 8. The point is understood the better if we remember that 'servant' in the Greek is really 'slave', and that what is being spoken about is not the idea of a servant working for wages, but a slave who is the property of his master who has entire control over his person and service. Jesus does not, of course, mean to suggest that we are lorded over by Him in the way that slaves were often lorded over by cruel and wicked masters in olden time; rather, what He teaches is that it is in this spirit of total giving that we are to serve Him. The kingdom of God, as one commentator puts it, "makes exacting demands on its servants which can only be met by an heroic temper". We could put it this way: "The service of the kingdom is as unlike that of a slave to his owner as possible in spirit; but it is like, in the heavy demands it makes, which we have to take as a matter of course" (A.B. Bruce). This is the point about the exacting demands made upon the slave in the parable. Demand after demand is made, totally beyond what would be reasonable or even human if made on a hired servant earning wages; and unless we get it clear that we owe this unlimited service to our Master, we shall never serve a right. More on this in tomorrow's Note.

277) 17:7-10

Commentators have not been slow to apply this point (referred to at the end of yesterday's Note). Calvin says: "Our life, even to the end of our course, belongs entirely to God; so that if a person were to spend half of it in obedience to God, he would have no right to bargain that he should rest for the remainder of the time; as a considerable number of men, after serving as soldiers for ten years, would gladly apply for a discharge". Trench says: "The lesson of the first part of the parable is - that we do not, after we have made some exertion, smaller or greater, account that we have a claim to be exempted henceforth from strenuous toil; but on the contrary, ever, as we have surmounted one hill of labour, perceive a new one rising above it, and gird ourselves for the surmounting of that also." This is the point that Paul makes also in 1 Cor 15:58 - 'always abounding in the work of the Lord'. It must be either wholehearted, dedicated service, or nothing at all, according to Jesus, in this parable. Service is never a matter of 'feeling like it', but of duty, whether we feel like it or not. Stewardship, obligation, duty - these are the words that indicate the quality of our service in the kingdom of God. And - of course - this stands good whether or not our service is appreciated -which raises the question of motive in service, and to this we turn in tomorrow's Note.

278) 17:7-10

If the first part of the parable commends patient faithfulness in the Lord's work (7, 8), it is humility that is underlined in 9, 10, and this teaches something tremendously important about motive in Christian service. In yesterday's Note we made reference to the idea of service being appreciated - and there is something, surely, in the parable about saying 'Thank you'. But the question now arises: "Why do we perform the service we do? What are our motives in service? Why do we engage in Christian service?" This parable says something very pointed about the question of motive, and it is this: We are not doing God a favour by serving Him. All we can do for Him is merest duty, and all poor and of limited worth. We are not to think of the work of the Kingdom in such a way as to suggest that God comes to us 'cap in hand' asking us to do things for Him, and that we 'do Him an obligation' by lending Him a helping hand. This would be an utter travesty of the truth. In reality, it is very different; for at the end of all we have done, we must always say, "We are unprofitable servants, we have done that which it was our duty to do". It is of the Lord's infinite condescension that He invites us -allows us - to share in His work. He does not need us, but He bestows on us the privilege of participation. It was Paul's joy to call himself the 'bond-slave' of Jesus Christ; and where this kind of privilege and dignity is concerned, we must all be unprofitable servants. The debt is all on our side, not God's.

279) 17:11-19

We wonder whether there is any connection between the story of the ten lepers recorded in these verses and the theme of the verses which precede it - in this sense: there are two ways of being 'unprofitable servants' - i.e., we are unprofitable servants whatever we do, and in whatever spirit we fulfil our service, but we can fulfil that service as a duty or as a delight. This seems to be the point that is made in the story of the lepers, only one of whom returned to give thanks for the blessing of healing, moved by a sense and spirit of gratitude. It is true, in the ultimate sense, that we are all unprofitable servants; and yet, paradoxically, since love is the fulfilling of the law (Rom 13:8,10), serving in a spirit of love and gratitude is something as far removed from serving in a mere spirit of duty as heaven is from hell. The thesis, then, in the incident before us is as follows: It is possible to take the blessings of Christ for granted, almost as our right, and to be casual and unthankful; and this does something to those who receive them, rendering their service questionable, and, it may be, even disqualifying them from service altogether. The specific reference to the Samaritan's gratitude seems to imply that the Jews had down the years taken their privileges for granted and set little store by them, and that this was a source of distress and grief to Jesus. To them pertained the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants (Rom 9:4); but they had got used to these blessings and privileges, and took them for granted, lightly esteeming them, even regarding them as theirs by right, instead of acknowledging them as gifts of unaccountable grace and mercy. Let us ask ourselves, in the light of this: Do we take all that we receive from His bountiful hand for granted?

280) 17:11-19

The story of the lepers, with its contrast between the one and the nine, is similar in its emphasis to Luke's earlier account of the woman who anointed Jesus' feet with ointment and tears (7:36 ff). That story tells us very plainly that there are two different levels of discipleship, and that it was the woman's not Simon the Pharisee's, that delighted the heart of the Son of God. And, interestingly, Jesus' words to the woman are very similar to those spoken to the leper here (compare 7:50 with 19).

Were the other lepers not made whole, then? Ah, yes, they were all cleansed; but the others were limited to bodily cleansing, whereas the Samaritan leper was cleansed in body and in soul. Geldenhuys comments: "He who has received only blessings from His hand and does not come close to Him in humble but heartfelt gratitude, will always forgo what is the highest and most glorious in life. But he who, on receiving gifts out of His hand, turns to the Giver Himself in real gratitude, will partake of fulness of life and happiness. There is nothing that can bind one more closely to Him than sincere gratitude - 'we love Him because He first loved us'." These others -the nine - missed a blessing that day; and when the heart-moving wonder of the gospel of redeeming grace leaves our hearts cold and unmoved, we miss a blessing too, and our souls become impoverished. This is the real hazard and peril of taking the good things of God for granted. He that hath ears to hear...!

281) 17:11-19

Having drawn the central message of the story in our previous two Notes, we may now look at it in terms of the illustration of the gospel itself that it provides. For, of course, every miracle that Jesus wrought illustrates the gospel of grace. In the first place, we have an illustration of the nature and tragedy of sin. Leprosy was chosen by God as a symbol of sin; and lepers fearfully bore in their body the outward and visible tokens of sin in the soul, and were treated as sinners. They were themselves a dreadful parable of death. When David prayed in Psalm 51, he regarded himself as a spiritual leper (51:7) needing cleansing and restoring to God from the furthest degree of separation from Him. It was the symbolic meaning that excluded the leper from the camp and city of God. This is why, in the New Testament, when Jesus dealt with it, it is said that He cleansed the leper, not that He healed him. It had an inevitable association with sin; and this is the illustration that is given here. In the second place, we may see, in the fact that they stood 'afar off' (12), what sin does to man. It separates men from God. One thinks of the moving words of the Apostle Paul in Eph 2:12, 13 as he describes this very situation and predicament. Sin fixes a great gulf between man and God, that no human means can ever bridge. But the gospel is the mighty act of God whereby His love makes its way to us across that gulf, overcoming every obstacle in its way, stopping at nothing to reach us in our need. And He comes to us in His Word: this is the meaning of the command in 14 - His word was a word of power that day, a word of cleansing and of new creation (cf 2 Cor 4:6. And the response of faith (itself surely created by that word of power) completed the process. We should not however miss the fact that the response of faith was the obedience of faith: 'as they went, they were cleansed'. It is as if the Scriptures were saying to us, "Commit yourself to Him in obedience - and the miracle will happen". Well, that is a thought for today, is it not?

282) 17:20-22

We come in this passage to some of what is called our Lord's eschatological teaching - i.e. teaching about the coming of the kingdom and the last things. Those who are familiar with the gospels will know that 20-22 are found in Luke alone, but that the rest of the chapter shares common ground with Matt 24:23 ff and Mark 13:21 ff. We shall have to look at these two very unequal sections separately and with some care. But first of all, and by way of introduction, we need to recognize the doctrine of the last things constitutes a very controversial area; and it is very easy to become bogged down in 'theories' of interpretation that at best can only be speculative, and at worst can become fantastic and absurd. But this is foreign to the whole spirit of prophecy and of our Lord's teaching, the emphasis in which is always moral, ethical and spiritual, never speculative. And anyone who reads this passage without coming to it with mind befuddled by preconceived theories of interpretation can surely see in a moment that the thrust of Jesus' words is nothing if not practical and full of moral challenge. Take for example the words in 32, 'Remember Lot's wife'. This surely gives the setting of Jesus' teaching: it is the crisis of judgment, of the doom of time, of which He is speaking, in which people are involved, for weal or woe. Nothing in our New Testament studies must ever get in the way of this, or obscure this solemn fact.

283) 17:20-22

The discussion opens with a question put to Jesus by the Pharisees, as to when the kingdom of God should come. The answer given by Jesus to this question seems to say two different things: on the one hand He speaks of the kingdom as being already present; on the other hand, in the later verses particularly, He speaks of that kingdom in future terms as something yet to come, and as a judgment, a sifting, a day of reckoning. It is this ambivalent teaching and emphasis that makes for problems in interpretation. Indeed, it is possible to distinguish a threefold interpretation - the 'here and now', the 'judgment of the fall of Jerusalem, and the final judgment of the 'end-time'. It may well be asked why it should be that this threefold emphasis, causing a real measure of ambiguity, not to say confusion, should occur so frequently in the prophetic teaching of Old Testament and New Testament alike. There is a real answer to this: the reason why the 'near' and the 'far' can be so easily confused is that 'near' and 'intermediate' judgments are themselves a prefiguring of the great and final day of judgment, and the same principle is involved in each. In fact, deep spiritual principles underlie all human history, and the great crisis points in history are all like one another because essentially they are all expressions of the same thing. This is why, to take one particularly well-known point, the 'abomination of desolation' mentioned in Matt 24:15 can be properly applied to not only two, but in fact three periods of history - there certainly was a fulfilment of Daniel's word in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes in 168 BC; yet Christ refers it to something yet to happen at a time future to that at which He then spoke, thus clearly giving it a second meaning and interpretation. But if it could be made applicable to two historical events, why may it not also be true of yet another, namely at the time of the end? This is the kind of 'multiple' meaning we often have to deal with in prophetic teaching; and to understand this will save us from much confusion and bewilderment.

284) 17:20-22

The meaning of the Greek in 21 is ambiguous. The word translated 'within you' can be equally rendered 'among you'. And this seems more suitable to the context than the former. For the kingdom was in no sense 'within' the Pharisees. The meaning of the statement would then be (following Plummer in I.C.C.): "So far from coming with external signs which will attract attention, the kingdom is already in the midst of you (in the person of Christ and His disciples) and you do not perceive it." The commentators point out that this usage is not decisive; and if the other be followed, then the meaning would be. "Instead of being something externally visible, the kingdom is essentially spiritual; it is in your hearts if you possess it at all." On balance, the 'among you' alternative seems the more likely; but in fact, either way, what Jesus said speaks of a present rather than a 'Future reality. It is both, in fact, but the important thing, in this context, was that it was there, at that point, in the person of Christ and His disciples; and they, the Pharisees, were utterly blind to it. There are important lessons for us here, and we shall have to spend some time, in tomorrow's Note discussing them.

285) 17:20-22

These men – the Pharisees – religious and devout by tradition, were victims of a basic misconception; and the force of that misconception blinded them to all reality; it blinded them to what was going on before their very eyes. They were looking for - they knew not what! - in the way of a coming kingdom of glory, a material, even political kingdom, of this world, not realising that His kingdom is not of this world, but a hidden, spiritual reality. One thinks of Satan's temptation of Jesus in the wilderness - 'All these will I give unto Thee - the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them - if Thou wilt fall down and worship me'. But that was not to be the way that the kingdom was to come. 'Ask of Me', says God to Jesus, and He embraced the way of the cross. The Pharisees were, in fact, more akin to the devil and his ways, than those of Jesus. They looked for a sign, something dramatic and unmistakeable. But it was not that way, Jesus said, that it could be discerned. As Paul was to say later, 'The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God.' One thinks in this connection of the 'this-worldly' emphasis of so much thinking in the Church today - social issues, political issues, revolutionary issues - this is the kind of kingdom that many are concerned with - this, to them, is the beginning of the kingdom; and it is possible to be so preoccupied with this that one misses the real issue of eternal salvation by grace through faith, and thinks that unless the Church is speaking with a clear voice on behalf of the freedom fighters of Africa, the kingdom is going by default! How blind can men get?

286) 17:23-37

The idea of judgment and sifting, implicit in Jesus' words in 20-22 - His presence in the midst of the human situation always precipitates a crisis for men, summoning them to obedience and commitment of faith - brings us naturally to the emphasis in the latter part of the chapter on the kingdom as a future, 'eschatological' reality. We have already remarked on the mingling of the 'near' and the 'far' in the prophetic teaching of Christ, and the reason for it as lying in the fact that principles of judgment are unfolded in the teaching, with the emphasis now on the judgment of the Fall of Jerusalem, and now on the last days. There are three points in particular to be underlined. The first is that one of the characteristics of 'crisis' periods in history is the existence and emergence of false Christs and false claims (23). In the early Church it was so; for they faced a crisis time; and many false Christs appeared on the scene, many 'anti-Christs', as John puts it in his first epistle. The early Church was not immune from such dangers; and neither are we. This is surely a timely warning. In a day when there is a spirit of enquiry abroad, when many have become disillusioned with the materialistic values of our modern society and are seeking something different, there are many different emphases that claim the allegiance of our minds and souls, claiming to be the answer to our need. We need to beware, and 'try the spirits whether they be of God'. In such a situation it is easy to see how spurious and false claims can lead people astray, for they are eager and wanting to be led anywhere. There is a word of this in Scripture, which underlines our Lord's warning here: in Jeremiah 6:16, the prophet cries 'Ask for the old paths....' Is not this a word for those who hanker after new things, the bizarre, the exotic, the unusual, the novel, the spectacular? What if, after all, the much-maligned 'establishment' hold the answer. 'Ask for the old paths'!

287) 17:23-37

The second point that must be underlined in these verses is the fact of the secularisation of life which seems a prevailing characteristic of 'crisis' times. It is not without significance that Jesus should, speak as He did about the ancient civilisation. No one who reads the Genesis accounts of the days of Noah and Lot could fail to realise that a time of crisis came for these generations, in terms of depravity and debauchery (theirs was a permissive society also!) and that this was a flashpoint of judgment for them. But Jesus did not mention these things -not because He did not think them serious, terrible and ominously dangerous. Rather, He mentioned something else: the utter and complete secularisation of society, the fact that in everything they did, God was not in all their thoughts, and was left out. And this is what led to the other things, which were merely the symptoms. This was the real heart of the disease: they were a God-forgetting age. This is the real flash-point of crisis for judgment, and it has much to say to our own God-forgetting generation. We should not be slow to hear.

288) 17:23-37

What was said at the end of yesterday's Note, however, raised a question and poses a problem. Does Jesus mean to indicate that a sign of the last days will be practical and utter turning away from the things of God, and spiritual barrenness? If so, what do we say of the Scriptures which seem to indicate that in the last days, prior to the coming of the Lord, will witness a great outpouring of the Spirit of God (cf Joel 2:18 ff). The answer to this is that both seemingly opposed and contradictory statements and positions are true. It all depends on one's point of view. An illustration will serve to underline this: One of the greatest evangelical movements of all Church history took place in what we know as the 1859 revival, a movement which made an enormous impact on the life and times not only of Great Britain but also many parts of the world, touching all aspects of life. Yet it is possible to read a serious historical novel of the period and find no reference whatever to the social, economic, cultural or implications of the movement, apart from one snide dig at a religious hypocrite of the day. It all depends on the point of view one takes; and the 'God-forgetting' can be so decisive and fundamental that not even a Spirit-filled movement of renewal and awakening will serve to mark it in the least. The records - and recording -of history can be remarkably selective and subjective, on occasion!

289) 17:23-37

The third point to be underlined is this: In His teaching on the last days, Jesus makes very plain the reality of the sifting process. It will not be all the same in the end, whether or not we respond to the gospel of salvation. The repeated emphasis, 'one shall be taken, the other left' in 34-36 makes this point only too clearly. "Why will one be taken and another left? Because although both seemed the same, they actually belonged to radically different worlds. On the one hand, the heart was set on this present world as if it, and themselves in it, would want to live here forever (what Christian, or heathen for that matter, would want to live here forever?!). On the other, the heart was longing for release from bondage into the glorious liberty of the sons of God (Rom 8:23). In that day no one who is 'looking for that blessed hope and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ' will dream of running from room to room gathering rags and baubles, or like Lot's wife of looking longingly at what cannot be taken. The exchange of a palace for a slum will not be in it: it will be good riddance to all that is left." (W. Still). In other words the difference between those taken and those left will then be seen to be so great and incommensurable that there will be no other alternative to total and final separation. Not that the separation takes place then, at the end - only confirmed, as having taken place long before, and only now seen in all its horror. In this sense, as in so many other things, we are making our future now, for weal or woe.

290) 18:1-8

There are a number of introductory considerations to be underlined at the outset in studying the parable of the unjust judge. First of all, there seems to be a link between the parable in 1-8 and that in 9-14; also between the two parables and the two incidents that follow, that of the little children (15-17) and that of the rich young ruler (18-30). For, consider the theme: in 1-8 it is prayer, based on relationship: if an unjust judge will hear a widow because of her importunity, how much more will a heavenly Father hear His child and answer its cries! In 9-14 it is again prayer, in relation to acceptance with God. While in 15-17 it is the Father/child relationship that is in view, and in 18 ff it is the question of acceptance with God (or non-acceptance) - as if to say that what was spoken of in the second parable (9-14) is really true to life and does happen. The Pharisee in the parable went down to his house unjustified; the rich young ruler went away sorrowful. There is thus a unifying theme running throughout the passage.

But there is another, even more important consideration in the background and context of these verses, namely the teaching in 17:20-37, and we shall think of this in detail in tomorrow's Note.

291) 18:1-8

The background is as follows: Our Lord has been speaking of the last days, and of the suffering and distress of that time. Of it He says that the saints will long to see 'One of the days of the Son of man' - that is, they will long for Him to intervene and usher in the kingdom, so that all suffering and distress will be over for ever. And it will often seem to their waiting and aching hearts that God is taking too long a time to do so, for their peace of mind. In such a circumstance, the temptation would be to become downhearted and discouraged. Hence the parable, with its message: 'Do not faint, or become downhearted; instead pray, and keep on praying'. As G. Campbell Morgan says, it constitutes 'a revelation of what is necessary for the life of faith in an age which is not conducive to faith. In such an age, prayer is the very essence of life'. The ultimate emphasis, then, is on the coming of God (in answer to prayer) to avenge His elect.

The parable teaches its message, however, by contrast, rather than by comparison, as most of the other parables of Jesus do. God is not to be thought of as like the unjust judge, whether in His character, or in His attitude towards prayer, as if He were unwilling to hear. The opposite is intended. There is in fact only one point of comparison between the widow's situation and the believer's, and that is the seeming delay in the answer. That is the focal point in the story, and beyond this all the lessons are taught by contrast. The widow's redress seemed as if it would never come; and sometimes, says Christ, it seems as if God would never answer the urgent cries of His people. That is the point of the comparison. Now, says our Lord, if an unjust judge, an evil man, will finally yield to the force of the widow's importunity, which he hates, how much more certainly will a righteous God, Who is also a loving Father, be prevailed upon by the faithful prayers of children whom He loves!

292) 18:1-8

Several applications of the parable are readily discernible. One thinks, for one thing, of the pressures of oppression and persecution that are the lot of so many Christians in different parts of the world today, of times (and are we not warned that this will be especially true near the end) when the faith of the faithful will be almost failing, and even the hearts of the elect will fail them for fear. The parable's message is surely pre-eminently apposite in such situations. Then, again, there are the lesser pressures that are the common lot of God's people, the battles of the soul, the long unanswered prayers for loved ones not yet in a state of grace, the personal problems for which there seems to be no answer, and which so often make us wonder whether God really cares. Here again, the message is plain: the antidote to fainting is -Pray! And there is the larger work of God, of which we and the work we are called to do are only a small and even insignificant part. This parable exhorts us to work on, without fainting, even if it means 'not receiving the promise' (Heb 11:39, 40). We must work on, serving our day and generation in all faithfulness, fulfilling our stewardship, in the conviction that God is at work in all we do, and that He will not be late. Let us not forget Stephen's great word in Acts 7:17: 'When the time of the promise drew nigh....' It was then that things began to happen'. God has His own time.

293) 18:9-14

This parable serves to underline Jesus' earlier words in 17:34, 35, 'one shall be taken and the other left', for this is exactly what happened with the Pharisee and the publican. And it is clear, from what is said, that it is very easy for men to labour under false apprehensions in the matter of acceptance with God. Luke says Jesus spoke the parable to 'certain who trusted in themselves that they were righteous' and despised others'. We should not miss the significance of this. They 'trusted in themselves', that is, they were completely confident about themselves, and assumed as a matter of course that they were 'all right'. They were people whom Jesus found very difficult to convince that they were not right with God. This, then, defines the purpose of the parable. It was told with a view to opening men's eyes to the truth about themselves. It was meant to be an eye-opener for people who were blind to the real truth of how they stood with God. It was as if He had held up a mirror before them, saying 'Do you see yourselves here?' This, then, must be our use of it also: God forbid that we should simply study it as an interesting phenomenon, and not see that it has a message and a challenge. A mirror, however, requires to be clean and clear and unmarked in order to give a true image, and it is necessary to clear away distortions of meaning which we tend to give this parable, if we are to understand the message it has for us. One of these distortions is the wrong estimate we place on the Pharisee, when we picture him as an open and obviously obnoxious person, a hypocrite of the most unpleasant type. We are wrong. That is to think of Pharisaism at its worst, but this is precisely not Jesus' point. He is speaking of Pharisaism at its best. This Pharisee was not outwardly reprehensible and objectionable. He was a good man, a righteous man, a deeply religious man. On any estimate, his record was an impressive one (11, 12). It is not here that we see the point of the parable, as we shall discover in tomorrow's Note.

