

James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of Hebrews

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THE BOOK of Hebrews

"Who it was who wrote the Epistle, only God knows certainly". So said Origen, one of the early Fathers, and after centuries of speculation this still remains true. But the thoughts are Pauline and the inspiration of the whole is unquestionable, and this should suffice for our present study, in the knowledge that what we read here is given by the Holy Ghost. The theme of the epistle is the Excellency of Christ and the Christian way as opposed to the older way of Judaism. Christ is better than... angels, Moses, Aaron, Joshua, Melchisedek, the sanctuary, the old covenant, the tabernacle, the day of atonement, the offerings. And He is better than these because He is the fulfilment of them all. The purpose of writing was to confirm Jewish Christians in the Christian Faith, and warn them against falling away. Others think - and this is not contradictory but complementary - that it was written to Jewish Christians who were still bound strongly by Jewish beliefs and were loth to let go the old ways.

1) 1:1

By way of introduction it will be useful to make a preliminary examination of this well-ordered, closely knit epistle. In the main, the first ten chapters are doctrinal in content, with a forthright exhortation at the end of ch 10, followed by a thorough application of the doctrinal position in chs. 11-13. The whole is interspersed by a series of seven solemn warnings, 2:1-4; 3:1-19; 4:11-13; 5:11-6:20; 10:26-31; 12:25-29, and 13:9-15. The importance of the epistle should be obvious in that it gives an authoritative interpretation of the Old Testament. While on the one hand it is true to say that a knowledge of the Old Testament is essential for a true understanding of Hebrews, it is even truer to say that Hebrews will give an enriching understanding of the meaning and significance of the Old Testament. The interpretation which Hebrews places on the Old Testament cultus is that the sacrifices had no inherent worth, but were shadows cast upon the course of history by the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. It is not quite true to say in view of this that the relation between Old Testament and New is that between shadow and substance, for the faith of the Old Testament saints, as we shall see in ch 11, was no shadowy thing. It is rather the relation between promise and fulfilment. Faith in the Old Testament was faith in the promise, and looked forward, while faith in the New is faith in the fulfilment, and looks back to the mighty act of God in history, namely the work of Christ.

2) 1:1-2

The opening words of the epistle form one of the