294) 18:9-14

The real point of the parable is this: "If you want to know yourself, you must have a standard. And when this standard is applied the differences between the two figures become apparent" (Thielicke). The Pharisee measured himself by looking downward; and naturally, in so doing, he came out favourably in the comparison. By that standard he was bound to look well. The publican, on the other hand, looked upward. For him, God was the standard. And when you do it this way, you know that there can be no kind of self-congratulation, and that your one need is for mercy. The divine majesty is so great and high, His holiness so burning, that all our righteousnesses - all the time and all the way through, after as well as before pardon and forgiveness - are as filthy rags, and remain so in His sight. This being so, the Pharisee is not only not justified, he is infinitely far from it. It can never be a question of his trying a bit harder to get there: he is an offence to God. He is far away. It is this infinite disparity between the best in the best of men and the holiness of God that makes mercy so crucially necessary. To see this, to understand this, is to silence for ever any possibility of making ourselves acceptable to God. But when we are in the place of abject, total helplessness, and see ourselves there, that is the point at which mercy comes. It was Luther who said, "God made the world out of nothing, and it is only when we are nothing - when we come to an utter end of ourselves - that God can make something of us".

295) 18:15-30

Matthew, Mark and Luke all alike associate the two incidents of the children and the rich ruler together, and this surely makes it most likely that there is a link between them. Nor, indeed, is it far to seek. Jesus speaks of receiving the kingdom as a little child. What are the characteristics He refers to? Not innocence, assuredly (as any parent will realise!) but rather the spirit of utter dependance, carefreeness and utter trust. Children are dependent and trusting, and the rich ruler refused to be just this. This is the link between the two incidents, and the point that is being made. The ruler was a man who refused to surrender his independent existence: that was his tragedy and his doom.

The general context of the story of the ruler in Luke, as in the other gospel records, is Christ's teaching about discipleship, and its inexorable claims, demands and conditions. Here is a man who, so to speak, offers himself for discipleship: and the Spirit says to us, 'Here is an illustration of how the question of discipleship works in a concrete situation. Just as he was unwilling to surrender things that for him signified independence of life - his riches -so too there are those today whose riches -material, moral, intellectual - tend to give them the illusion of independence that keeps them from casting themselves on the divine compassion and finding life in Christ.

296) 18:15-30

When the ruler asked Jesus what he should do to inherit eternal life, Jesus referred him to the commandments of the Decalogue. Concern has sometimes been felt that this is a different kind of answer to that given by Paul to the Philippian jailor in Acts 16: 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved'. But we must remember that on another occasion Jesus said, in answer to the question, 'What shall we do that we may work the works of God?', 'This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent'. Obviously Jesus did not contradict Himself. Why, then, did He take this particular line here? Two things may be said in answer to the question. Firstly, following Calvin, we may say that this is no doctrine of salvation by works; rather, Christ is simply answering the ruler on his own level - he did say, 'What shall I do...', after all. And if he wanted an answer on that level, here it was. But, of course, no one can attain eternal life that way, for no one has ever or can ever fully keep the law. And, consequently, this approach of our Lord's is designed to bring the man. to an utter end of himself. And, as we see, this is in fact what did happen, when Christ probed more deeply into his claim to have kept the law. Secondly, in the fullest sense salvation is a question of fulfilling the Divine law; and the gospel is designed to make it possible. Man was originally made for obedience to the will of God, and but for sin and the Fall this would have been the pattern for man. And the gospel has come to enable it to be so. There is therefore no real contradiction between the two kinds of statement. It is only by believing in Christ and yielding to Him that we can fulfil the commandments.

297) 18:15-30

We should notice particularly that Jesus cites the commandments in the second table of the law, relating to our duty to man, not those of the second table, relating to our duty to God. There is great significance in this: for He knew the man was not in a right relationship to God, was in fact without God in his life, But He started with the manward aspects of the law, as if to show him that even on lower ground he was falling short. The commandments He mentioned in order, were the seventh, sixth, eighth, ninth and fifth, missing out the tenth, until the ruler made his claim to have fulfilled the others from his youth up, Then Jesus thrust the tenth at him in the words 'sell all that thou hast...'. And suddenly the man's real need and condition was exposed. Like Paul, who said 'I had not known lust except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet', the arrow of the Lord touched his heart, and the real issue of his life, his dissatisfaction, was made plain. There was an idol in his life - his wealth - and he was not prepared to let it go. The apostle James points out that if we keep all the law but offend in one point we are guilty of all (James 2:10), So it was with the ruler. He was challenged to a great surrender, challenged on the basis of the law to yield himself to God, to His claims on his life, to yield his independence, to have done with his idol, to die a death to his sin, and live unto God. Christ always puts His finger on the focal point of man's resistance to His claims. Sometimes it is the tenth commandment, sometimes it is another, but always He sees it unerringly.

And the ruler went away sorrowful - a divided heart, wanting, longing, but bound by a fierce will to independence. The tragedy is that he went away from life. It was God's Son who was calling him to life, to joy, to fellowship, to the realisation of his true destiny. And Jesus refused to lower the price. He let him go, rather than try to win him with a lower standard!

298) 18:31-34

These brief verses constitute a prediction of the passion of Christ. The commentators point out that this is the third prediction of His coming death, the other two having been made immediately before the Transfiguration (Luke 9:22) and immediately after it (Luke 9:44). It is the implication of the insertion of these verses into the narrative here that are so important; for they surely indicate that it is this central fact - the death that Jesus was to die - that is definitive for His whole ministry, and explains everything He ever did. Indeed, it was because He adhered so utterly to the principle of the Cross, in obedience to the will of God, that He was able always to heal and bless the lives of men. That was the secret of His power. There was never an occasion when He was not able to heal and save because His whole life was lived in obedience to one great fundamental principle. He was able to heal, and He did heal, not because He was God (although He was), and His power did not derive from the fact that He was God, as such, but because He was God incarnate Who came down, in obedience unto death. The principle of acceptance of the Cross underlay all Christ's life and ministry, and His unswerving obedience to that principle was the explanation of His power to heal. It was in virtue of the death that He was to die, and the supreme act of obedience that He offered in that death, that there was power in His word and in His touch.

299) 18:35-43

With yesterday's comment as background, we are the better able to understand and appreciate the healing of the blind man, called in another of the gospels Bartimaeus. In our earlier Notes in Luke we have spoken of the significance of our Lord's miracles and of how they are to be interpreted, but it will be useful to underline these lessons afresh. What we have said was as follows: on the one hand, the miracles are to be interpreted as evidences of the Lordship of Christ; on the other, they can be taken as spiritual illustrations, illustrations of the gospel answer to the problem of sin. In other words, they can be spiritualised. It may seem arbitrary to do the latter, passing from the realm of the physical to that of the spiritual, and to say 'What Jesus did in the physical realm is an illustration of what He came to do in the spiritual.' It may even seem to be a rather lame expedient to make what seems to be an unwarranted transference. But there is the best kind of spiritual warrant for so doing, for our Lord clearly implies, as for example in John 5, that the miracle in the physical realm at Bethesda does in fact illustrate His power in the spiritual realm. Indeed, John's gospel makes this out to be the whole point of the miracles recorded in it. They are 'signs', that is, they 'illustrate' in the physical realm realities in the spiritual. The man at Bethesda therefore illustrates the paralysis of sin; and Bartimaeus here illustrates the blindness of sin. More on this theme in tomorrow's Note.

300) 18:35-43

There is, of course, a connection between the physical and the spiritual, between physical or mental disability and sin. It is sin that is at the root of all human malady. It is the entrance of sin into the world that has infected the whole stream of humanity with countless woes and sorrows. That is the biblical teaching, and that is the connection which permits us to look at any of those who were the objects of Christ's compassion in the New Testament - leper, palsied, lame, blind - and use them as an illustration of the sickness of sin. But all this kind of spiritualising is true and valid only because something else is also, and first of all, true, namely that the miracles stand in the gospel record to bear witness to the Lordship of Christ over the whole of life. In this connection we may make three points: firstly, the miracles stand as a testimony to the fact that 'miracle' is what the whole thing is about. The gospel is miracle. It is the story of God's miraculous intervention in the human situation. Secondly, and following from this, we say that the miracles are to be regarded as the evidences of the kingship and lordship of Christ, and that He has come forth from God. They attest His Person, and show that His claim to be the Lord is no idle one. Thirdly, as such they are 'tokens' or 'evidences' of the new order that He came to establish, harbingers of the new day that is to dawn. Such is the teaching underlying the miracle of the giving of sight to the blind man, the 'theology' that explains the act of Christ in healing his sightless eyes, We are shown a Lord, full of compassion, pity and power, shown Him at His most gracious and loving, and at His most sovereign: 'What wilt thou that I shall do unto thee? Such is the word that comes to men in the gospel of grace!

301) 19:1-10

The same lessons that we drew from the story of blind Bartimaeus apply here also with Zacchaeus. The principle that Jesus adopted and accepted for His life - the principle of the cross - was the source from which His power to heal and bless and save was derived. It is not by accident that the incident concludes with the words, 'The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost'. And the reason why the story has relevance for us today is precisely because of that principle; for His power to bless and save today depends upon it also, and supremely on the fact that, having adopted that principle He carried it through to death and beyond death, into resurrection. It is because of the 'finished work' of Christ that this ancient happening can become a happening today. The first and perhaps most glorious lesson the story teaches us is the unconditional nature of God's salvation. It exalts free grace, and extols God's unconditional offer of mercy. Jesus did not say to Zacchaeus, "If you are prepared to mend your ways, I am prepared to have dealings with you", but "Zacchaeus, come down, for today I must abide at thy house". There was something wonderfully sovereign about it all. "Zacchaeus, come down...." sudden and instantaneous as that, and without warning. And, "Today is salvation come to this house". Everything we might say about it would only serve to emphasise the Divine initiative. Zacchaeus would well understand Bonar's words:

I came to Jesus as I was...
And He has made me glad.

302) 19:1-10

Scholars point out that on His way to Jerusalem, as He was at that time, Jesus did not need to pass through Jericho. But He did - and we need not doubt but that it was to seek and to save this man that He did so. One lovely old tradition says (there is no Scriptural warrant for it, of course) that when Matthew the publican was converted, he said to Jesus: "If you are ever down Jericho way, I wish you would do something to help a friend of mine, Zacchaeus by name". No basis in fact, to be sure - but it is remarkable how divine sovereignty is so often seen to be aligned with human beseechings and prayers. Wesley once said, 'The prayers of the saints are the decrees of God beginning to work'. Something with more basis in fact is that Zacchaeus' name means 'Pure' - a name given him by his parents surely with the hope and prayer that he would come to fulfil that name in the life he lived. Was there a history of prayer behind this man's life - broken hearted prayer? Was this what moved the hand of God? The power of prayer to influence lives, and bring them into fruitful contact with Christ is incalculable!

Something else is underlined in Jesus' first words to Zacchaeus: 'Make haste'. There is an urgency in the gospel. Jesus was not to pass that way again. It was so also with Bartimaeus at the gates of the city. It was a case of 'now or never' with both. This also belongs to the idea of the Divine sovereignty. It is God's time, not ours, in which we may be saved. Times of refreshing are in the hand of God, and in His prerogative to give or to withhold, Days of visitation pass, and then salvation may be hid from men's eyes. This note of serious urgency is never very far from the surface, even in the sweetest and tenderest and most winsome of appeals of God's grace. May we never forget it!

303) 19:1-10

If this passage tells us of the true nature of salvation as to its method of operation - free and unconditional grace - it has also something to tell us of the true nature of salvation as to its content and indeed its essence. In what did Zacchaeus's salvation consist? Just this: the Christ of God broke into his life and transformed it. It was a marvellous, unlooked for, and to Zacchaeus incredible encounter which did for him, in an instant of time, what no human power or consideration could ever have done. This may be brought out by the following considerations. Let us think, for example, and by way of contrast, of the religion of his day - of what it offered him, if he ever conceived it as offering anything. The Pharisees had reduced - and perverted - the ancient covenant religion of his and their forefathers to a mass and conglomeration of rules and regulations which bound heavy burdens on men, cramping and stifling them and making life a misery. And, withal, it was a harsh, cruel and loveless thing, which made no kind of provision for human frailties, for failure and sin. But this was something so different: an invitation to fellowship - 'Today I must abide at thy house'. He could hardly have believed his good fortune, for - and this is the second consideration - he was a chief tax-gatherer, which meant that he would be ostracised by all his fellows, hated and despised as a traitor to his country. There was a price to be paid for making your money at this job, and this was the price he had had to pay. Zacchaeus was a social leper, and the loneliest man in Jericho. And it was into this loneliness and isolation that Jesus came, with His invitation to fellowship and friendship. To think that he mattered like that to Jesus, and was accepted by Him as he was! This is what he could not get over. Little wonder that he came down and received Him joyfully!

304) 19:1-10

We are told that Zacchaeus went up the tree to see Jesus who He was. This has been variously interpreted as (i) evidence merely of curiosity, (ii) evidence of real seeking (so Calvin). We are not really in a position to dogmatize one way or the other, and we should be prepared to accept either alternative. But something else may be suggested: After all, if he had wanted to see Jesus he could have seen Him in another way - he was an influential man and could have arranged things, surely. But here he is, up a tree. What does this suggest? Well, he was obviously drawn in some way - either by curiosity or by conscious need, and seeking, for Christ's very presence is the call of God to man. It is His presence that stirs up our interest and need. And here he is, viewing Christ, beholding Christ at a distance, a safe distance as he thought. For, curious or in need though he may have been, it seems he did not really want to become personally involved. Is this not the story of many lives? Why is it that people come back again and again and again, almost in spite of themselves, under the sound of the gospel? Drawn - yet fear keeps them at a distance. They long -but they hesitate to become involved. And the moment involvement becomes likely, up go the barriers. But on this occasion Jesus breached all the barriers and came through to him, stopping under the tree, knowing all about him, knowing his name, and his need, and smiling in love upon him. That was Zacchaeus's day of salvation!

305) 19:11-17

The parable which follows the story of Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus has certain affinities with the better known parable of the talents (Matt 25:14ff), but the differences are quite marked. Whereas in the latter, there is a distinction in the number of talents given to the servants - one was given five, another two, another one - here each servant was given the same amount - one pound. The emphasis is different in each case: in the talents, it is the varying gifts each man has that is at issue, but in the pounds, it is the equal opportunity and responsibility that each servant had.

We should notice, in the first place, why it says Jesus told this parable - it was "because he was near to Jerusalem, and because they supposed the kingdom of God was to appear immediately". Jesus disciples were assuming that because he was nigh to Jerusalem, something tremendous was going to happen, and this 'something tremendous' was the visible manifestation of the kingdom. He therefore spoke the parable to correct wrong ideas about the kingdom. A very simple lesson thus emerges right at the outset: "Occupy till I come" - it will be a long time coming, and we must not only wait patiently, but work patiently. Rome was not built in a day, and the kingdom of God in any place does not come overnight.

306) 19:11-27

We should notice in the next place that there are two pictures given here-of the kingdom of God. It is spoken of in terms of a nobleman seeking a kingdom, and it is also spoken of in terms of trade and business. There seems to be a definite significance in this: it is that these represent two aspects of the kingdom of God and of the gospel. And they both are present in the parable because it is meant to have a twofold message and application to two different sets of people. There were two sets of people around Christ at that moment: His disciples, on the one hand, and the uncommitted and the antagonistic, the scribes and Pharisees, on the other. And there is one lesson in the parable to these foes, and one to the disciples, and we must be careful to distinguish them. The message to the foes of Christ is that Christ is a King, Who demands submission and obedience and loyalty, under pain of punishment; the message to the disciples is that they must serve with all their might, and exercise a faithful stewardship in the things committed to them. And the question of His kinship must come first and be settled, before there can be any question of service for His kingdom. We must not misinterpret the passage. It is not true to say that it teaches that anyone without exception can work for God. Before ever one can be a disciple, the question of Christ's Kingship and Lordship must be settled. This was our Lord's message to His foes, and to the host of people around Him who had remained uncommitted in face of His teaching.

307) 19:11-27

The point underlined in yesterday's Note will bear a little further thought. Consider what is being said. Here is a nobleman, a prince, who goes to receive the investiture of the kingdom over which he is to rule when he returns. The picture behind this unusual procedure is of something that often happened under the Roman yoke. King Herod was king of Judea, but he was only in reality a subordinate king under the authority of the Roman Caesar. And when he died, his son Archelaus did not automatically succeed him. He had to go to Rome, that he might "receive the kingdom" and return to take up his reign. While on his way there, some Jews so hated him that they sent a message to Caesar saying "We will not have this man to reign over us" (14).

This, says Christ, is how it is with Me, in My kingdom. I have received the investiture of the kingdom from My Father, but many are saying-"We will not have this man to reign over us". The lesson is surely obvious, without further comment. One thing in particular needs to be underlined. We should see how Jesus broke down the opposition and antagonism of his enemies to one basic issue - their attitude to Him. It is one thing to think in general terms about religion - most people would probably like to think that basically they are 'pro-God'. But what shows whether we are 'pro' or 'anti' is our attitude to Christ. And this is one of the functions of the preaching of the Word - to show up where we stand in this matter. And it does so by probing deeply into our hearts, and penetrating till it uncovers and exposes our real loyalties. The operative words here are "reign over us". Men resent the absolute claim Christ makes on their lives. They crave for a 'middle-of-the-road' loyalty, not this absolute, exclusive lordship. But if Jesus is not Lord of all, he is not Lord at all:

308) 19:11-27

Now, to the other emphasis in the parable, the trading with the pounds. The phrase "occupy till I come" means "trade with these till I return". There are two things to note: one is, they all got the same amount; the other is, none of them got very much to work with. What does this pound represent in the parable? It is the sacred deposit of the gospel that is committed to every true believer, to trade within his Master's name till he come (Paul speaks of this in his epistles to Timothy - cf 1 Tim 6:20, 2 Tim 1:14). All true servants of God receive the same commission to 'trade' with the Word of the gospel for the Lord of the gospel. All men have the same opportunity to work and speak and live for Him. It is not a question of gifts or abilities here, but of equal opportunity in service, and equal responsibility in service; for if we know Him, we can all witness for Him. We all stand on the same level in this. The fact that none of them was given much to trade with is no reflection on the gospel which is committed to them, but rather an indication of the fact that a small piece of service in this respect is quite big enough responsibility for any man, without coveting anything bigger.

It is the gospel, then, that is committed to us. And, as Paul puts it in 2 Cor 4, we have this treasure in earthen vessels. And the "stewardship" is to allow the vessel to be broken, to let the treasure out to men. From this point of view, we all start at the same level. And what this means is that, in this stewardship, our service constitutes a time of trial for us, when what we are fit for in the future will emerge and become clear. It is, in fact, like a race, which almost starts from the same point and at the same time - and quality and dedication soon tell!

309) 19:11-27

The point, then, of the parable's teaching is this: What is ascertained by the time of training, the time of probation, is not the varied ability of the servants but the unequal measure of their zeal and industry and dedication. There was one who did supremely well; there was another who had done pretty well; there was one who did nothing. For the first there is unqualified praise and reward; for the second, reward; for the third, reproach. This may represent three levels of Christian experience. There are those whose lives tell so wonderfully for Christ: they touch nothing they do not adorn: the impact is undoubtedly there. They are soul winners, they trade with the gospel, and win many others for Christ. There are those also whose lives tell, or have told: but they could tell far more, or could have told far more, for Christ. They are fully orthodox, of course; they are thoroughly evangelical, but they are lacking in that total dedication that would make their lives flame with zeal and power; and, lacking it, lose the divine approbation at the last. It is not a question of feverish activity in evangelism that is in view. That can often be a substitute for real and costly witness and dedication. Rather, it is being utterly real in one's own situation, in one's own place, maintaining a steady, faithful, consistent witness where we are. That is the point at issue.

310) 19:11-27

But who is the man who wrapped up his pound in a napkin? How can you wrap up the gospel in a napkin? Here is one possible answer: "It is the man who is so concerned about purity of doctrine that he creates a 'closed-shop' fellowship like a secret society; it is the man who so cuts himself off from the outside world in evangelical huddles that he has no opportunity to witness to others and trade with his pound; it is the man who hides his light under a bushel, at the office, or the factory, so that nobody could suspect him to be a Christian; it is the man who knows the truth, and knows what he should be doing, and does not do it, for fear of the repercussions it is going to have when he dares to; it is the man who includes in his belief the basic truth that prayer changes things, but will not sacrifice his Saturday evening's pleasure to come to pray for God's work; it is a man who pays lip service to the truth that the gospel matters supremely, and yet trifles with every conceivable distraction rather than take the gospel seriously and commit himself, irrevocably and wholeheartedly, to promoting it among men". If this is valid interpretation, it asks us the question: "Where are we in this story?" Are we saying, "We will not have this Man to reign over us?" Have we wrapped up our pound in a napkin? Are we among those who could have done so very much more; or are we trading wisely and well making ten pounds more? Ah, let us be up and doing: The years are rolling on, and time may be shorter than we think. Days of trading may be few. The Lord is looking for dedication and consecration. Nothing less will avail in His work!

311) 19:28-38

The record of our Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem makes striking and thrilling reading. It is recorded by all four gospel writers, and it was clearly regarded as an event of great importance and significance. Matthew and Luke tell us that what took place fulfils an ancient messianic promise, and they quote from Zech 9:9 the words "Behold thy King cometh", recording the response and reaction of the people as they sang "Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord" (Ps 118:25). Luke, in recording that response, gives the following: "Blessed be the king that cometh in the name of the Lord: peace in heaven, and glory in the highest". Luke, particularly, emphasises the kingly aspect of what Jesus did in riding into Jerusalem. And it is worth looking at this concept and theme in some detail. We need a big canvas to do this theme justice, for it is as big as the gospel itself. The King who is the subject matter of the Scriptures is One who is spoken of in connection with an uprising that has challenged His rule, and set up in opposition against Him. And consequently the story of the Bible is the story of His counter-attack to establish His kingdom. The Garden of Eden is the 'scene' of the revolt, and the temptation of Satan that which incited it. It was the incitement to throw off the rule of God, and become independent of Him. It was something that led to the rule of sin in the world. This is the usurped authority in the world of men that has caused us all so much trouble and tragedy. In both the Garden of Eden story and in Jesus' parables alike there is implicit the idea of the coming of the King to redress matters and put them right. And this is what happened in the Incarnation. The King was born, according to promise. And in the fulness of the time, He entered into battle, for us men and for our salvation. This is the picture we have of Jesus in the gospel record, from beginning to end. He is the King, and in His coming, the kingdom has drawn near. More of this in tomorrow's Note.

312) 19:28-38

It was in the twofold context of His claim to be the King, and of the blindness of so many as to who He was, that Jesus deliberately, and of set purpose, came to Jerusalem, on the last Sunday of His earthly life, and rode into the city on an ass, a colt, the foal of an ass. It was a true description of His act to apply to it the words of Zechariah, "Behold thy King cometh". And the significance of that act was threefold: first of all it was the coming of the King to His own, offering Himself to them, as their King, and their hope of salvation.- It was His plea to them to recognize Him for Who He was. No one could have failed to see the implications of His symbolic action, fulfilling the prophecy. It was a deliberate and conscious identification of Himself with-the messianic idea. And the offer was refused 'He came to His own, and His own received Him not. The display of enthusiasm was simply something-that had repeatedly been made to do duty for heart-belief in Him. It did not deceive Him.- 'Indeed, so little did it deceive Him that - in Luke's version of the story - Jesus went on to weep over the city, saying "If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things that belong unto thy peace. But now they are hid from thine eyes...because thou knewest not the time of their visitation" (42). And presently, in a terrible, fatal blindness, His people led Him away to be crucified, repudiating His claim to reign over them, crying "We have no king but Caesar".

313) 19:28-38

The second significance of Jesus' action was this: it was not only as the king's offer of Himself, and their refusal of Him, that we are to understand this story. There is something else - from the point of view of the gospel message Luke is proclaiming - very much more important. It is that Jesus was presenting Himself as a king coming to do battle against sin, against the sin that had marred the face of God's creation. He had set His face steadfastly to go to Jerusalem - for this very thing! And it is as if all the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the new are uniting in their cry "Behold your King cometh" - as if to say, "Look at this glorious King going into battle - this King who has shown His kingship so unmistakeably in His signs and wonders and mighty deeds".

There is an immense irony and pathos in the fact that it is precisely here - in His own people's rejection of Him - that He comes in contact with the most awful and terrible aspect of sin - the deliberate blindness on the part of a people who should have seen who He was, and welcomed Him. This is the heart of the mystery of sin. But we also sense the pride and joy with which Luke presents Him to us in the story - "Behold this glorious figure: is it really possible that sin and death should ever survive such an onslaught, and still retain their rule and reign in the world?" For, of course, Luke is writing from the standpoint of Christ's victory, looking back on this incident from the triumph of the Resurrection. And, surely, His kingship is demonstrated supremely in the fact that in their very rejection of Him He was still in control, notwithstanding, and did his greatest work, accomplishing through their refusal of Him His work of redemption, turning the wrath of man to praise Him. This is how kingly He is!

314) 19:28-38

The third significance of our Lord's entry into Jerusalem is this: we spoke of the King's offer of Himself, and this is what was taking place. It was a day of grace. But the dark side of grace is judgment. And it is very significant that both Mark and Luke, in different ways, underline this. Luke, in the words already quoted (42ff), speaks of a judicial blindness coming on the people of God because they knew not the time of their visitation. And Mark (11:11) says that our Lord went into the temple when He came into the city and looked round about on all things. We must not miss the significance of this. It was as a King that He did so. And the next thing Mark records in the story is the story of the barren fig tree which received the curse of Christ because of its fruitlessness.

And evening time had come for Israel (Mark 11:11) - the eventide of the long day of grace. And the Lord of the vineyard had come to reckon with them. It is not all the same in the end what we do with Christ our King! That is the point that the gospel writers are intent on making. And it adds a poignancy to the situation to realise that the point is made in the context of the tears and heartbrokenness of Jesus, as He beheld the city and wept over it.

315) 19:39-48

We resume our readings in Luke's gospel. The Pharisees were, understandably, offended at the popular display of enthusiasm shown by the crowd toward Jesus (even though it was only momentary and superficial). They could hardly think, otherwise, since they repudiated His claims to be the Messiah. They could not but have been aware of the significance of this symbolic act, and this doubtless added to their sense of outrage at Him. Jesus' reply is more, we feel, than a form of speech: that the stones should cry out is an indication that even inanimate creation would be more ready to bear testimony to its Creator and Lord than the rebellious and reluctant sons of men. This adds its own poignancy to the verses that follow, which are perhaps among the most moving in all the gospel record. Here is the city, "beautiful for situation, the joy of all the earth", the holy city, the symbol and centre of the divine election, the city above all others, which, because of its unique place in the Divine purposes, should have acknowledged its King and its God, repudiating Him completely, in its blindness and perversity. It "knew not the time of its visitation". What is so impressive and moving here is the fact that the judgment that our Lord pronounced upon the city (and how fatefully it was fulfilled in A.D.70) was pronounced through tears. It is a revelation of the heart of God, suffering and broken because of the sin of His people. The agony in His words is unmistakable: the "even thou" is inexpressibly painful and full of yearning; all the suffering love of the heart of God is here. We should remember this when we consider our Lord's action in 45 in purging the temple. It is the action of outraged and broken-hearted love. This is what makes it so very terrible.

316) 20:1-8

We read in these verses how the Pharisees questioned Jesus' authority, and how our Lord answered them. There is a deep significance in the manner in which He replied to their question, and we need to stand back a little from the story, so to speak, and see it in perspective. The story we have just dealt with in the previous chapter, of our Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, records the Jews rejection of their promised Messiah. But still more solemn is the fact that their rejection of Him became His rejection of them. The words in 19:43, 44 were a judicial sentence passed on the renegade city. And it is in this context that we require to understand Jesus refusal to answer the chief priest's question as to the authority by which He wrought His mighty works. He refused to answer them because there was no point in doing so. They had already demonstrated absolutely clearly that He had come from God, and wrought in the power of God given to Him by His Father, and they had refused His testimony. There is such a thing as giving that which is holy unto the dogs, and casting pearls before swine, and this He was not prepared to do. These men had forfeited any right to have anything further revealed to them because they had wilfully refused what had been revealed to them. To refuse light is ultimately to have light withheld. This was how it was with those who questioned Jesus about His authority. They had closed up all the avenues of approach to their hearts along which grace might yet have come to them, to bless and save them. And the fact is, they asked this question about His authority, not because they were prepared to submit to it if it was proved to them to be of God, but rather in order to trap Him, and incriminate Him, so that they might take and destroy Him. Such questions, then, being wrong questions, ought not to be answered!

317) 20:1-8

What was said in yesterday's Note should make it clear that Jesus' reply was not, and should not be taken as, an evasion of the Pharisees question. For Jesus was not on the defensive; on the contrary, He skillfully turned their question against them, and seized the initiative in this debate about authority, as He proceeded to reply to them, in His way, and on His terms. And, paradoxically enough, although what we have said about his refusal to answer them is true, there is a sense, nevertheless, in which He did answer them. But it was in an oblique way. He did not say outright that He was sent by God, yet His own question to them about the ministry of John the Baptist does imply the answer which He believes to be true. For Jesus knew they could not dare deny that John was a man sent from God, and therefore, since John had testified concerning Him that he was the Lamb of God, they must surely concede that John's testimony concerning Him was true, and that therefore He was from God. And having thus implied His Messiahship and authority, He proceeded to attack their unbelief in the parable which follows in the next verses.

318) 20:9-18

In view of what was said in yesterday's Note, it is clear that a terrific dramatic tension must have been evident as Jesus told this parable. Indeed, it is difficult to avoid thinking that our Lord deliberately heightened the tension that was already there; and if so, then we can only assume that He was intent on carrying the war into the enemy's camp, intent on forcing the issue with His enemies. After all, He had gone up to Jerusalem to die. Thus fearlessly did He succeed in exposing their designs on Him, and bring about the grand climax for which He had left His Father's throne above - the Cross! But we must not lose sight of the fact, either, that there was in it an appeal - urgent and pressing - to them to see themselves and the implications of their actions and attitude, and turn in time, before doom finally overtook them.

The main tenor of the story is plain enough for all to see. Jesus summarises the entire history of God's chosen people, and shows exactly what their attitude has been down the ages. The vineyard is the kingdom of God, which was committed to the Jews: to them first it was given to realise that kingdom, but they had miserably, and consistently, failed to rise to the occasion, and had mistaken responsibility for privilege. All along the line they had failed to understand the meaning of their own election, until in the days of our Lord they summed up all their long history of perversity, blindness and stubbornness, in crucifying God's only Son. That is the main thrust of the parable, and the lessons we may gather from it are threefold. We shall turn to them in the Notes that follow.

319) 20:9-18

First of all, we need to notice how Jesus underlines the fact that they went from bad to worse in their history. There is an ascending scale of atrocities in the behaviour of the husbandmen, culminating in the destruction of the heir. This is something inherent in the nature of sin, throughout all history. Opposition to God is never a static thing, but dynamic and restless and growing, always culminating in crisis. And, with all, there is an element in it that carries it outwith human control altogether, and it goes careering on to its final end, carrying its victims with it. Secondly, the parable stresses the unaccountable patience and long-suffering grace of God towards His people. The parable is an improbable one in the sense that no businessman would be likely to tolerate such behaviour from his servants as this vineyard owner did for the husbandmen! But this is how God acts. Every page of the Old Testament bears witness to this amazing longsuffering of God towards His people in face of continued provocation. Christ's own words outside Jerusalem in Luke 13:34, "How often would I have gathered thy children...and ye would not" are a true indication of the situation. Thirdly, it is striking to see how Stephen, in Acts 7, 'repeats' the pattern of this parable, and in effect affords us a commentary on it. His great climax in Acts 7:51, "Ye do always resist the Holy ghost...." simply expresses our Lord's own point in the parable. And the repeated resistance of the Holy Spirit in fact led to the terrible disaster that overtook Jerusalem in A.D.70, when it was razed to the ground by the armies of Rome.

320) 20:9-18

The primary meaning and interpretation of the parable, then, lies in its depicting of the history of the Jews and their tragic failure in responsibility. One of the values it has for us is that it gives us a key to a true understanding of the Old Testament. This is how we are to interpret the Old Testament history of Israel as

(i) the desire of God to fulfil His will and purpose through His people whom He chose to be the instruments of His revelation to the world, and
(ii) the persistent refusal by Israel of this destiny. This is certainly how the Apostles also interpreted (cf Acts 13:17 ff). In the second movement of the parable, however, Jesus passes from history to prophecy, and parabolic form reveals what was about to happen, in telling that the husbandmen killed the lord of the vineyard's heir. It must have been a dramatic moment, and a devastating experience, for these wicked men to hear our Lord so calmly and so deliberately reading their inmost thoughts and exposing their evil designs. They were, even then, immersed in their plans to kill Him, but it must have been a tremendous shock for them to be told just exactly what they were doing, when they planned to kill Him - disposing of the Lord of the vineyard's Son Himself! The lessons for us lie in the realisation that a divine principle is unfolded in the parable that is applicable in several ways. We shall look at some of them in the Notes that follow.

321) 20:9-18

In the first place, what was true of the history of Israel is also true of the nations of the world, and particularly the nations of the west. To us, the nations of the west, in the providence of God, was committed the kingdom of God, as a sacred stewardship for the world. This is surely an incontrovertible fact, proved by modern history. But it is a stewardship in which the 'Christian' west has proved unfaithful. Look at the last hundred years, to go no further back. Look at the waning of missionary enterprise, the dwindling moral and spiritual capital, generation after generation. Look at the recurrent chastisement of God upon the west with its vaunted civilisation; look at the unheeded warnings of the 20th century, with its wars, its devastations, its economic and political crises, the convulsions of our time, and the threat to law and order. Can not a good case be made for saying that this parable speaks to the 'Christian' west today?

The same could be said of the history of the Church. One has only to look at the state of the Church today and see in its domestic crises, its dead-wood membership, its ignorance of its own doctrines and beliefs, its worldliness and spiritual deadness - and its lack of money and men for work at home and abroad, that God may in fact be saying, after repeated pleading has fallen on deaf ears, 'The kingdom shall be taken from you'. How terrifying. Jesus' words take upon them a relevance for our own day and our own situation!

322) 20:19-26

These verses belong to the general movement beginning at 20:1, the challenge to Jesus' authority. He had openly declared Himself in the Triumphal entry, making it impossible for the religious leaders to ignore Him, or overlook His presence. Therefore, they could only hope to trap Him into some statement that would incriminate Him with the government or discredit Him with the people. Hence the challenge about the tribute money, a test in the 'political' realm, and that -in the following verses - on the resurrection, in the 'religious', theological realm. The question they asked Jesus was deliberately designed as a trap. To say 'No' would open Him to a charge of treason; to say 'Yes' would alienate His followers. It is our Lord's complete mastery of an impossible and extremely dangerous situation that stands out here, The effortlessness, the ease, with which He confounded them is what impresses and rejoices the heart! He did not have to stretch Himself to win this victory. Well might people say, "Never man spake as this Man!" It was the simple truth. A brief, pointed question about the coin, then this mighty word, stark in its simplicity, so right, so elementally right, comes crashing at them, "Render unto Caesar...and unto God...." It was the perfect answer. Small wonder that they marvelled at Him. Behold our incomparable

323) 20:19-26

Jesus was not content merely to parry their attack. He carried the war into their camp, and laid before them a terrific challenge in the words He spoke. We should note first of all the significant change of word, when He takes up the issue. They said, "Shall we give...."; He said, "Render...." There is a whole philosophy underlying that distinction. The fact is, the Jews bitterly resented having to give taxes and tribute to Rome. To them the Roman dominion was something to evade if possible. But Jesus indicates in the use of the word 'render' that it was a duty to be honoured. Tribute is not a matter of 'giving' but a matter of 'owing'. It is a debt we owe to government. The teaching of Scripture is clear here - the powers that be are ordained of God, and it is a Christian duty to be law-abiding. But there is an even greater challenge here. Consider the basis of Jesus' word about Caesar. He said, looking at the coin, "Whose is this image and superscription?" The coin of the realm, bearing the image of the emperor, was the symbol of the authority that was over them, namely, the authority of the emperor, and they therefore owed him homage. When we apply this criterion to the other half of the statement, we see that our Lord is saying to these lawless and rebellious men, "Whose is the image you bear? Whose image and superscription is stamped on your souls?" It is as if He had said, "Remember what Genesis 1:26, 27 says about being made in the image of God, and render unto God the things that are God's!"

324) 20:19-26

Two further points may be made in connection with this incident, the first relating to Caesar, the second to God. On the one hand, our Lord's words with reference to our duty to 'Caesar' indicate that it is possible for Christians to discharge one's duty honorably even as loyal subjects of a pagan empire, and in an unjust rule and order. There is, by implication, a disavowal of revolutionary nationalism and insurrection (as many of our Lord's contemporaries, especially the Zealots, were advocating), in favour of an attitude of responsible obedience, as a matter of duty. The way Christians are to fulfil their duty to Caesar is not by rebelling, but by adopting an attitude shot through and through with the spirit of love (cf Romans 13). On the other hand, there is no greater or more absolute challenge in all Scripture than in Jesus' words, "Render unto God the things that are God's". If Caesar demands unquestioning obedience, as our rightful overlord, how much more does the living God have a right to demand the entire homage and devotion of our hearts. This puts the claim and challenge of the gospel in its proper perspective. The claims of Christ are royal claims. Our forefathers used to speak of "the crown rights of the Redeemer". It is no less than this that our Lord's words imply, no less than this that is involved in the call of the gospel. The call to conversion, to consecration, is a call to give God His rightful due, to render to Him what is His by sovereign right. Anything less is simply to have misunderstood what is being said. Have we understood the gospel alright?

325) 20:27-38

What was said about the matchless supremacy of our Lord in face of the verbal attack of the Pharisees in the previous verses is equally applicable to this next encounter, with the Sadducees. Once again Jesus deals with the question with effortless ease. The Sadducees' question, taken as a question, and in comparison with that of the Pharisees in the previous verses, is really pretty poor stuff! It was a manifestly ridiculous sort of question, put forward by minds barren of real ideas, and we are tempted to say, 'You will have to do better than that if you are to confound Jesus of Nazareth!' What they said was not an intellectual argument, attempting to show by logical proof the impossibility of resurrection; it was a frivolous, flippant, irreverent concoction, which did only one thing - it revealed these men for what they were, frivolous, flippant and irreverent men. If this, then, is the end-product of rationalism and the denial of the supernatural, it well underlines our Lord's words to His disciples, 'Beware of the leaven of the Sadducees'. For that leaven does something to a man - it brings on a creeping paralysis of the spirit that kills everything real and noble and deep, and leaves a dull and tragic shell of cynicism. We should bear in mind that these men were among the leaders of Israel at that time. Well, if they betrayed such a desolating emptiness in face of such a basic question of human existence, how utterly inadequate they must have been when confronted by a real human situation of need. Would someone who had been bereaved be likely to find comfort from such a source? Would someone whose marriage had threatened shipwreck be likely to find there an atmosphere of compassion and understanding? That is the real test, is it not?

326) 20:27-38

We turn now to the answer our Lord gave to the Sadducees. It is full of significance and, like His answer to the Pharisees earlier, can be taken out of its immediate context and applied as a general principle. Luke's account here should be compared with Matthew's (22:23ff) and Mark's (12:18-25). Luke does not give the words "Ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures, nor the power of God", but His answer (in Luke) implies them, for He deals with these two issues in what He says to them, speaking of the doctrine of marriage (it is in this regard that the Sadducees did not know the power of God) and of the doctrine of the resurrection (this is where they did not know the Scriptures). As to marriage, what Jesus says to them in effect is: "Do you really imagine that the problem you have posed about the seven brothers all taking the one wife (in terms of the old law of levirate marriage) could really be a problem to God? Your God is too small, if that is how you think. The God Who calls worlds into being by the word of His power, and calls those things that are not as though they were, will not be unduly perturbed by such a difficulty". Indeed, God is able to create an entirely new order of life, and will do. That is what Jesus' answer implied.

What He says in 35, however, does cause a good deal of concern in many minds today, and will be useful to consider it further, in tomorrow's Note.

327) 20:27-38

Happily married people are sometimes greatly perturbed by what is said in 35 about there being no marriage in heaven. The reason for this unnecessary concern is that they generally look at it from the wrong point of view, and think that because there will be no marriage, their situation will be less happy than now. But suppose marriage, at its sweetest and best and highest, were simply a pointer, a shadow, a slight token of something infinitely more grand and glorious, beyond all our imagining, and almost beyond belief? A relationship with God which is unspeakable in its intensity, splendour and rapture? After all, marriage was instituted as a help towards closer fellowship with the Lord; and this is the very thing that will not be needed in heaven, where we shall see Him face to face, and will require nothing to bring us nearer! Marriage will therefore not be needed for its present, earthly purpose. But, as C.S. Lewis so helpfully points out, it will not be thereby jettisoned; it is only its earthly purpose that will be dispensed with. Lewis adds: "What is no longer needed for biological purposes may be expected to survive for splendour. Neither men nor women will be asked to throw away weapons they have used victoriously. It is the beaten and the fugitives who throw away their swords. The conquerors sheath theirs and retain them." We could put it another way also: a child will not be able to appreciate the wonder of marriage, however much you try to describe it to him - pleasure for him is usually on the physical level at his age. He prefers the tangible pleasures of sweets and ice cream to the intangible and, to him, dubious, pleasures you are trying to describe to him. But perhaps one day, when he is older, he will change, will he not, and begin to appreciate the possibilities? Well, suppose, further up still, there is a new genus of pleasures and joys, the glory of which quite eclipse and overshadow those of marriage? Marriage in heaven is not so much abolished as superceded. It is way down the list of heavenly joys. We shall be changed! The trouble is, we are too easily pleased. We are content with shadows and tokens, when God is offering us infinitudes!

328) 20 27-38

The other part of our Lord's answer deals with the doctrine of resurrection. In the other gospel records Jesus is said to have charged the Sadducees with their ignorance of the Scriptures, and this is clearly implied here also. They had read and studied the Old Testament, and yet had missed the cardinal and fundamental reality in them. Well, Jesus finds the doctrine of resurrection in the Old Testament, even if they do not - God is the God of the living, not of the dead. Scripture does not say, 'I was the God of Abraham', but 'I am the God of Abraham He is still Abraham's God. And the point that is being made is not so much that God is still living (even to the Sadducees that would have been obvious) but that Abraham is still alive, and therefore already in the enjoyment of resurrection life and reality. We should not miss the wonderfully perceptive way in which our Lord draws this lesson out of the Old Testament: "that the dead are raised, even Moses showed at the bush...." In view of this, it might be as well for us to question the confident assumptions so often made by scholars that there is little, if any, evidence shown in the earlier parts of the Old Testament of any consciousness of the life to come. How could this be so confidently asserted, in face of Jesus' words here?

329) 20:39-47

The enemies of Jesus, having exhausted their questions, now find themselves questioned by Him. Our Lord's question was about the Messiah of the prophetic scriptures. The Pharisees and scribes were, of course, familiar with the thought that the Promised One would come of David's royal line. But Jesus shows them that this raises a very real difficulty, which He brings out by quoting Psalm 110, where David, speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, calls the Messiah his Lord. David saw prophetically that the Messiah was to be exalted to God's right hand. How, then, could the Messiah be his son? This is Jesus' question. And to the scribes and Pharisees it was unanswerable. Not that it was an unanswerable question, for there is an answer to it; but it was an answer they could not give, holding the views they did about the Messiah. For they thought of Him merely as a human figure, greater than David, but similar to David himself, another David, a warlike, lion-hearted hero. To such a viewpoint, Jesus' question must be unanswerable; for His question requires the Messiah to be more than merely David's son. The Messiah is not only son of David; He is Son of God. He is Divine. He is both man and God. As Paul was to put it later, He was 'made of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead'. This is a deeply significant issue for the whole nature of the gospel, and we shall consider it further in tomorrow's Note.

330) 20:39-47

Our Lord really takes us to the heart of the gospel with this word. For, in fact, everything of decisive importance in the gospel depends on the fact of His God-manhood, on the fact that He was more than the Son of David. And this 'more than' does not mean 'a little more than', but must be taken all the way to the confession of His Godhead. Indeed, if Jesus Christ be not God, then there is no gospel to preach, there is no atonement, and no forgiveness. The Pharisees were right when they once said to Him "Who can forgive sins, save God alone?"; and when, in that incident (Luke 5:18-26), He went on to say, "The Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins" He was really claiming equality with Deity. We could put it this way: Atonement for sin, to be valid and real, must be made by man, for it is man who has sinned; it is man that must make amends for what he has done. But this is what man cannot do; for sin is something infinite, in the consequences that follow it; it partakes of the infinity of the One against Whom it is committed. Throwing a stone at an ordinary car and throwing a stone at the Queen's car are two very different things; and the importance of the personage against whom the offence is committed makes it all the more serious. So it is with man's sin; is simply infinite in its consequences, because it is committed against God. And therefore, only Someone infinite could ever deal with it. Here, then, is dilemma. Atonement must be made from man's side; yet it can only properly be made by God, And God became man, in order to fulfil this unique task. Not the Godhead per se, but the God-manhood of the Son - this is what makes atonement possible. Not even God could do this, as God; He had to do it as man. Thus the Messiah, in order to atone for sin, had to be God as well as man. But it was impossible that the Pharisees, with their view of the Messiah, should see this; that is why they were so completely silenced.

331) 21:1-4

There would seem to be a link between what is said in these verses and what precedes them at the end of the previous chapter. The incident of the widow's mites stands as a very striking contrast to the self-important scribes in 20:46, 47. The widow is, in fact, the antithesis of the scribes, and represents all that is true in worship over against what is false and empty. The theme of the previous chapter may be said to be 'the Lordship of Christ, and the widow's action is a very eloquent one as expressing her acknowledgement of that Lordship as a practical reality. This is the point of her offering all she had. It is really a Lordship of life - all life and all things. If He is Lord of all, He is Lord of our substance also.

In Old Testament times, a tithe was set apart for the Lord, as a token recognition that all is His. Tithing is imbedded in Old Testament laws, going back far beyond the legal enactments of Exodus 20 (cf Gen 14:20). It is not abrogated in the New Testament: it is a sacramental sign that we belong to Christ. Our giving must therefore be a real token - "not out of that which is over and above, i.e. giving out of the margin, out of that which they did not really need, out of what was not necessary to themselves - but giving with a red streak of blood in it" (G. Campbell Morgan) Proper and true giving is possible only when we adopt a certain life-style, in which the things of God come first!

332) 21:5-9

The substance of this discourse is recorded also in Matthew 24 and Mark 13, although there are variations here and there, and the other accounts need to be studied along with this one, to give the full picture. We have already dealt with at least some of these issues and themes that are before us in this passage (see Notes on 17:23-37), and have seen there, as we see how, the somewhat perplexing ambiguities that are seemingly present in our Lord's teaching. Anyone who takes up Luke 21 - or Matthew 24 or Mark 13 - is immediately confronted with the problem of how to know whether in any particular verses Jesus is referring to the Fall of Jerusalem, or to the End-time, and His second coming. We begin, then, with the question of what meaning we are to put on our Lord's words in 6, '...the days will come....' It seems clear that there was a certain confusion in the disciples' minds about what He was saying. They seem to associate the destruction of the temple, of which Jesus speaks, with the End-time (9). And Jesus is at pains to distinguish between the two things: they are not the same. With this as the key, we can trace two distinct patterns throughout the chapter: one dealing with the destruction of Jerusalem, and the other dealing with the End-time. Thus, in 8, 9, 10, 12-19, 20-24, the references are all to the Fall of Jerusalem, in A.D.70; whereas, in 11, 25-28, 29-33, the reference is surely to the End-time. But we must also say this: on the one hand, there are areas where these two patterns cross and intersect; and on the other hand, sometimes what is said clearly applies to the whole age, from our Lord's time right through to His second coming, as in 8, 10, 12ff. This is an important consideration, and we shall have to say something further about it in tomorrow's Note.

333) 21:5-9

The reason why there are some areas in Jesus' teaching where the 'near' and the 'far' intersect, and why sometimes what is said clearly applies to the whole age of grace, is that there are deep spiritual principles underlying all history. The great crisis points in history are all similar to one another because essentially they are all expressions of the same thing. This is why we cannot dismiss as fanatical error the claims that Christians have made in various ages about the appearance of anti-Christ; why also we cannot criticise the disciples here for their confusion of the sack of Jerusalem with the End-time. For the former was a kind of judgment scene, and a coming in judgment, but it was also a prefiguring of the great day of judgment. This also applies to the identification of the emperor Nero, or the pope, or Hitler, or Stalin, with the anti-Christ; such identification is both true and false, for this very reason. All this - though perhaps confusing to us - makes the teaching in this passage highly relevant, especially if it deals with conditions, and what we may expect, during the course of the Christian age, and leading up to the End-time. Hence the moral challenge in our Lord's words both at the beginning of the discourse ('Take heed', in 8) and at the end ('Take heed', in 34). From which we may surely gather that this teaching is not a matter for endless and profitless speculation, as if it were a spiritual 'game' to play; rather, it is the moral and spiritual challenge to watch, lest we be deceived, and pray to be kept faithful.

334) 21:10-19

We should note, then, the following points: in the first place, there is the general spirit of crisis, pressure, and recurrent crisis and pressure throughout. And one of the characteristics of 'crisis' or 'pressure' periods in history is the existence and emergence of 'false Christs' and false claims (see Notes on 17:23-37). This is why it is so necessary to 'try the spirits', whether they be of God. For another thing, we must consider the nature of the crises that come -wars, commotions, convulsions are the order of the day. These, we must recognise, are part of the nature of sinful existence. They are inevitable (9), as also are the recurrent bouts of persecution and oppression (12ff). Then there is the terrible thought of family betrayal (16), something grimly topical in China and other communist dominated societies. We have lived in our generation to see the reality of these things happening to people, to believers, for Christ's sake. But, over against all these things - and the situation is not all gloom and fearfulness - there is the reality of the sovereignty of God. Evil does not have the last word in the world in which Jesus has died and risen again! The initiative lies with Him! This is the glorious message that stands out in all prophetic teaching, both here (15ff) and in the book of Revelation, with its vision: of the Throne towering over the world of men. A testimony will be maintained in the midst of it (13, 15), and there will be the constant and un-failing activity of the Holy Spirit (15), by which no crisis will find us unprepared or unsupported. The call, therefore, and summons, to Christians, is to preach the gospel in the midst of crisis conditions, and to recognize that crisis-times are, for the Christian, not times for wringing hands and moaning in distress, but for being up and doing in the service of the Word!

335) 21:20-24

The reference in these verses is clearly to the sack of Jerusalem in A.D. 70'(cf Mark 13:14ff, where 'the abomination of desolation' from the book of Daniel is brought in), when the city was compassed about with armies, and history tells us that one million Jews were slaughtered, and Christians literally fled to the hills when the city was razed to the ground. Comparison with Matthew and Mark shows that there is the ambiguity of the 'near' and the 'far' here once again, but Luke seems to emphasize mainly the A.D. 70 attack. This 'judgment' was surely a judicial visitation from God for Israel's infidelity and unbelief, as Jesus had warned would take place. We should pay particular attention to our Lord's words about 'the times of the Gentiles' in 24. The godly Bishop Ryle comments: "I regard (this) as the period between the first and second advents of Christ during which the Gentile nations have a day of visitation and enjoy the privileges of the gospel. These times will come to an end at last, as the old Jewish dispensation did, because of the hardness and unbelief of the Gentile Churches. They too, because they continue not in God's goodness, will be cut off. And when their time of visitation comes to an end, and they have been found as faithless and hardened as the Jews, then at last will the Jews be converted, and Jerusalem restored to its rightful possessors." This, or some such interpretation, is the obvious construction to put upon our Lord's words, nor is there any ground for supposing that it will not come to pass. The prediction about the sack of Jerusalem was fulfilled, to the letter; and the restoration of the city of Jerusalem in our own day, after so many centuries of 'occupation' should give us ample cause to suppose that 'the times of the Gentiles' may be near their fulfilment.

336) 21:25-28

Again, in these verses, we come to the merging of the 'near' and the 'far'. The reference in 25 and 26 is to cosmic disturbances in association with the End-time. It is not, however, enough to say that this is simply apocalyptic language. Of course it is, but this does not explain it, or give its significance. The explanation lies in the biblical teaching on the Fall of man, viz., that when man fell, all creation was affected. In the last days also, when evil will wax worse and worse, cosmic disorder may be expected to result. Just as there is reason to suppose that the ancient of the Flood was a cosmic crisis caused by the enormity of the sin of man, so also, in the End-time, when evil rises to the summit of its arrogance in its defiance of God, it is to be expected that the very universe will reel under the impact of the clash.

Conversely, in the regeneration, we are told that the wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose, and the trees of the field shall clap their hands, and all creation shall enter into the glorious liberty of the sons of God. This is not simply poetic licence, though doubtless it is expressed in poetic categories; rather, it bears witness to the fundamental connection between mankind and inanimate creation.

337) 21:29-33

The parable of the fig tree brings our Lord's prophetic teaching to its climax. Some interpreters take it as a quite ordinary simile or metaphor, with the meaning that, as it is certain that summer will follow when the first leaves are seen on the fig tree's tender branches, so also these things will follow the signs just mentioned (so Stibbs, in the Tyndale commentary on Matt 24). But we may question whether there is not more to the illustration than that. For the fig-tree was a well known symbol of the Jews as a people, of Israel, God's chosen ones. What if Jesus is looking here at the far future, and indicating that the Jews are God's signpost in history, and that He is saying that when things happen with the Jews, it is a sign that God is going to act in history? This is an exciting and tremendous thought, especially in relation to present day events in the Middle East. It needs to be looked at with great care. The statement in 32 has often caused perplexity: it seems to indicate that our Lord's words had reference to the then generation of Jews. But the word could as well be interpreted to mean 'a race or family of people'; if so, then the reference would be to the continued existence of the Jews as a people; and this makes the whole passage gleam with a new light. For the extraordinary truth about the Jews is that they have persisted as a race, as a unified race, amid the disappearance of empires and dynasties, amid persecution and suffering untold. And this can only be because God has willed them to remain in existence, in spite of everything, in spite even of their refusal of Him and of their election to be a light to lighten the Gentiles. His love has refused to let them go, and even in their rejection of Him they have been made to bear witness to Him, albeit in a negative way. They are not any rejected people, but God's rejected people. The reference here, therefore, is to the ultimate fulfilment of their true purpose in the world as God's instruments of revelation. More of this in tomorrow's Note.

338) 21:29-33

If the interpretation in yesterday's Note is a valid one, then the budding of the fig-tree may refer to the fact that, after the long winter of affliction and persecution and suffering that God's people have sustained down the centuries, there are now the signs of spring. "Lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone, the flowers appear on the earth, the time of the singing of birds is come" (Song of Solomon 2:11). The 'movement' of the Jews! This is the significant factor in world history. It has always been so, even from the earliest times. The coming of the Jews out of Egypt into Canaan was the evidence of God's purposes of redemption being fulfilled. The return of the Jews to Palestine from Babylon after the Captivity was a further evidence of the fulfilling of God's promises. And both these, so to speak, foreshadowed the coming of the Saviour to Bethlehem. Similarly, the coming of Jews from all over the ancient world to Jerusalem at the feast of Pentecost was not by accident, but associated with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And if - as the poet says - coming events cast their shadows before them, then we may well see some deep significance in the return of the Jews to Palestine once again in our time - this time to foreshadow the great Second Advent, in all its glory and majesty and power. Well might Jesus say: Watch the fig-tree, and know that when it puts forth its leaves, things are about to happen!

339) 21:34-38

Our Lord's teaching about the future ends with a solemn charge and exhortation to take heed (34), and to watch and pray (36). The keynote of this appeal is, surely, simplicity, over against the danger of being overcharged with surfeiting - that is, being too preoccupied with the things of this world, with this world's goods. This is an indispensable pre-requisite for the all-important consideration of being able to stand before the Son of man (36) on the Great Day (cf the Apostle John's emphasis on this in 1 John 2:28). We sometimes sing the great words:

Bold shall I stand in Thy great Day and this is surely the heritage of every true believer who has known the justifying mercy of God, but we must ever remember (it is truly fatal to be forgetful here!) that justification must carry with it an answering fruit in character. Our life must be in character with our standing. Furthermore, it is well for us to remember that it is possible to make spiritual shipwreck on lawful things as well as on open vices. This is the point of our Lord's warning about being 'over charged'. As Bishop Ryle comments, "We are to live on our guard, like men in an enemy's country". Our lives are to be godly and circumspect, in face of the reality of our Lord's certain return. The danger of being caught unawares is always present. He could come at any time, therefore we must be at the ready all the time!

340) 22:1-6

This chapter begins Luke's account of our Lord's sufferings and death. In common with all the other gospel writers, Luke records the awesome event in great detail and fulness. It is quite clear that for the four Evangelists this was the central heart of the gospel. It will be noticed that the account of the keeping of the Passover (7ff) is introduced and prefaced by the dramatic and sinister word about Judas Iscariot's undertaking to betray the Son of God for money. It would seem that the Holy Spirit means to teach us deep lessons by this association of ideas. We could put it in this way: It makes one almost shudder to see the story of the Last Supper set in the context of such a foul and unspeakable betrayal. But this fact in itself is eloquent of the fundamental and elemental issues of the gospel itself. What we mean is this: Judas's betrayal of Jesus was an unspeakably ugly thing, but it is spoken of here specifically in terms of a work of Satan. We are told that Satan entered into Judas, and that this is how the foul deed was done. This is surely most significant; for what is represented here is the true nature of evil and sin. We are in fact taken right back to the Garden of Eden (and beyond it!) in the reference to Satan. This is where sin originated, in Satan's beguiling Adam and Eve. But the nature of that beguilement was the incitement to rebel against God, to set up in independence of Him and in opposition to Him, to defy Him. And, behind that, was Satan's desire to destroy God. This is the real essence of sin; and here it is expressed blatantly, openly, in the determination of the scribes and Pharisees, and the connivance of Judas, to kill One Who was the Son of God!

341) 22:1-6

Here, then, is the true nature of the conflict: the abolition of God, the determined attempt on the part of Satan and the kingdom of darkness to destroy God and His kingdom: "This is the heir: come, let us kill him, that the inheritance may be ours" (Luke 20:14). With this as its setting and background, we are the better able to see what Luke is telling us in what follows. For what, in effect, Luke does is to set over against this ugliness and evil the answer of God to it in the work of His Son. It is the same as John's word in the Prologue to his gospel: "The light shineth in darkness..." and the dark and sinister reality of evil is irradiated by the light of what God was doing. And the other part of John's statement is just as true here: "...and the darkness could not put it out".

But more: and something even more dynamic, in the fact that, while men were doing their worst, even in that, and through that, God in Christ was working His victory, His redemption, His answer to the mystery and tragedy of sin. As the hymn says,

The very spear that pierced His side
Drew forth the blood to save.

God used the worst that men could do to His Son to effect the world's redemption. Indeed, this is the measure of God's sovereign control of the situation, that the worst men could do was simply turned into His crowning act of grace and mercy for the world. The powers of evil were successful in their efforts; for they did put Christ to death. But their victory became their defeat, and His defeat became His triumph, and the means whereby He triumphed, As the writer to the Hebrews put it, "By death He destroyed him that had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb 2:14).

342) 22:1-6

It can hardly be accidental that the word 'covenanted' should be used in 5 to describe the transaction the chief priests and scribes entered into with Judas Iscariot, in view of the fact that the verses which follow speak of the 'new covenant' which our Lord instituted in the Last Supper. Truly the dark and sinister reality of evil was irradiated by the light of what God was doing! It will not be out of place to consider here some of the lessons that the story of Judas affords. For one thing, all the available evidence points to the fact that the tragedy of Judas was not a sudden and inexplicable failure and disaster, but on the contrary something which grew and developed gradually and imperceptibly over a long period of time. It was simply the visible fruit of something that had been going on secretly in his heart, growing insidiously like a cancer' within. For another thing, While we know, from the Scriptures, that there had to be a Judas (cf Matt 18:7), but this must not be thought of in fatalistic terms, as if Judas could not help himself. He was a responsible being, and the traitorous spirit grew in him because he allowed it to do so. Nor need we suppose that Judas ever meant to go as far as he did. Few men ever dreamt they would go so far in their sin. Judas's sin was covetousness: but it went out of control. Sin always finally goes out of control: we touch off something over which it no longer remains in our power to exercise control, and one of the penalties of sin is that it obliges us to keep on committing it. The lesson here is, surely: Resist beginnings. That is the point at which the battle is lost or won. Also, in Judas's case, covetousness was mixed with disenchantment and disappointment with Jesus, and the way His teaching had developed. This is always how things go wrong, and any sin fortified by such a spirit will drag a man down. When a man says 'No' to the Cross, that 'No' will soon find something in his temperament and personality to fix on and combine with, and it will do devil's work somewhere and in some direction.

343) 22:1-6

Judas's traitorous spirit was hidden from the eyes of men - even in the Passover scene, the disciples apparently did not suspect him, as the other gospel writers indicate. Only Jesus saw it. And we cannot doubt that He saw it from the beginning, saw its birth in his soul, with dismay and heartbreak, and bent His energies to woo him from it. What was true for all the disciples, namely the appeal of the cumulative evidence of our Lord's ministry, its miracles, its teaching, to their minds and hearts to elicit from them the confession of His Messiahship and Lordship over their lives, would be specially true for Judas - above all, the feet-washing scene and the sop given him at the Supper, recorded by John - all this was the appeal of Christ to his soul. And it is not at all improbable, in this light, to suppose that our Lord's consistent emphasis on the danger and corrupting power of money, although of general import and application, was directed particularly towards Judas, and this evil thing in his heart (cf Matt 6:19, Luke 12:16ff, Luke 16:19ff, Matt 19:16ff). It was in face of all this that Judas went down. Light came into his world, but he loved darkness rather than light, because his deeds were evil. This was his condemnation.

344) 22:7-13

These verses bring us back from the hidden, unseen world where the dark battle for Judas's soul was fought, to the 'ordinariness' of the ongoing narrative which records the disciples' preparation for the eating of the Passover. This reminds us that so often, behind the 'ordinariness' of our day-to-day existence there are often movements of momentous, even cosmic, significance taking place. But it also reminds us - and how needful is this reminder: - that life goes on, and must go on, along its ordinary channels. And we may trust Divine providence to guide, direct and preserve us in it since He holds the initiative and calls the tune. There is something comforting, almost lovely, in this gentle, unassuming account of the preparations that the disciples were to make for the Passover, against the dark backcloth of the previous verses. Are they not an assurance to those who trust in God that all things work together for good?

The actual instructions given by Jesus may well demonstrate our Lord's perfect knowledge, and indicate a supernatural, miraculous provision. The 'sign' the disciples were to look for was, at all events, a striking one, for a man carrying a water pot in a land where all carrying was done by women would be sufficiently conspicuous to be an unhesitating identification. And it turned out exactly as He had indicated. Thus simply, and effortlessly, did Jesus carry forward the Divine plan, in face of the devilish opposition of His enemies!

345) 22:14-23

It does not need much thought to make us realise that the institution of the Lord's Supper by Jesus was - and was meant by Him to be - a fulfilment of the true meaning of the Passover feast; and it was taken to be by the early Church, as we see from Paul's words in 1 Cor 5:7, "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us". This is the key to the meaning of these verses. In fact, the association of the Supper with the Passover is too clear and obvious to need argument to establish it. It was at the Passover time that our Lord was crucified. This was no accident or coincidence. It was planned and intended by God. And even the high priests' desire not to take Jesus captive on the feast day (Matt 26: 5) was set aside by the higher hand of God, Who determined that it should be at that time. Furthermore, it was while eating the Passover that Jesus instituted the Supper, using the elements of the Passover - the unleavened bread and the wine-cup - as symbols for the Supper. It is inevitable, therefore, that in thinking about the meaning of the Supper we should consider the significance of the ancient Passover itself, for the association of ideas is dramatic and inescapable: there is another Passover, Jesus meant, another lamb, another deliverance, another covenant: "This is the truth about the Passover", He cries, "it foreshadowed Me, I am the truth of all the sacrifices. They are but shadows cast on the course of history by the death I am about to die". We shall look, then, at the Passover story in Exodus, in the Notes which follow.

346) 22:14-23

No one could fail to be stirred by the marvellous story of Israel's deliverance from Egypt, and it is hardly to be wondered at that it played such a prominent part in the consciousness of the Old Testament people of God down the ages. And we would be blind spiritually if we did not see great gospel lessons in the message of the sprinkled blood that sheltered the Israelites from the angel of death that moved through the land of Egypt. But what is the deepest significance of the story? It is this: The Passover meant for them the emergence from a state of slavery, from the status of a cowed, slave people, into a new life, into a new, triumphant status as the people of God. The Passover is the mark of the covenant. And the blood of the Passover lamb is at once the sign of that covenant into which the people were brought, and also the means by which it is made. And what Jesus is saying to His disciples - and to us - is that His death on the cross is the true Passover sacrifice, and in His blood the new covenant is established; and that blood is the means whereby the new relation with God is created.

347) 22:14-23

Here, then, is the great, central fact for the Christian: he has not only been redeemed from sin, he has not only been forgiven, not only is the hand-writing that was against him blotted out, not only is his guilt done away, not only is the bondage of his sin broken once for all - but, most profoundly, he has been brought into a new relationship, a new communion with God. And this relationship, this communion, is based upon a covenant, which is utterly binding. We can bring out in some adequate way at least the meaning of this covenant idea if we think of the kind of covenant that is made in marriage. In marriage, the covenant is unconditional - it is 'for better or worse, for richer, for poorer' - it is not affected or changed by any circumstances. And in marriage, it is not simply a question of the love a man and a woman have for each other that binds them together. A covenant is entered, that binds them, and they plight their troth to each other, and sign a marriage schedule to this effect. It is not enough - and society as at present constituted does not think it enough - that two people in love should just live together, in the thought that their love is strong enough to keep them together and keep them faithful. No; the covenant must be made, and attested. And it is this that is the bulwark against unfaithfulness, against the temptations that come when the first glow fades and ardour is cooled. For the covenant stands for something bigger than that individual marriage; it stands for marriage itself, in all its solemn sanctity. And so is the covenant relationship with God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. It is solemnly and unchangeably binding.

348) 22:14-23

The bread and wine, then, refer to the death Jesus was to die, and that death was the slaying of God's Passover Lamb, and all that is foreshadowed by that ancient feast - the passing over in safety of those under the sheltering blood, the deliverance from the house of bondage, the establishing of the covenant with the redeemed people - all this has its counterpart in a spiritual sense in the redemption of the New Testament (cf 1 Pet 1:18). And that divine visitation upon sin becomes the deliverance from the bondage of sin, and the establishing of a new covenant with all who believe in Christ, a covenant of forgiveness and a new relationship of fellowship with God, in Him. This is what our Lord illustrated in the Passover scene on this last evening of His life.

One last word, before we go on: all this was proclaimed in the presence of Judas (21-23) - a way out of slavery, out of bondage, out of the black and dastardly ugliness of his soul. What a picture! But it is a picture that has relevance for us also; for the sin of all men is echoed in Judas' treachery and betrayal of the Son of God - our desire for independence of God, our revolt against Him. This is our sickness, our woe, our immemorial wound that, but for grace, would drag us all down and bring us to the death. But look at what Jesus is saying to us. "Here is the answer to the contradictions of our hearts, to our sin, our shame, our brokenness, our mortal sickness - the offer of forgiveness, and the gift of new life and fellowship, through the blood of the everlasting covenant".

349) 22:14-23

So much for the actual exposition of the passage before us. But there is a great deal more that can be said, about the significance - indeed, about the theology - of the Lord's Supper, and it will be useful to spend some time on this. We sometimes speak of 'the sacrament of the Lord's Supper'. One definition of this word is that it is 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace'. Calvin says, "A sacrament is an external sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences His promises of goodwill towards us, in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn testify our piety toward Him both before Him and before angels as well as men". This idea of confirming our interest in Him (as the Westminster Confession puts it) and sustaining the weakness of our faith is an important one, and we shall return to it later. The word 'sacrament' is, of course, not a biblical term. This is not to say that it is unbiblical or anti-biblical in its meaning. It comes from the Latin word 'sacramentum', which had two meanings: it was used first to describe the oath a soldier took when he entered the army. It was his oath of allegiance to his commander-in-chief. When the Christian Church took over this word, they turned it round the other way to make it mean the act whereby the commander-in-chief admitted soldiers into the ranks. In other words, it was not, from the Christian point of view, first of all something that the soldier did, but something the commander-in-chief did. Of course, the soldier did make his response to what the commander in-chief did, but the Christian use of the word 'sacrament' comes from the act of the commander-in-chief. In the spiritual sense, we speak of 'sacrament' as referring to that act by which God incorporated us as believers into the body of Christ, and secondly as our response of allegiance and loyalty to Him - our solemn engagement to the service of God in Christ.

350) 22:14-23

Some people are uneasy at reading into the simple institution of the sacrament an over elaborate theology, making it mean more than the New Testament seems to make it mean, doing despite to the 'simple, straightforward account' of the memorial meal recorded in these verses. But when we think through the idea of the simple memorial service, we begin to realise that the Lord's Supper cannot be simply a memorial service, not even in the terms in which Jesus spoke of it in the Upper Room, for two reasons: it was not that for the first disciples, because they were not remembering an absent Lord. He was there, in flesh and blood. We cannot, then, speak of it as a simple memorial meal, unless we are to take What He said as an indication of what they were to do when He was no longer with them. And, secondly, it is not that for us either; when we gather together we do more than remember Jesus in His death. The whole point about Christ worship is that Jesus is 'in the midst', and therefore it cannot be simply a memorial to an absent Lord. To think of it as such is to misunderstand it even in terms of the simple biblical account. The great fact which constitutes Christian worship is that Jesus is in the midst, the risen Jesus, Therefore, as well as remembering His death, we are having fellowship with a risen Saviour. But this leads us into all sorts of implications. For fellowship with Christ is fellowship with Him in His death and resurrection, and partaking of the Supper is to partake of such fellowship. We are committed, then, to theological thinking about this 'simple memorial meal'; on biblical grounds, we cannot get clear of a theological interpretation: we are committed, by the Scriptures themselves, to a theological understanding of the Sacrament.

351) 22:14-23

The sacrament is sometimes called 'a means of grace'. The phrase signifies a means where by the grace of Christ's redeeming work is communicated to us who believe in Him. This is supremely true of the Word, He 'comes' to us in the preaching of the Word. But there is an integral relation between Word and Sacrament, which always go together. This is why, in Reformed worship, the celebration of the sacrament follows the preaching of the Word. A Communion service outwith the context of the preaching of the Word is not a Reformed concept. Calvin taught that the sacrament is meaningless and useless apart from the preaching of the Word, because it is meant to be a sign and seal to confirm the Word to God's people. The sacrament 'speaks the same language' as preaching. It is of the essence of the Reformed position that we get nothing in the sacrament that we do not get in the preached word: the only difference is that we get it in a more graphic way in the sacrament, to confirm our interest in Christ, and sustain the weakness of our faith. What Jesus did in the Upper Room was to give the disciples a graphic illustration, in action, of what He had been teaching them by word of mouth, namely the fact that He must die and rise again for the sins of the world, and that they must put their faith and trust in that atoning work, and 'take' it to themselves for salvation.

352) 22:14-23

The Westminster Confession says: "There is in every sacrament a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified; whence it comes to pass, that the means and effects of the one are attributed to the other." This is an important statement, in view of the widespread distortion of the meaning of the sacrament. The union between the sign and the thing signified is a sacramental one, that is, it is a union because God has proposed that it should be. It is not anything in the sign itself, and nothing to do with any miraculous properties in the bread or the wine, as such. The bread and wine remain bread and wine, and are not 'turned into' the body and blood of Christ (that would be 'magic'); rather, in the sacramental relationship between the sign and the thing signified faith apprehends in the bread and wine the body and blood of Christ. The symbols have no virtue of themselves, but they 'convey' Christ's benefits because God has chosen them to do so, and for no other reason. It is true that in Scripture the outward elements are called by the name of the things they represent - 'This (bread) is My body....' 'This (cup) is My blood....' - but they still remain bread and wine (as is seen clearly from the words in 18, - the wine was still wine after He had given it to the disciples, it had not become something else). We shall say more of this in tomorrow's Note.

353) 22:14-23

The Westminster Confession says: "Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements in this sacrament, do then also inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally, but spiritually, receive and feed upon Christ crucified, and all benefits of his death: the body and blood of Christ being then not corporally or carnally in, with, or under the bread and wine; yet as really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses." This is the true biblical understanding, and it means that when a minister of the Word breaks the bread, and pours out the wine, handing it to the elders to distribute to the people, they receive bread with hand and mouth, but in that act the hand and mouth of faith receive from the hand of the unseen Saviour the blessing of His redemption. This removes all idea of magic from the sacrament and - even more important, removes all preoccupation with the elements as such, and puts the emphasis on the action. As P.T. Forsyth says, "We must take the comma out of the sentence 'This is my body, broken for you'. The comma should not be there". Read with the comma, our attention is fixed on the bread, and that is not what Christ meant. 'This is my body broken'-it is the action, not the element, that is important, and it is this that faith lays hold on. It is the action of God in Christ for the world's redemption that is offered us in the sacrament.

354) 22:24-30

The verses to which we now turn form, as it were, a preface to the account of our Lord's agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. Here, it is the contention among the disciples as to who should be greatest (24); and this is followed (31) by our Lord's word to Simon Peter about the activity of Satan in his life; then the instructions about the forthcoming service they were to be engaged in (34f). At least one significance of these verses lies in relation to the experience of Gethsemane through which Christ was about to pass, for, if nothing else, they show the need for the sufferings that were about to come upon Him. We should bear in mind that the central message of Luke's record is the death Jesus was to die, and that he is concerned to impart to us something of the significance of that death. If we look at these verses in this light, they become clearer to us.

355) 22:24-30

We should bear in mind what has just taken place. The Lord Jesus has just instituted the new covenant and given the disciples something they were to remember all their days. It must certainly have been a deeply moving experience to have heard that teaching and received that unforgettable assurance of the new covenant. And yet - these men were pre-occupied with carnal self-interest, self-seeking and personal ambition. Jesus had spoken as never man spoke concerning the death He was to die - what privilege to have heard that teaching from His lips: - and of the need to deny oneself and take up the cross and follow Him - and yet they were vying with one another in a spirit of envy and pride: All this is simply to expose and reveal that in even the best of men by nature there are vast tracts of nature that are corrupt and in need of being redeemed. The Reformers used to speak of 'a heart turned in upon itself' as being the essence of human sin, a condition incapable of being remedied by any human means and requiring a divine power to break into it and heal it. It was to do this that Jesus went to the cross - to destroy man's essential self-regard and give him a new centre outwith himself.

356) 22:31-34

What was said in yesterday's Note is underlined still further in these verses. As well as 'self' being a power that destroys human life, there is also an evil power in the background, at work in our souls to destroy us. Our Lord's remarkable word in 31, 32 can hardly be studied aright except in the context of Peter's denial which is recorded later in the chapter -and we shall be looking at this in relation to what is said there in the Notes that follow, It must suffice at the moment to point out the reality of the devil's work in men's lives, and it is this that necessitates our Lord's atoning and redeeming work on the cross. This is the background of His suffering in Gethsemane. Indeed, the words 'I have prayed for thee' in 32 are well illustrated in 39ff in the agony He endured. Gethsemane represents the cost of that prevailing prayer. It tells us what it meant for Christ to pray for Simon. And the virtue of the prayer lay in the death He was about to die, its quality and effectiveness depended upon what He was to do on the cross. His intercession, then and now, rests upon His redeeming work, upon His standing in for us, in our stead.

We shall look, first of all, therefore, at the story of Gethsemane, with all the solemn awe that surrounds it, then we shall look at Peter's denial, in the light of what both he said here in 33, and what Jesus said to him in 31 and 34.

357) 22:35-38

A word, first of all, however, about what our Lord says here. It is interesting to compare and contrast 35 and 36 with 9:3 - from this it seems clear that our Lord could not have meant the instructions given to the disciples in chapter 9 as an invariable pattern of service. The godly Bishop Ryle, in his 'Expository Thoughts' makes the following comment: "We learn from these verses that the servant of Christ ought to use all reasonable means in doing his Master's work... It is safest to take these remarkable verses in a proverbial sense. They apply to the whole period of time between our Lord's first and second advents. Until our Lord comes again believers are to make a diligent use of all the faculties which God has implanted in them: they are not to expect miracles to be worked, in order to save them trouble; they are not to expect bread to fall into their mouths, if they will not work for it; they are not to expect difficulties to be surmounted, and enemies to be overcome, if they will not wrestle, and struggle, and take pains. They are to remember that it is 'the hand of the diligent which maketh rich' (Prov 10:4). We shall do well to lay to heart our Lord's words in this place, and to act habitually on the principle which they contain. Let us labour, and toil, and give, and speak, and act, and write for Christ, as if all depended on our exertions. And yet let us never forget that success depends entirely on God's blessing: To expect success by our own 'purse' and 'sword' is pride and self-righteousness; but to expect success without the 'purse and sword' is presumption and fanaticism. Let us do as Jacob did when he met his brother Esau. He used all innocent means to conciliate and appease him; but when he had done all, he spent all night in prayer (Gen 32:1-24)."

358) 22:39-46

The story of our Lord's agony in Gethsemane is, rightly, considered as a holy of holies, and we necessarily approach it with a certain awe and reverence. It would indeed be a hard heart that was not moved as it contemplated the sufferings of the Saviour, as He wrestled until great drops as of blood fell from His brow. All the same, it is doubtful whether we are meant to think of Gethsemane only in reverent meditation, and as a devotional exercise. For the trouble with devotional exercises as such is that they do tend to miss the point. The danger here is lest we should fall into the attitude expressed by the words: "Poor Jesus, to suffer so!" Now certainly the agony of Christ draws, or should draw, our deepest feelings in this way. Yet it is questionable whether this is meant to be our deepest understanding of Gethsemane. Indeed, to stop there is to misunderstand its deepest thought altogether. For we are meant to ask, "Why did He suffer so? What is the meaning of the agony?" And when we do, we pass from devotion to doctrine. And doctrine is ever the truest and best foundation of real piety and enrichment. It is when we consider the doctrinal significance of Gethsemane that we really enter into the mystery of the divine purposes in our redemption.

359) 22:39-46

Both Luke and John emphasise that Jesus went into the Garden as was His wont. And He did so, not to hide from His enemies, or even to seek for seclusion; for Judas, who had gone out to betray Him, knew the place, and knew where to find Him. It was the last place to seek hiding, if that had been His purpose. But it was not. And when He had finished His sojourn in the Garden, He went forth. - "Rise, let us go hence" - not to escape His foes, but to meet them. He was not on the defensive, but on the initiative. He went forth to die! His death was not something He suffered, but something He accomplished. He deliberately, and of set purpose, went forth, to be taken. He carried the war into the enemy's camp. He called the tune, and He chose the hour in which to be betrayed, tried and crucified, "That thou doest", He said to Judas, "do quickly", as if to say, "This is the time which I have appointed for you to do your dire deed". If this is the general pattern of the last earthly days of Jesus, it must apply equally to the scene in Gethsemane. And it does. Calvin points out, "He did not seek retirement for the purpose of concealing Himself but, as if He had made an assignation with His enemies, He presented Himself to death." That is to say, what we see here is the picture of a King going forth to battle. This is made to gleam with light and truth as we think of the theological construction which the New Testament epistles put upon the sufferings of Christ. More on this in tomorrow's Note.

360) 22:39-46

We must never forget the lonely Figure in the Garden is standing in for us, as our Substitute. The point of Paul's teaching, for example, in Romans 5:12ff and 1 Corinthians 15:21, 22, lies here. The first Adam failed and fell in the Garden of Eden: the second Adam triumphed, for us, in the Garden of Gethsemane. Newman's superb words say it so well:

O loving wisdom of our God,
When all was sin and shame,
A second Adam to the fight
And to the rescue came.

This surely puts the right complexion on the situation: a King entering the lists of combat, advancing to face the enemy, not a Sufferer shrinking from his foes. And this is true, even in the context of the prayer "Let this cup pass from me". The very symbolism of Scripture seems to enhance and support this idea. The New Testament writers had a deeper feeling for symbolism than we have. Gethsemane had for them certain associations: for example, in the story of the revolt of Absalom (2 Sam 15:30) the reference to Mount Olivet sets the scene of David's weeping and sorrow in the very place where, centuries later, David's greater Son faced a greater revolt, that of mankind against the true and living God. David, however, had company in his grief; Jesus was left alone. Furthermore, 'Gethsemane' literally means 'an oil-press' or 'wine-press'; and in Jesus' day the Garden was a grove of olives fitted with a winepress. The Gethsemane experience was for Christ the beginning of the action of the winepress of the wrath of God. "I have trodden the winepress alone, and of the people there was none with me" (Isa 63:3). The prophet's words do much to explain why the disciples were left outside this particular experience. Even the inner circle, Peter, James and John, could not penetrate the awesome loneliness.

361) 22:39-46

The contrast between Adam and Christ also provides a key to an understanding of the meaning of Christ's agony. For Adam was tempted in Eden; and Gethsemane was likewise a temptation experience for our Lord, and part of the battle He fought was with temptation - the temptation not to drink the cup and not to die for the sins of men. This thought is in line with earlier experiences of our Lord: the wilderness temptation was, fundamentally considered, the temptation to a Messiahship without a cross, as was the temptation that came to Him through Peter at Caesarea Philippi, when He said, "Get thee behind me, Satan". Here, again, in Gethsemane, the Tempter came to Him, with the same Temptation. In this connection, we should consider the words in Heb 5:7-10: "strong crying and tears", 'He was heard', 'He learned obedience'. What do these phrases mean? The reference is clearly to Jesus' agony in the Garden. - but what was heard was not so much the prayer, 'Let this cup pass from Me' - for that was not granted - as the following request, 'nevertheless not as I will, but as Thou wilt', Implicit in these words was the cry for strength to go through with what He knew to be the Father's will. And this was answered, as witness the calm serenity that rested upon Him from this point right through to the crucifixion itself. 'Learned obedience' does not mean that He learned to be obedient - that was impossible - but rather that He learned what obedience to the Father's will cost. He needed the cross to make Him a Redeemer. He was made perfect in this sense that He was brought into His proper destiny as the Redeemer by dying the death of the cross.

362) 22:39-46

What, then, was the cup He feared? Not death, as we know it, not even the horrible death of the cross, harsh and gruesome as this undoubtedly was. Many believers have faced such death, calmly and fearlessly. Neither the physical brutality, nor the mental torture, but the spiritual burden, with all that this involved - this is the explanation of the agony in the Garden. It was the knowledge of the meaning of this 'particular cross': not death as we know it, but death as the wages of sin - this is what appalled His spirit. Death as the materialised form of guilt, the death - this is what explains the intensity of His feelings. It was for Jesus the beginning of the horror of great darkness which is expressed in its fulness in the cry of dereliction on the cross, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" In Gethsemane, the darkness began to come down. A man of sorrows indeed, and acquainted with grief: Death as a 'being away from God' this is why He referred to it as a cup, for it was the cup of divine wrath, poisoned by the sins of men. For death as the wages of sin means separation from God - this is what appalled the Son of God, that the Father's face should be turned away from Him when He became the world's Sin-bearer. It was the experience of dereliction, with all that that implied, that He so shrank from in Gethsemane.

363) 22:39-46

Two considerations of considerable importance arise here. The first is: here, in Gethsemane, Jesus is represented as shrinking from the cup He was called upon to drink; yet, elsewhere, He says, "The cup which My Father hath given Me, shall I not drink it? (John 18:11). There is no real contradiction: for on the one hand, His delight was to do the Father's will, and this is what is expressed in the words recorded by John; on the other hand, however, He shrank from separation from God, and this is what constituted, as we have seen, the agony of Gethsemane. The one is foreshadowed by the idea of the 'burnt-offering' in the Old Testament economy, in which He presented Himself without spot to God, a sweet-smelling savour, thereby expressing His utter devotion to the Father's will; the other is foreshadowed by the idea of the 'sin-offering', the 'non-sweet savour offering', in which He bore the sins of men. The 'offering' and the 'sacrifice' are both involved in the atonement wrought in the cross.

There is a way for man to rise
To that sublime abode
An offering and a sacrifice
A Holy Spirit's energies
An advocate with God.

364) 22:39-46

The second consideration is: Why should our Lord ask, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from Me"? Surely He knew it could not pass from Him, if atonement was to be made? There is something here that matches the similar question on the cross, "Why hast Thou forsaken Me?" Why should He ask this? Did He not know that it was for the sin of the world? Had He not gone voluntarily and willingly to the cross, knowing it would involve separation from, and being forsaken by, God? Yes, indeed. But this belongs to the very essence of being made sin for us; for to do so was to cut Himself off from God, and in that dereliction He cut Himself off from light, and His consciousness of what was happening became clouded. That is the real heart of the agony: to have been able to go through it all, and still know that all was well, would not have plumbed the depths of the mystery of iniquity. He must forego even that knowledge. It is this that made it a real hell for Him. It was there, at that point, where the Son of God lost the last consciousness of the Father's love and presence, that atonement was made and pardon bought and won for men. And Gethsemane was but a fore-taste of that ultimate agony. In the Garden, He was no longer sure of the Father's will, and this was part of the horror of darkness that came upon Him. His mind and spirit were beginning to cloud over.

365) 22:47-62

We turn now to the dramatic and tragic story of Peter's denial. It is a sad story indeed, but one that is very human. Perhaps undue prominence is given to Peter's denial. All the disciples protested their loyalty to Jesus (Mark 14:31); they all forsook Him and fled (Mark 14:50). It is just that Peter's sin was pin-pointed, that it came to the surface and found expression, and public exposure, in a way that the others' were not. But all were alike - they all failed at the testing time. That being said, however, in Peter's favour, we need also to say this: we have already looked at the story of Judas Iscariot (see Notes for 25th/26th January 1979). Though that story is in many ways a contrast to Peter's, it bears also a close similarity. The view that thinks of Judas as a black villain and of Peter as essentially "all right" at heart is not only superficial, it is erroneous. There was little to choose between the two failures. Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss; Peter denied Him with a curse. Betrayal and denial amount to much the same thing: they both disowned Christ. And Christ's attitude was the same to both - He gave Peter a look of compassion, and Judas a word of compassion: 'Friend'. Peter was restored: Judas was not. But the reason for this is not that Peter's sin was less heinous than Judas's. Rather, it was that Peter showed repentance; Judas only remorse. Peter went out and wept bitterly; Judas went out and hanged himself. Peter was restored, that no one need despair of mercy, having failed; Judas went out into the darkness of night, that none might presume on mercy.

366) 22:47-62

We should think first of all of the extraordinary nature of Peter's denial. Is it not almost inconceivable that a man who has had three years' constant companionship with Christ - with all that this meant of love and care, and the intimacy of the inner circle - should have thus denied Him, not once only, on the spur of the moment, betrayed by a wayward impulse, but three times, and therefore conscious and deliberate. How does one explain this? A failure, a lapse, a mistake, one could understand - but this? To deny that he even knew Jesus? There is an answer to this question, and this is one of the profound lessons the story has to teach us. It is implied in 31: Satan hath desired to have you.... "What we mean is this: we need to bear in mind that this was the crisis hour of history, and it was at this moment building up to its awful and awesome climax. Jesus had already said "This is your hour, and the power of darkness" (53); dark and malignant immensities were abroad that night, and cosmic currents were flowing with sinister flood-tides. It was in this that Peter was caught and involved. Small wonder that he was swirled about like a cork in a raging stream'. This does not, of course, excuse him and his fall, but it does serve to explain how such a disastrous fate overtook him. Christ had seen it coming, and knew that Peter, being the man he was, would never stand. Only a spiritual giant could have, who had access to resources of spiritual power and grace that Peter had failed to avail himself of.

367) 22:47-62

This serves to show what the best of men are by nature. We are accustomed to think of Peter as impulsive and weak, and this is ultimately true but it was the weakness of a big man. He was certainly not a weakling, but a born leader, with great qualities and great possibilities. And it was his very bigness that made the crash so horrifying and frightening. But his nature was fallen, as ours is, and the testimony of Scripture is that "in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing". When we look back on Peter's rash boast in 33, it becomes clear that he was a man who did not know his own heart, did not know that there was that in him, as in all of us, that would not only deny, but Judas-like, betray Jesus. And especially in a crisis of this magnitude, when ultimate issues of good and evil were at stake, he just did not stand a chance! Furthermore, in relation to the crisis that had come upon the world, he was involved in it by reason of his commitment to discipleship, and this is why Satan desired to have him. People who are engaged in the work of the kingdom are always at risk in this way, and are especial targets for the enemy. Becoming a disciple is a throwing down of the gauntlet to Satan. This is not a fancy, but something deadly real. And any weakness will be doubly exploited by Satan and his pressures. Discipleship really puts us 'on the spot'; for if we commit ourselves without the crucifixion that discipleship demands, we are going to be in big trouble. And we will undoubtedly go down. For Satan goes about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, and is ever on the outlook for people with hidden weaknesses that have remained uncrucified, and he will have them! And in time of particular crisis, when pressures are great, he will gain an advantage over them. Only those who can say "the prince of this world cometh and hath nothing in me" will stand!

368) 22:47-62

Peter's was a big crash, and big crashes do not 'come out of the blue'. They all have a 'history'. The great oak tree that comes crashing down in the storm has not been brought down by that storm alone - that is merely the occasion of the fall - the reason for it may go back years, to undetected and unheeded rottenness that set in and slowly and insidiously spread. It was so with Peter. The real cause of his denial is seen at several points in his history - he was a man who all along, and consistently, refused the discipline of the cross, who refused to die to sin and self. Christ's purpose was to make him what his name suggested - Petros, a rock. But no man is made rock-like without painful discipline, and this Peter would not accept. He was always balking at the cross. He did not see as often we do not see either - that in him there was a treachery that might at any time break out and overwhelm him, did not see that the cross, and taking up the cross, was to be his salvation and his hope. More: Peter's words in 57, "I know Him not" was really, ironically, far truer than he knew. For in fact, in the spiritual sense, he did not know the Lord in the only way that can keep a man from falling in the evil day. Consider the emphasis on knowing Him in Psalm 9:10, Daniel 11:32 and Phil 3:10: Peter had never yet been to that place. To know Christ in this way is to know His cross. Every Christian who denies his Lord, and says thereby, "I know Him not" is also proclaiming something unmistakeably about his own experience, that he is a stranger to the cross, or has forsaken the place to which Christ has called him.

369) 22:47-62

What we must learn from this sad episode is that every sin we commit proclaims that we do not know Jesus (cf 1 John 2:4, 3:6). Our lives may speak day by day the same language that Peter used here. What we are, and what we do, speaks far louder than what we say. When we commit a sin, it means that for that particular moment we have chosen to part company with Christ. At that particular moment we find. Him an embarrassment to us, "The Lord turned, and looked upon Peter" (61) - O that we realised that that look is upon us, with its sorrow and compassion, each time we sin!

There is a strange irony to be seen when we take Peter's words in 33, "I am ready to go with Thee....to death" into consideration at this point. As Peter spoke them, they were a pious fraud; but in a far other sense than Peter meant, they express a deep and profound truth; for if he had been ready so to die, the tragedy would never have happened, and he would have stood firm under the onslaught of temptation. His whole trouble was that he had never 'died' with Christ.

370) 22:47-62

But what, in view of all this, are we to say of our Lord's words in 31? Did Christ's intercession fail, then, for Peter? Ah, no. Jesus did not say that Peter would not fall. Indeed, the way that He preserved Peter's faith was to allow him to fall here, because he had to be brought to an end of himself. When Christ takes us in hand, we need to watch out: there is something very firm and inexorable about His tender dealing with us. And He is strong enough to resist pity for us until sorrow and shame and I penitence have done their gracious work in our hearts. C.S. Lewis has something very pertinent to say in this connection: "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".

It was down there, then, in that abject place of moral failure and collapse, when he learned the truth about himself at last, that the foundations of the new Peter, the rock, the man of the cross, were laid. His faith did not fail: only his faith in himself. His faith was purged and purified and reborn, as it were, and it emerged a new thing.

371) 22:63-23:26

We come in this long passage to the account of the trial of Jesus. In our consideration of our Lord's agony in Gethsemane we were more concerned to understand its meaning from a theological standpoint, so as to see where it fitted in, and what was its basic significance, in relation to the whole story of the gospel -thereby gaining a deeper appreciation of what it meant for the Son of God to come into the world to be our Saviour. This is certainly how we should also look at the subject of the verses now before us, recording the trial of Jesus. It is the theological significance of what happened, rather than the emotional impact of the story, that really brings out the message.

We look first at the facts of the trial. First of all - and this we find by comparing the four gospel narratives together - Jesus was taken to Annas, father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest; then to the latter; then to Pilate; then to Herod; then back to Pilate again, where the sentence of death was passed on Him. Luke is the only writer who tells us that Jesus appeared before King Herod. We shall try to assess the significance of this in a later Note. Even with this additional information, however, it is clear that the trial of Jesus was a twofold one: ecclesiastical, and civil (or political). This, as we shall see in tomorrow's Note, has a profound theological significance. Indeed, it is not too much to say that almost everything of final importance in our consideration of the trial lies here.

372) 22:63-23:26

Jesus was first of all arraigned before the religious rulers of the nation, and the charge levelled against Him was a religious one. He was accused of blasphemy. He claimed to be the Son of God (70), and for this they regarded Him as having condemned Himself out of His own mouth. To the priests, this was a blasphemous claim. He was also arraigned before the civil authority, Pilate. But when His enemies accused Him to Pilate, they did not charge Him with blasphemy: it was a different charge they brought against Him, as 23:2 makes clear. It was a political charge - subversion, rebellion, revolution. In other words, treason against Rome. It is clear also that this is how Pilate construed their charge (3). The reason for this 'charge' is very significant. The Jews wanted Jesus killed, because to them His claims were blasphemous and intolerable; but, on the one hand, they had no power, as a subject nation to put anyone to, death by judicial sentence, and on -the other, they realised very well that it would not work to put a charge of blasphemy before the Roman authorities. They were not interested in a religious issue; blasphemy was not an indictable offence in Roman law. -But treason was another matter: this Pilate would be interested in. So, the Jews cunningly twisted Jesus' claim to be a King to appear treasonable. This is what Pilate had to deal with a political charge. Thus the twofold charge - religious at heart, but cloaked with political disguise - blasphemy and treason.

373) 22:63-23:26

It is hardly possible to overestimate the importance of this twofold charge of blasphemy and treason for the theology of what was happening. For of course there was a theology at work, behind the evil schemings of these wicked men. We should recall what the Apostle Peter said of this in his sermon on the day of Pentecost: "Him being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain" (Acts 2:23). God was at work in this: the cunning and evil of these wicked men was intent on destroying Jesus, and Satan was behind them, engineering their fell designs; but God was also at work in their evil, putting it to His use - nay, more initiating it, in a way beyond human understanding; they were diabolically twisting the charges against Jesus, but God was fulfilling His sovereign, over-riding purposes in making it fall out in this particular way. Just how diabolical and abandoned they were, and how mysteriously God was at work, and how sovereignly, we need to see and discern in a truly theological way. This will occupy our attention in the Notes that follow.

374) 22:63-23:26

The trial was a shameful farce from beginning to end, of course, without vestige of either justice or legality. It was hurried through in indecent haste; it was held at the wrong time; it was unlawfully convened; there was no attempt at hearing evidence; the accused was not allowed to state a case. Everything about it that could have been wrong was wrong. Not only so: they could not get evidence against Jesus; even the witnesses who perjured themselves to incriminate Him could not agree properly. But, then, it needed to have been like this, if ever they were to secure a verdict against the Sinless One, It is impressive to see how repeatedly in the narrative His innocence is insisted upon, by Pilate, Herod and others. The point that is being made in the record is precisely that it was an Innocent One that was being found guilty. And the only way to secure a verdict against such an One is to pervert justice. No true court of justice could have done other than conclude that there was no case against Him. It was the innocent One who was condemned to die. This has enormous theological significance, as we shall see in a later Note. But we must next return to the twofold charge of blasphemy and treason made against our Lord, and this we shall consider tomorrow.

375) 22:63-23:26

The question that arises is this: Why a trial? Would a death without a trial have been the same? They wanted rid of Jesus. Was the trial only a cover for their evil deed? Would assassination, or poison in His cup, not have sufficed as well? Doubtless, from their point of view, yes. But, from the Divine point of view, God decreed otherwise. There had to be a trial, and there had to be these particular charges against Jesus, because the trial was our trial. What we mean is this: the trial of Jesus was part of the great substitutionary atonement He came to make for us. In our readings on Gethsemane, it was pointed out that the agony He suffered goes back to the failure of the first Adam in the Garden of Eden. In the same way, the trial goes back to these events at the dawn of history. Let us put it this way: What is the essence of human sin? "Ye shall be as gods" ('like God', RSV). This is the temptation to blasphemy into which Adam fell in the Garden. This is the tragic truth about man - he is determined to put himself in the place of God in the citadel of his being. And this is the charge that God makes against man. Furthermore, that sin in the Garden was an expression of a revolt against the authority of God, against lawful, royal, regal authority, against the great King: "We will not have this man to reign over us". This is a treasonable revolt. Blasphemy and treason: This is man's sin, and the charges of God against him. And such were the charges laid on Christ when He stood in in our place, as our Substitute and Sin bearer,

This, then, is what was happening. Deeper than, and behind the malevolence of His enemies intent on killing Him, was the plan of God. He - not human malevolence - was on the initiative.

376) 22:63-23:26

What was said in yesterday's Note illuminates a good deal of the rest of the picture, and explains our Lord's attitude during the trial. Another of the gospel writers records that Jesus said to Peter, "Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?" Jesus could have thus prayed; but He did not. Similarly, He remained silent and unprotesting in face of His enemies. He submitted to the injustice of the trial without protest. Why? Are we to suppose that He could not have out-argued them in pleading His cause? Is this why He was silent? Or was it to show an example of noble patience and forbearance under affliction and pressure? His attitude does teach us this, but surely there is something infinitely deeper and more important for us to learn. The conclusion we are meant to come to is that that, if He could have defended Himself, but did not, then He chose to be found guilty, because He was standing in for us. Not only so: there is another consideration. Another great part of Scripture takes the form a trial - the Epistle to the Romans - where Paul presents the case against man the sinner. The conclusion he draws is: "Now we know that what things so ever the law saith it saith to them that are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God." This is why Jesus was unprotesting and dumb: He assumed on Himself, the guilt of the world's sin, and guilt stops a man's mouth. He had nothing to say during His trial, because there is nothing for a guilty man to say before a holy God.

Bearing shame and scoffing rude
In my place condemned He stood.

"Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God" (1 Pet 3:18). Hence, Paul's triumphant climax at the end of Romans 8 - the charges against us are taken by Christ, the condemnation borne by Him, the separation endured by Him. These are deep and profound issues, taking us to the very heart of the gospel message, and this is what Luke's narrative is designed to convey to us.

377) 22:63-23:26

Now back to something said earlier: it was the Innocent One Who was condemned to die. But, of course, it had to be, from the divine point of view, this kind of sacrifice before it could be effective. In the Old Testament economy, the sacrificial lamb had to be without spot or blemish-Only such an one could be effective, for the ethos of sacrifice was that it was to reflect that which God desires from man, a holy, spotless life. We sing,

Jesus Thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress.

And righteousness: This is the 'positive' to the 'negative' of bearing away guilt - the offering of a perfect, spotless life to God.

Finally, a word about the referral of Jesus to Herod by Pilate. The significance of this is that it was an attempt to 'pass the buck', and shrug off responsibility. Pilate knew what was right for him to do, and he wanted to do it; but other considerations weighed with him, and he desired above all else to be relieved of the decision. But this is the whole point of the gospel - it puts men on the spot, and refuses to let them 'off the hook'. We must make up our minds; the decision is ours.

378) 23:26-56

Simon the Cyrenian has achieved immortal fame by the role he was compelled to play in the drama of the crucifixion, bearing the Saviour's cross to the hill of Calvary. Was it a rough gesture of sympathy on the part of the soldiers for the One Who had been so ignominiously treated, and were they smitten in conscience at what they were doing to Him? We do not know, but we would like to think that this may have been one of the signs of a dawning realisation of Who He was that led later to the centurion's confession in 47. In a Note on the parallel passage in Matthew the Rev. W. Still acutely remarks, "It should have been another Simon who should have borne that cross". Yes, indeed'. And when God was unable to get one of His chosen men to demonstrate the meaning of discipleship, He chose an otherwise unknown 'outsider' to bear that testimony. Behold, then, the lonely Son of God, repudiated and rejected by the chosen nation, rejected by His own family, by His own disciples, cast out of the holy city, lifted up from the earth, as if even the very earth He had made disowned Him, and above all forsaken by God (cf Matt 27:46), when He bore the world's sin and took it to Himself, to destroy it and put it away. Behold and see if there was any sorrow like unto His sorrow:

379) 23:26-56

Luke is the only gospel writer who gives us our Lord's words to the lamenting and mourning women who accompanied Jesus to the cross. It is a very grim beatitude that He utters in 29, as He warns them to keep their pity and grief for themselves in face of all that would yet come upon them because of the events of that day. It lends a new dimension, too, to the words He went on to speak from the cross: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do", for they surely could not have foreseen, as He clearly did, the terrible and terrifying judgment that was to come upon a Jerusalem that so rejected its Messiah, and that did come, in A.D. 70, when - as Ryle points out - 'upon none did the last judgments sent upon the Jewish nation fall so heavily as upon the wives, the mothers and the little children'. Caird, in the Penguin commentary, adds, "The metaphor of the final saying is an echo of those passages in the Old Testament where a nation's manpower is compared to a great forest, about to be consumed by the forest fire of the divine judgment (Isa 10:16-19, Ezek 20:47). Israel's intransigence has already kindled the flames of Roman impatience, and if the fire is now hot enough to destroy one whom Roman justice has pronounced innocent, what must the guilty expect? Simon may carry the cross; but Jesus is already carrying on his heart the cross of Israel's condemnation."

380) 23:26-56

The following comment by Bishop Ryle on our Lord's Prayer on the cross is worthy of reverent study: "We read that when He was crucified, His first words were, 'Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.' His own racking agony of body did not make Him forget others: the first of His seven sayings on the cross was a prayer for the souls of His murderers. His prophetic office He had just exhibited by a remarkable prediction; His kingly office He was about to exhibit soon by opening the door of paradise to the penitent thief; His priestly office He now exhibited by interceding for those who crucified Him: 'Father', He said, 'forgive them'.

"The fruits of this wonderful prayer will never be fully seen until the day when the books are opened, and the secrets of all hearts are revealed. We have probably not the least idea how many of the conversions to God at Jerusalem which took place during the first six months after the crucifixion, were the direct reply to this marvellous prayer. Perhaps this prayer was the first step towards the penitent thief's repentance; perhaps it was one means of affecting the centurion, who declared our Lord 'a righteous man', and the people who 'smote their breasts and returned'; perhaps the three thousand converted on the day of Pentecost, foremost, it may be at one time among our Lord's murderers, owed their conversion to this very prayer, - The day will declare it: there is nothing secret that shall not be revealed. This only we know, that 'the Father heareth the Son always'. (John xi.42) We may be sure that this wondrous prayer was heard."

381) 23:26-56

There would surely be general agreement if we described the mockery in 35ff as diabolic, but it is as well to see, on closer inspection, just how diabolic it is. The derision in 35 "let him save himself, if he be the Christ, the chosen of God" - is, in fact, a direct echo of the satanic temptation in the wilderness to aim at a Messiahship without a cross, to find some other way of doing the will of God. It was a temptation that came again and again to Jesus, at different times and in different ways - at Caesarea. Philippi, when He discerned Satan in Peter's protest against His teaching that the Son of man must suffer: 'Get thee behind Me, Satan'; on the Mount of Transfiguration when Peter wanted to bask in the glory of the transfiguration instead of going down to the sufferings that were to come; above all, in the Garden, where part at least of our Lord's agony lay in the fact that it was still possible to refuse to drink the cup. And, even at this late hour, as He hung on the cross, it was still possible for Him to have invoked the help of the legions of angels to bring Him down from the cross. But His Messiahship and Saviourhood depended precisely on His not coming down from that cross, on His not saving Himself. It is only a Saviour who does not come down that men can believe in unto salvation. A King who saved Himself could not really be a Saviour of others. And this, Satan surely knew - hence his desperate endeavour even thus late, to tempt Jesus away from the cross.

382) 23:26-56

The verses which speak of the dying thief deserve, as Bishop Ryle says, "to be printed in letters of gold. They have probably been the salvation of myriads of souls. Multitudes will thank God to all eternity that the Bible contains this story", Hardly anything could illustrate more beautifully or more effectively our Lord's words recorded in John 12:32, "I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me", Here was the beginning of the great multitude which no man can number being drawn into the kingdom of God by the power of the cross. The story magnifies the reality of the grace of the gospel towards the worthless, those who- have no goodness to advance, no fitness to plead. There is a sense in which it displays the deepest truth as to what the gospel is all about, for here we see the depth to which the Saviour stooped to meet the depth of the sinner's need, in the abandonment and extremity of his sin. One can only assume that the sight of the suffering Saviour on the cross did what nothing else had ever done - melted his heart, and brought to him a dawning hope such as he had never known or imagined, the hope of acceptance and welcome, and prompted his immortal words, "Lord, remember me...."(42), and brought him, in his death throes, to everlasting salvation: "Today thou shalt be with me in paradise" (43). But there were two thieves, and only one was saved. We should never forget this. One was saved, that no one need despair of the Divine mercy and forgiveness, however black his life has been; one was lost, that no one might presume on that mercy.

383) 23:26-56

The veil of the temple being rent in the midst at the death of Christ has a deep theological symbolism. The veil referred to was the curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Holiest of All. In the O.T. economy, the Holy of holies where the presence of God dwelt, was sacred and unapproachable. No one was allowed to enter save the high priest, and that only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, to make atonement for the sins of the people. The veil was the 'sign' that there was not a way into the divine presence. It was therefore equivalent to the shut gates of the Garden of Eden. The way to God was barred by sin. But when Jesus died on the cross, that barred gate was breached and opened, and the way to God made accessible to all. This is the meaning of the rent veil. Christ has broken down every barrier, and opened up the way into the divine presence. It is fitting that we should also consider our Lord's last words in this connection (46). For what He said was not so much a sensing and acknowledging the approach of death, as 'a determinate delivering up of His Spirit to the Father' (so Alford). Indeed, following the analogy of the temple and its worship, He was - in the words of Hebrews 9:14 - offering Himself without spot to God, in making atonement for the sins of the world. That, it seems to us, is what Luke is concerned to convey. His death on the cross was not so much something that He suffered as something that He accomplished at Jerusalem (cf Luke 9:31).

384) 23:26-56

In the closing verses of the chapter we are told about the reactions of two very different people to the death of Christ. There could hardly be a greater contrast than that between the centurion (47) and Joseph of Arimathea (50), the one a rough soldier, the other a rich Pharisee and counsellor of the Jews - yet at the cross they were both on the same level, and the same thing happened to them. The centurion was drawn to confess Christ (Matthew goes further than Luke here and says he called him 'Son of God'(27:54); and something of the same nature took place in Joseph. We are told of him in John 19:38 that he was a disciple, 'but secretly, for fear of the Jews'; but by His death on the cross Jesus drew him out into the open, to declare his interest and allegiance, and to nail his colours to the mast. This is ever what the cross does - it is a great sifter and divider of men

It makes the coward spirit brave
And nerves the feeble arm for fight.

This, then, is a word for secret disciples, for those who have become convinced of the truth of the gospel as they have read and pondered the story of the cross, but as yet have been, it may be, hesitant or afraid to declare their interest. And it proclaims a simple yet decisive message: let it be known where you stand. Ask God for a suitable opportunity to open up, and tell it to someone - today.

385) 23:26-56

It will be helpful at this point to consider some of the interpretations that the early Church placed on the death that Jesus died. Enough has already been said in these Notes to indicate that, far from being a simple record of the historical fact of Jesus' death, the gospel story is shot through and through with theological interpretation. And the explicit statement in the epistles of the New Testament are really all implicit in the gospel record itself. Let us consider, first of all, then, the words in Heb. 2:9, "He tasted death for every man". This statement is directly linked with two things that we considered when studying our Lord's agony in Gethsemane, two things that are themselves linked together. On the one hand, we saw how Jesus referred to the death He was to die as a cup He was to drink. It is the drinking of that cup that Hebrews 2:9 refers. It was the cup of death that He tasted. On the other hand, we pointed out that Jesus' agony in the Garden was not simply a question of His shrinking from death as such. It was not death as such, but death as the wages of sin that He shrank from. And it was this that He tasted for every man J.H. Jowett once preached a notable sermon on the death of Christ in which he contrasted the statements made in the New Testament about the deaths of other people and those made about the death of Christ. "Lazarus sleepeth"; "the maid (Jairus' daughter) sleepeth"; but Jesus died - what others went through was 'sleep'; but Jesus died the death, death in all its horrors as the wages of sin, death in its hideous intensity and power, something no man has known or can know. And He drank that cup so that no man need ever drink it, and drank it to its bitter dregs. Death as the wages of sin means separation from God, and this is the meaning of the phrase in Hebrews, and the meaning of the darkness that came down on Calvary, and above all the meaning of the cry of dereliction "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" This is what He was doing, when He hung on the cross, and bled, and died. "The Son of God loved me, and gave Himself for me" -like that!

386) 23:26-56

Another prominent statement in the epistles is found in Phil 2:8 - "He was obedient unto death". In giving Himself to 'taste death for every man' the New Testament stresses particularly the voluntary nature of His death. He chose to die, and that choice was in obedience to God's will. It is this that explains why He remained silent, when He could have confounded His enemies, and why He would not come down from the cross, when He could have. Even when He hung on the cross, the twelve legions of angels could have come to deliver Him. It was not the nails, but obedience to the Father's will, that kept Him hanging there: - obedience, as we have seen, in face of the fiercest satanic temptation to do otherwise. Furthermore, it was the Father's will and plan that He should die, that a death for sin should take place, to make atonement for sin, a death which was 'by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God'. And Jesus said, 'I delight to do Thy will, O God'. It is this voluntary obedience that makes the work of Christ of such infinite value as an act of atonement. It gives it its moral value. The moral worth of Christ's obedience in this context is simply incalculable. What is for all other men a grim necessity - death - was for Jesus a matter of voluntary obedience to the Father's will. As C.S. Lewis finely and graphically puts it, "He entered our sad regiment as a volunteer". No unwilling conscript, He!

387) 23:26-56

A third apostolic emphasis is found in 2 Tim 1: 10, "He hath abolished death". Death is the great enemy to be dealt with in the gospel. It is the 'sacrament' and ultimate expression of sin. It reigned in human experience, bringing all under its dark shadow and tyranny. Therefore redemption, to be real, must involve a battle with death, to depose it from its throne, and establish a reign of grace and life. Already there had been some skirmishes with it - Lazarus, the widow of Nain's son, Jairus' daughter - and Christ had been victorious. But now came the decisive battle. And how other could death be dealt with effectively than by Christ Himself entering into it, and dealing with it, and destroying it, from the inside? This is what the gospels proclaim. Indeed, it is not too much to say that this is the whole point of the 'build up' of the gospel record as given by Luke and the others. This Jesus - He Who manifested Himself as Lord of all life, Lord of disease, devils, nature, man - it was not possible that death should hold such an One! And when He entered death, He 'took it by the throat' and strangled it, and flung it on one side, a foul, empty thing. 'It is finished', He cried - and death was finished as a power in the lives of men. He abolished death, emptying it of its power and authority. And when the disciples grasped the truth and significance of this, they went out in the power of an endless life, to proclaim a new reign in the world of men.

388) 23:26-56

Enough has been said in the last three Notes to controvert the common assertion that we should not concern ourselves overmuch with theories about the death of Christ and the Atonement. It is the fact, they say, not theories about it, that is important. Nothing could be more mistaken than this, however plausible it may sound. For we have already seen that the gospels themselves contain implicit, and sometimes explicit, allusions that are theological in essence. Above all, however – and this is decisive – it is precisely the interpretation placed on the fact of Christ's death by the apostles that makes it a gospel. Jesus promised the disciples that the Holy Spirit would lead them into all truth, and this was certainly fulfilled in the early Church in the construction they placed on the death of Christ. "Christ died on Calvary" – that is a fact of history – He was crucified under Pontius Pilate, as the Creed says. But "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" – that is the apostolic interpretation of the historical fact, as inspired by the Holy Spirit and, indeed, guided by our Lord's own teaching on the death He was to die. Interpretation, therefore, of the death of Christ – theories of the Atonement, let it be said – is essential if we are to have a gospel at all. And apostolic interpretations are more likely to be authentic and authoritative than non-apostolic ones.

This is why we should be concerned to seek a truly and fully biblical interpretation of the Cross.

389) 23:26-56

The apostolic interpretation of the death of Christ is very wide and comprehensive, and no one single idea is sufficient to convey the whole truth. This is why New Testament teaching is like a jewel with many facets. One facet of the teaching we have already touched upon (see Note for Saturday, 10th. March) - the obedience of Christ, and something more must now be said about it. We read in. Rom 5:19, "By the obedience of One shall many be made righteous". This thought is clearly an. important one for the apostles (cf Phil 2:8, Heb 5:8, 9). It stands over against, and. is the answer to, man's disobedience. When man said. 'No' to God, he lost that communion with God for which he was created and, losing it, lost himself also. Man is no longer himself because he is no longer in communion with. God; and it is a predicament from which he cannot extricate himself. It is the obedience of Another that alone can put him right, an. obedience expressed and fulfilled in death. The obedience of Christ by which many are made righteous has sometimes been spoken in a twofold way: active and passive obedience. John Murray says: "The real use and purpose of this formula is to emphasise the two distinct aspects of our Lord's vicarious obedience. The truth expressed rests upon the recognition that the law of God has both penal sanctions and positive demands. It demands not only the full discharge of its precepts but also the infliction of penalty for all infractions and shortcomings. It is this twofold demand of the law of God which is taken into account when we speak of the active and passive obedience of Christ. Christ as the vicar of his people came under the curse and condemnation due to sin and he also fulfilled the law of God in all its positive requirements. In other words, he took care of the guilt of sin and perfectly fulfilled the demands of righteousness, He perfectly met both the penal and the perceptive requirements of God's law. The passive obedience refers to the former, and the active obedience to the latter. Christ's obedience was vicarious in the bearing of the full judgment of God upon sin, and it was vicarious in the full discharge of the demands of righteousness. His obedience becomes the ground of the remission of sin and of actual justification,"

390) 23:26-56

Another prominent emphasis in the New Testament is that the death of Christ was sacrificial. This emphasis has ritual connotations, and serves to express a very personal element in the work of atonement, in contrast to the legal, forensic idea which expresses the objective element. Two words figure prominently in the ritual terminology: expiation and propitiation; and they together convey the truth that "something must happen if there is to be peace between God and man, if the communion which has been broken by sin is to be restored. Indeed, there is a further truth behind the shedding of blood in the atoning sacrifice: blood must actually flow, for man has forfeited his life by his rebellion against his Creator and Lord" (Brunner). The difference between expiation and propitiation is this: you expiate a sin; you propitiate a person. It is when one realises that there is this difference between the words that the real seriousness of man's predicament is understood. For it is not merely that there is a need for man's sin to be expiated by the sacrifice of Christ; it is also - and supremely - that what man's sin has done to God must be dealt with: the divine anger and wrath against sin must be turned away. This is propitiation, and so utterly does it stand at the heart of the atonement that without it there is no gospel at all.

391) 23:26-56

In yesterday's Note, it was underlined that something must happen before any restoration to fellowship with God can take place. This is further underlined in the next emphasis we look at - that of reconciliation. Indeed, in some ways this serves to 'fill in' the picture, and 'give it body'. Reconciliation presupposes estrangement; and estrangement is the disruption of the original relationship of fellowship with God for which man was created. The need for reconciliation is profoundly and movingly expressed by Denney: "The estrangement which the Christian reconciliation has to overcome is indubitably two-sided; there is something in God as well as something in man which has to be dealt with before there can be peace. Nay, the something on God's side is so incomparably more serious that .in comparison with it the something on man's side simply passes out of view.... It is God's earnest dealing with the obstacle on His own side which constitutes the reconciliation; the story of it is 'the word of reconciliation'; when men receive it, they receive (Rom 5: 10) the reconciliation.... The serious thing which makes the gospel necessary, and the putting away of which constitutes the gospel, is God's condemnation of the world and its sin; it is God's wrath, 'revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men' (Rom 1:16-18). The putting away of this is 'reconciliation': the preaching of this reconciliation is the preaching of the gospel." The gospel, Denney goes on to say, does not speak of the wrath of God and His condemnation resting on the sinful world as if they were illusions: "It does not tell men that only their own groundless fear and distrust have ever stood between them and God. It tells them that God has dealt seriously with these serious things for their removal, that awful as they are He has put them away by an awful demonstration of His love; it tells them that God has made peace at an infinite cost, and that the priceless peace is now freely offered to them."

392) 23:26-36

Another emphasis prominent in the New Testament is that in His death our Lord 'spoiled principalities and powers', defeating them and setting them at nought. (Col 2:15). There is little doubt that this is a "neglected emphasis in New Testament theology", as one scholar has put it, and that the whole concept underlying it is quite foreign to the modern mind. Yet it is clear to anyone who reads the New Testament that this was a very prominent concept for the apostles, not to say central and integral to their understanding of the gospel. It is significant that the Fall of man, recorded in Genesis 3, is described in terms of an attack on man by the evil one, and that the first promise of the gospel, the primal promise (3:15) that was to find its fruition in the coming of Christ and in His death and resurrection, is spoken of in terms of the destruction of the evil one - the seed of the woman shall bruise the head of the serpent. It can therefore be very truly said that this 'spoiling of the enemy' is what the whole story is about. It is not peripheral; it is not a legendary accretion; it is central and fundamental to a true understanding of the gospel itself. The primal promise of redemption, therefore, can be interpreted in terms of God serving notice on His enemy that in the fulness of the time - God's appointed time - He would engage him in mortal conflict and destroy him in and through the promised seed. And we must understand all the encounters with the evil one - in the Temptation story, in the demon-possessed people whom Jesus healed - as preliminary and anticipatory skirmishes, so to speak, leading to the final climactic battle in the death of the cross, in which - to use our Lord's own parable - He entered the strong man's house, binding him and spoiling his goods. This is the real and deepest understanding of the victory Jesus won at Calvary.

393) 23:26-56

Another 'picture' of the death of Christ must occupy our thinking before we leave the subject. In 1 Cor 5:7, in the words "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us", the Apostle in one bold stroke associates the death of Christ with the supreme divine visitation of the Old Testament, the deliverance of the people of God from the bondage of Egypt. It is a tremendous word, and the association of ideas in it is tremendous also, combining in itself so many of the insights we have already underlined in previous Notes - the idea of deliverance from dark powers, the idea of sacrifice, in the lamb whose blood was shed, the idea of atonement in that blood, the idea of protection from the wrath and judgment of God, and therefore the idea of deliverance from the guilt of sin. But above all - and this is the special insight given us in this 'picture' - in the Passover the people of God were given a new beginning. They emerged from a state of slavery into a new, triumphant status as the people of God. The Passover constituted them the covenant people, it was the mark of the covenant. And the death of the New Testament Lamb establishes the new covenant by which we enter a new relationship of fellowship with God. In Christ we are not only redeemed, not only forgiven, not only delivered from bondage, but - best of all - we are brought into a new communion with God. Our original destiny is restored to us.

394) 24:1-12

We come with this passage to the story of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, There is much, much to be said about this glorious message, and we must take time to think of it fully in all its aspects.

We have sometimes pointed out that the message of the cross by itself is incomplete without what followed it, i.e. the resurrection. This is everywhere implied in the Apostles' teaching. But no more can the resurrection be understood except in relation to the death Jesus died. In point of fact, the early Church spoke of Christ's death from the standpoint of, and in the glad light of, the resurrection, and this is just as true of Luke's gospel as of the later writings of the New Testament. Neither the cross nor the resurrection of Christ can be understood apart from each other.

And we must ask the same questions about the resurrection as we ask about the cross: what is the significance of the resurrection of Christ? What in fact was happening when Jesus rose from the dead? What was it all about? These are the issues we must now deal with, in the Notes that follow.

395) 24:1-12

First of all, we must look at the facts of the situation. Any one reading through Luke's gospel without prejudice, and without coming to it with preconceived notions, will certainly come to the conclusion that what is referred to here is something very literal and real. There was a time when to say this would certainly have caused a good deal of puzzlement to those who heard it. "Why, of course", they would say, "it was literal. What else could it be?" But it really needs to be said, and stressed, categorically today. For the literal, bodily resurrection of Christ is contested, even denied, in some quarters. We are asked to believe that the resurrection of Christ must be understood in a metaphorical sense, even a mythological sense (using the word 'myth' in its technical meaning of a non-literal way of expressing the truth), and that it needs to be understood in a spiritualised, rather than in a literal way. Thus, as they say, it does not really matter whether the dead body of Jesus rose or not, it is the principle, the spiritual truth that is important.

Now, over against all these ideas and views, we must state our position clearly. When we speak of the resurrection of Christ, we are not referring to a metaphorical happening, or a mythical happening; we are not speaking of a spiritualised conception either. We are speaking of the real, literal, bodily rising again of Jesus from the dead, that is, the Jesus that was nailed to the cross and laid in the tomb was raised from the dead.

396) 24:1-12

This being so, it will not do to regard these deviations from the orthodox position as 'interesting new insights' into the truth, having their own particular contribution to make to the overall picture. If Jesus really rose from the dead, how on earth can saying that He did not really rise from the dead be an interesting new insight into the truth? If words mean anything at all, if truth means anything at all, we must as a matter of common honesty accept that the New Testament writers believed that Jesus rose from the dead, and that they meant exactly what they said when they stated this belief. It is possible to disagree with what they proclaimed: but it is not possible to disagree with them and still claim that you are a Christian as they were. For, believing that God raised Jesus from the dead is what being a Christian means: "If thou believe in thine heart that God raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved". Not to believe this, then, means not to be saved.

Besides, if what the New Testament writers said is not literal, what is the point of interpreting the resurrection in a metaphorical way, or any other way? What other interpretation can have any real relevance for men's needs? The burden of sin and guilt, the disorder of human life - these are things that are too great, too serious, too intractable, to be dealt with by a metaphor!

397) 24:1-12

So much, then, for the facts. And, that being so, we must go on necessarily to say this also: what we are dealing with here belongs to the realm of the miraculous and the supernatural. The Christian Faith is a supernatural faith, and true Christian experience is an experience of the supernatural. Indeed, the whole gospel consists of this. To imagine we can exclude or excise the supernatural from the Christian Faith is to exclude the all-decisive factor that makes it a gospel. To stumble at the supernatural is simply to stumble at the gospel itself. The rationalism of the 20th century has for far too long been allowed to emasculate the gospel, until the very mention of the supernatural has become almost strange and 'off-beat'. It is this supernatural element that invests the real, bodily resurrection with its incalculable potency.

398) 24:1-12

In the next place, we must take note that in 5-8 the angels of God said something very significant to the disciples. Announcing our Lord's resurrection, they added, "Remember how He spake unto you, when He was yet in Galilee, saying, The Son of man must he delivered and crucified, and the third day rise again" (in Matthew's account, we have the words (28:6) "He is risen, as He said"). It is hardly possible to over-estimate the importance of these words. There is a whole world of theological significance in them. For what they underline decisively is that both Christ's death and resurrection were parts of a divine plan. His death was not an unfortunate happening, but something He accomplished, and. His resurrection was something He foretold, and was indeed foretold in the Scriptures themselves (cf Paul's words in 1 Cor 15:3, 4, "according to the scriptures"). It was therefore not something 'made up' by the disciples, or invented by them, to give the record of His life 'a happy ending'. It is integral to the whole strategy of God, in His plan for the redemption of the world. For resurrection means victory, and the whole Old Testament throbs with the expectation and promise of the final victory of God over evil.

399) 24:1-12

That this message of victory was the glorious proclamation and the inspiration and driving power of the early apostles can hardly be doubted, as a simple reading of the Acts will show. And we need to ask ourselves the question: What was it about the resurrection that made it so? The answer to this question is found in the meaning and significance of the death that Jesus died. We can sum up that significance in two statements: the first is that in the death He died, Jesus paid the price of sin, bore our condemnation, took its curse upon Himself; the second is that in the death He died, Jesus overcame the powers of darkness that had invaded and usurped power over mankind. But the question that arises is: Was the price Jesus paid on the cross for sin big enough to meet the debt? Was the sacrifice great enough? Surely one thing was necessary, namely that that death be shown to have dealt with sin, and with the dark powers of evil, that the price be shown and declared to be sufficient, that the victory over evil be declared to have really been won?

This is the force of the resurrection of Jesus. It was God's answer to these questions: It was God telling the world that the price paid on the cross was sufficient. And Jesus' coming forth from the tomb was itself the indisputable evidence that He was Victor over all dark powers.

400) 24:1-12

Now let us see the impact of this twofold knowledge on men's lives. It is here that the transforming power of the gospel lies. To relieve a burdened soul of its guilt works an amazing transformation. How should it be otherwise? It is liberation. We may think of it this way: a sinner is a condemned man; he has been judged guilty before God. And when a prisoner at the bar is pronounced guilty, he is put in prison. His condemnation means confinement. But put a free pardon in his hand, and he walks out of jail a free man. He is free! And oh, the wonderful, exhilarating sense of freedom that pardon brings to the soul!

My sin - O the bliss of this glorious thought
My sin, not in part, but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more;
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

That is not something that a metaphor or a myth can do for a man. It needs a risen Saviour, with a pardon in His nail-pierced hand to do so: "If Christ be not raised", as the Apostle says, "then is your faith vain: ye are yet in your sins" (1 Cor 15:17).

401) 24:1-12

We spoke of Christ as Victor. When the Allied armies swept across Europe, through Germany, to Berlin, what happened? They came upon prison camps on the march forward; and all the prisoners of war were naturally set free. This is the effect of the victory of the resurrection: prisoners are set free into the glorious liberty of the children of God. This illustration is a good one, and can be carried further. Two further consequences follow upon prisoners being set free: one is that, after their long incarceration, they are able to return home. And this is one of the wonderful realities of Christian liberation - it is a coming home. One has only to think of the story of the Prodigal Son to realise all the emotional and psychological impact of coming home - the immense sense of well-being, the healing of the awful alienation of spirit, the coming of joy into the heart, and the sense of belonging.

The other consequence of being set free is that, having been brought home, the set-free prisoner of war is re-equipped and sent out again to fight. We sometimes sing

But who can fight for truth and God
Enthralled by lies and sin?

Exactly. It is only those who have been liberated from bondage that can fight the King's battles. It was a company of liberated men and women who took the ancient world by storm. It will always be so:

402) 24:1-12

This brings us to yet another consideration. We have spoken of the theology of the resurrection, and pointed out its life-transforming effect in the lives of individuals and of society, in the ancient world, as for example in Galatia (Acts 13/14), in Thessalonica (Acts 17 and 1 Thess 1), in Corinth (Acts 18). The question that now arises is, has the message of the resurrection had this effect in our lives? That it does not always work out this way, and does not necessarily happen like this, may be gathered from Paul's words in the great prayer in Ephes 1:19 ff, when he prays that believers' eyes may be opened to know the 'exceeding greatness of His power to us-ward who believe'. Well, look at these words 'in us who believe'. Paul expounds them further in Ephes 2. When the mercy of God overshadows a man who is dead in trespasses and sins, and raises him from the dead to newness of life, in the mystery of regeneration, this is none other than the power of Christ's resurrection at work in him, since it is the power by which Christ Himself was raised from the dead now operating in the soul of the man.

403) 24:1-12

But this same truth is dealt with from a different viewpoint in Philippians 3. As a sinner, man is indeed dead in trespasses and sins, and the spiritual is utterly lacking in him. But this 'deadness in sin' does not mean that he is inert, so far as either his physical life, or his reason, intelligence and above all his will, are concerned. And his spiritual deadness expresses itself in a very active resistance and rebellion against God. In this sense man, though dead spiritually, is very much alive. And when first confronted with the gospel he is very full of himself. So, before anything can happen in his life, that false 'life' of his must be brought down to 'death', brought to an end of itself, brought to recognize that its rebellion against God is in fact the evidence of spiritual death. This 'being brought to an end of' oneself is the beginning of the work of salvation, and it is the touch of the divine operation on the soul: the death and resurrection of Christ 'repeats' in the experience of those whom God has appointed to salvation. Death becomes the way to life.

404) 24:1-12

This is what Paul means in Philippians 3. He is simply describing his faith when he says "I count all things loss...that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection". This is what faith means: absolute surrender to Christ in the gospel, an utter abandonment of all we are and all we have, to Him. This is the response the gospel evoked from Paul. It gripped and mastered him, heart, mind, will, body, interests, friendships, habits, recreations -everything. It took him over, lock, stock and barrel, till he was a man utterly possessed. This is how he proved the power of the risen Christ in his life bursting his bonds and driving him with a holy constraint across the ancient world.

This, then, is the pattern: we must all be brought - believer and unbeliever alike - again and again to the divine 'movement' of death and resurrection, so that it can take place in our experience. As Martin Luther once said, "God made the world out of nothing, and it is only when we are nothing that God can make something of us".

405) 24:13-35

The narrative which follows the record of the facts of the resurrection serves to underline the significance of what we have been saying. The story of the Road to Emmaus is an oft-studied passage, particularly at Easter-time, but it is perhaps good that we can look at it in the context of our continuing study in Luke's gospel as a whole. Seen thus, the incident stands, as it were, as the end-product of the gospel and of the work and mission of Christ. What we mean is this: the good news of the gospel is that in Jesus Christ God has come to man, and in the Word made flesh in the Incarnation, and made sin in the death of the cross, all that separated man from God is now done away. And this encounter on the Emmaus Road, this meeting with the risen Christ, is in fact symbolic and typical of what Jesus came to effect and accomplish for man. Indeed, it is instructive to compare and link together the other gospel writers' testimony with Luke's, for this underlines the lesson. In Matthew, for example, we have the well-known words, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (28:20). When we read this into the Emmaus story, we see that this is meant to be the distinctive and continuing experience of those who name the name of Christ. We have the same emphasis in Matt 28:9: "And as they went to tell....Jesus met them" - that is, stepping out on the testimony that He was risen, the fact became an experience for them! That is what 'Emmaus' is about!

406) 24:13-35

Let us look, then, in more detail, at the ways in which this story is illustrative of the central reality of Christian experience - walking with Christ, in fellowship with Him.

The question that arises for us is: in what sense are we to understand this being in fellowship with the living Christ, this walking with Him? For, clearly, we do not walk with Him in the same way as it happened on the Emmaus Road. It is not a visible companionship.

What is it, then? It is here that misunderstandings can arise. People sometimes regard it as something mystical, even emotional. And it is this assumption that probably has led to the notion that something even psychological is involved - and therefore the reality and validity of the Christian experience is challenged, and questioned, and repudiated. Clearly, there is a great deal of hard and honest thinking to be done here, and we shall address ourselves to a consideration of these issues in tomorrow's Note.

407) 24:13-35

Part of the complication of this question lies in the fact that, on the one hand, it would be true to say that there is a mystical element in the Christian experience (depending on what one means by 'mystical'); but it is beside the point to describe it as a mystical experience. In the same way, on the other hand, it would be true to say that there is an element of the emotional in it - inasmuch as the emotions are part of the personality, and necessarily come into any real and meaningful relationship. But to think of it as something emotional is simply to misunderstand it. Psychological? Well, the human 'psyche' is involved in being human, and necessarily, therefore, the psychological comes in. But to describe the experience as psychological is not to have discerned what is basic and fundamental in it. It is more than all of these things - although all of them are involved inevitably. It is a relationship based on faith-And this is simply a different dimension altogether from these other conceptions. This must be the heart of our discussion, and understanding, of it, for its implications are very considerable.

408) 24:13-35

First of all, of course, there is the fact of the risen Christ. This is what we see in the passage at the outset: "Jesus Himself drew near", we are told. The first part of the chapter tells us this. This is the objective reality with which everything begins. Without this, the mystical, the emotional, and above all the psychological, would have a field day and come into their own.

The fact, then, of the risen Christ. This is how everything begins. This is the basis and the foundation of the Christian experience. He, the living Christ, comes to men, and men respond in faith to Him. That is what creates the Christian experience.

Now, faith comes by hearing. And it is imperative that we see the implication of this. If you have to hear before you can have faith, then hearing necessarily implies understanding. And it is understanding what we hear that brings faith to the birth in our souls. This is well illustrated in the story. Here are two disciples of Jesus: clearly they are cast down and dejected, bewildered and confused. They were sad: it was as if the bottom had fallen out of their world. They were as men who had nothing to hold on to, nothing to stand on. All around them had seemed to give way. Their faith had received a severe jolt. Indeed, they had lost faith. They said, "We trusted...." (21). They used the past tense. And in what He said to them Jesus put His finger on the whole truth about them: "O fools, and slow of heart to believe...." It was their lack of understanding of the Scriptures, and slowness of heart to believe them, that was the whole trouble.

409) 24:13-35

One is prompted to remark in passing that this kind of 'loss of faith' sometimes occurs in experience today - and for the same reasons too! Sometimes an emotional experience is induced, something psychological more than spiritual, which at first bears all the marks of a genuine conversion - but later, it disappears, comes to grief, and faith seems lost. In such a case, there has been a basic lack of understanding of the situation, of the Scriptures, and a slowness of heart to believe....This is the problem.

Here, then, is how real faith was wrought in the hearts of these two disciples: Christ opened their understanding that they might understand the Scriptures (45), expounding in all the Scriptures the things concerning themselves (27). Do we see the implications of this? Two things stand out: one is that it was the opening of the Scriptures, and their grasping the implications of the gospel, that brought to them the warming of the heart of which they spoke in 32; the other is that what in effect was unfolded to them was the reality of the Christ of the Word.

410) 24:13-35

The Christ in the Word - the importance and significance of this can hardly be over-estimated. For this is the definitive mark of a true conversion experience. Their eyes were opened to an understanding of the whole purpose of God as revealed in Scripture, as the essence of the gospel's meaning was unfolded to them. The whole thing became clear. For the first time. Hitherto, they had been in a cloud of incomprehension -we know this from the pre-crucifixion record of their attitude - oh, they loved Jesus, their Master, but they did not understand - but now everything clicked. The eyes of their understanding were enlightened, to know the reality and the glory and the immensity of the gospel.

We have the perfect illustration of these principles in operation in Acts 8, in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. Here was a man arrested by what he was reading in the Scriptures, and Philip opened his understanding to grasp their meaning, and the significance of the message came home to him. And in that 'coming home' there was an encounter with the living Christ. The Christ of the Scriptures came out of the book, and took command of his soul.

The Christ in the Word! This is how we have fellowship with the risen Saviour - in the Word, and by the Spirit Who makes the Word live to us.

411) 24:13-35

This, then, is the definitive reality: fellowship with Christ by faith, in the Word. We do not yet see Him; but we believe. And one day we shall see His face. Then shall we know, even as also we are known!

This is the nature of Christian experience -not something mystical, or something emotional, or something psychological, although there may be an element of all three involved, but faith. We walk by faith, faith based on facts, and facts grasped and understood. This is the basis of what has sometimes been called 'the transforming friendship'. Look how the depression and distress, the bewilderment and disorientation of these two disciples were dispelled and dissipated, and turned to joy and burning heart! Is not this a testimony today, and is there not a need for such a testimony? Is not this the answer to our so often powerless and ineffectual witness?

But there is something else. The two disciples reaction and response is also paralleled in Christian experience. As they drew near to Emmaus, Jesus made as if He would have gone further; but they constrained Him, saying, "Abide with us...."What is the significance of this? This: having learned for the first time what kind of Christ He was, and what He had done, having had their minds opened to understand, they wanted Him! It was if they had said, "Yes, we want such a Christ as you have unfolded to us". They wanted Him. This is so true to experience. The Ethiopian eunuch, when he understood, also wanted such a Saviour. And this is the gospel challenge in the story of the resurrection: Do we want such a Christ?

412) 24:36-43

The concluding verses of Luke's record are not Without their significance either. It is a very human reaction that is represented here. The fear and terror felt by the disciples were surely inevitable - as any contact with what to them seemed to be the 'spirit-world' must be (37). But the 'spooky' spirit-world is one thing; this was something entirely different, for the whole thrust of these verses is designed to indicate that the risen Jesus was not a spirit, but a Main. 'Handle Me and see', He urged. It is the humanity of the risen Lord that comes through so clearly. It is hardly possible to overestimate the importance of this. Jesus had died, on the cross; and death had sundered body and soul. But now, the effects of death had been annulled and reversed, and body and soul were reunited again, and reconstituted in the risen humanity of Jesus. It is precisely this that constitutes the victory of the resurrection. It was not that Jesus had survived death; rather, He had abolished death, deprived it of its power to hurt or harm God's creation. This is surely the significance of our Lord's reference to His body (39) and of His partaking of the broiled fish and the honeycomb. As the saying goes, 'It was for real': Away, then, any fruitless and faithless attempts to 'spiritualise' the resurrection of Jesus. It was Jesus Himself (15) Who walked with them, talked with them, and ate with them, the very Jesus into Whose hands and feet they had seen the nails being driven on the terrible day of Calvary. Too good to be true? - this is what 41 seems to indicate that they felt. But they 'got the message' - and finally they saw that it was too good not to be true!

413) 24:36-43

Another lesson stands out in these verses. It is this: Not only here, but also in the other gospel records, it is clear that Jesus made repeated appearances to the disciples. This was one of the ways that He got home to them the message of His rising again. He kept coming to them, as if by the very accumulation of evidence their uncertainty might at last be quite dispelled. This is one explanation of the numerous occasions on which He appeared to them. But there is another: by appearing again and again to them - and then passing from their sight, as He did - He was beginning to teach them to get used to His presence with them all the time, even when they did not see Him. It was to emphasise the reality of His unseen presence that was to be with them all the time. This, indeed, was one reason why He did not immediately ascend to the Father's right hand after his resurrection: there was a work of interpretation and instruction to be fulfilled. They had to be given a theology to work on, as what is said in 44 ff also makes clear.

414) 24:44-47

Almost the most important thing to be gathered from these well-known words is that our Lord anchored His disciples, and founded their experience, in the Scriptures. It is not too much to say that He was indicating to them that for the future, this is how and where He would meet with them and have fellowship with them. It would be well for believers in these latter days to do likewise: it can hardly be controverted that a great deal of the problems that arise in Christian experience derive from the failure to base life fairly and squarely on the Word. But there is something more here also: our Lord's teaching given to His disciples surely became the basis of the apostolic message in the subsequent life of the early Church. How truly and faithfully did the apostolic preaching follow this pattern (cf Acts 17:2, 3)! In a recent series of Sunday evening studies we have pursued this theme, and seen how utterly relevant it is for our own day and generation to emphasise the fulfilment of the messianic prophecies, since the longing and yearning, the hunger and thirst, of the human heart is basically a messianic longing, and fulfilled only in Christ. Hence the mandate to preach such a message, not only to the Jews, but 'among all nations' (47).

415) 24:48-49

These two verses are taken up by Luke in the opening passage of Acts (1:1-8), and should be understood in that context. The question that arises is: how were these disciples - in all their weakness and insufficiency, to undertake and fulfil such a task as our Lord was laying upon them, to be witnesses to His saving and redeeming work? The answer was that they were to receive power from on high to be their enabling. It is this that Jesus refers to in these verses. But it is a subject that it is very easy to become confused about, and it is essential to get certain matters very clear in our minds. The manner in which we apply these words of Jesus will depend on the nature of the answer we give to this question: "Were the disciples at this point Christians?" Well, when did they become Christians? Was it when Jesus said to them, 'Come ye after Me, and I will make you fishers of Men'? Or, when He appointed them to go forth to preach and heal in His name? Or was it after the resurrection, when He breathed on them and said 'Receive ye the Holy Ghost'? Or was it on the day of Pentecost, when the New Testament Church is regarded to have been born? One has only to ask these questions to realise that there is a problem here to be resolved. But there is a sense in which it cannot be resolved: for there is an inevitable ambiguity that belongs to the situation of these early days, and to the very nature of the gospel. For the fact is that Christ came at a specific point in history, once for all, and the events associated with that coming, such as the call of the disciples and the institution of the Church of the New Testament, stand on the borderline between two dispensations, the old and the new. And the ambiguity is caused by this: that although necessarily Christ's appearance on earth, being historic, came at one point rather than another, yet that appearance has a timeless significance, applying to all history. He is the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. More on this in tomorrow's Note.

416) 24:48-49

One example of the ambiguity aforementioned is this: from one point of view, how can we speak of men in the old covenant having faith in Christ, since they lived and died before Christ was born into the world. Yet, from another point of view, it must surely be clear that, having faith in the Promised One, they were saved by faith, just as we are; and the Christ in whom they believed was surely operating in history before the Incarnation. By this token, the command of Jesus to 'wait for the promise of the Father' must necessarily be recognized as a historical command, and once-for-all, applicable to these disciples only, in that and because they were part of the historical process that was being worked out once for all. Thus, it is misleading to take this command as having meaning for us, in the sense that we also must wait for the Spirit. The Spirit could not at that point be given, because Christ's work was not yet complete. At that point He still had to ascend to the Father. And therefore these men could not possibly have the Spirit in the sense in which we now understand these words. And, since we today are not in the position of standing on the threshold of a new dispensation, as these men were, their experience in this regard cannot be taken as a norm relevant for us. They both were, and they were not, true believers in the sense we give to the term. They were true believers of the old dispensation; but they could not be believers of the new, for the new was only about to dawn - but had not as yet dawned - at Pentecost.

417) 24:48-49

Indeed, the experience of the first disciples was not even regarded as normative for the later disciples in New Testament times. They did not 'wait for the promise of the Father' after the days of Pentecost. The Spirit came upon them in their reception of the gospel. Definitive doctrine of the Spirit is to be found in the epistles of the New Testament, rather than in the gospels or in Acts, and there we find that the baptism of the Spirit, the reception of power, is the initiatory work of grace whereby men are brought into Christ, and therefore into the kingdom of God (cf John 3:7, 1 Cor 12:13, Eph 1:14). In other words, what Jesus is referring to here, and in Acts 1:5, 8, is the initiation of the new covenant, by which stony hearts are made into hearts of flesh (Jer 31:31 ff, Ezek 36:26), the covenant which He came to inaugurate and which He sealed in His own blood.

418) 24:50-53

The account given in Luke's closing words of the ascension of Jesus is brief, simple and factual; but the fact that it comes at the close of the record is itself an indication that it is to be regarded as the culmination of His redeeming work - that which makes His work a 'finished work'. The theological implication of this is taken up explicitly in the epistles (as cf Heb 9:24, Phil 2:9, Eph 4:8). The thought expressed in the old idea of the priestly work of Christ will help us here. As in the Old Testament economy the high priest entered the holiest to make atonement for the sins of the people, to sprinkle blood on the altar, so Christ our great High Priest entered into heaven for us, to present the merits of His sacrificial death on the cross and appear before God on our behalf (this is the message of the epistle to the Hebrews). There were three things that the priest of the old economy did: first, he offered sacrifice; and this our Lord did when He entered heaven for us at the ascension, having offered Himself without spot to God for our sins. Secondly, he made intercession for the people; and this our Lord now does at the Father's right hand as our blessed Advocate on high. It is this intercession, according to Heb 7:25, that guarantees our uttermost salvation. Thirdly, he blessed the people (cf the Aaronic blessing, 'The Lord bless thee and keep thee') - this was the pronouncement of the divine forgiveness upon the people, indicating that the sacrifice offered for sin had been accepted.

419) 24:50-53

All this throws light on the meaning of the ascension of Jesus. And one of the things it makes clear is that for Him, the ascension was not merely a going back to heaven, whence He had come, it was His elevation to an official position, a position of power at God's right hand. It is in this way that we need to look at and understand the important references to it in the New Testament, as for example, Phil 2:9 ff, in the reference to the name given Him above every name, and Eph 4:8, where Paul speaks of it as the final seal on His victory. And having had this, in His munificence and royal bounty He bestows gifts upon men. This giving is a 'celebration' giving: it is the high-priestly blessing upon the people on the basis of the sacrifice offered and presented before God. Such was the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost: rightly considered, it was the gift of salvation to men. It is only on the basis of the ascension (as the completion of the 'finished work') that the gift of gifts - salvation is bestowed upon men. The disciples were to become ambassadors - this is the force of Eph 4:8 - for Christ. 'Ambassadors' is a royal word. They were ambassadors for an ascended Lord, and their message was from a crowned King. The offer of forgiveness is an offer from the throne of God, and it could come from no higher source. This is what makes it authentic, real, true and valid.

420) 24:50-53

We feel we could hardly do better, in concluding our study of Luke, than include the final comments of the godly Bishop Ryle from his 'Expository Thoughts'. He says: "Let us notice, lastly, in this passage, the feelings of our Lord's disciples when He finally left them and was carried up into heaven. We read that "they returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple, praising and blessing God".

"How shall we account for these joyful feelings? How shall we explain the singular fact, that this little company of weak disciples, left for the first time like orphans in the midst of an angry world, was not cast down, but was full of joy? - The answer to these questions is short and simple. The disciples rejoiced, because now for the first time they saw all things clearly about their Master: the veil was removed from their eyes; the darkness had at length passed away. The meaning of Christ's humiliation and low estate; the meaning of His mysterious agony, and cross, and passion; the meaning of His being Messiah and yet a sufferer; the meaning of His being crucified, and yet being Son of God -all, all was at length unravelled and made plain. They saw it all: they understood it all. Their doubts were removed; their stumbling blocks were taken away; now at last they possessed clear knowledge, and possessing clear knowledge felt unmingled joy."

421) 24:50-53

Bishop Ryle continues: "Let it be a settled principle with us, that the little degree of joy which many believers feel arises often from want of knowledge. Weak faith and inconsistent practice are doubtless two great reasons why so many of God's children enjoy so little peace; but it may well be suspected that dim and indistinct views of the gospel are the true cause of many a believer's discomfort. When the Lord Jesus is not clearly known and understood, it must needs follow that there is little 'joy in the Lord'.

"Let us leave the gospel of St Luke with a settled purpose of heart to seek more spiritual knowledge every year we live. Let us search the Scriptures more deeply, and pray over them more heartily. Too many believers only scratch the surface of Scripture, and know nothing of digging down into its hid treasures: let the Word dwell in us more richly; let us read our Bibles more diligently: so doing we shall taste more of joy and peace in believing, and shall know what it is to be 'continually praising and blessing God'."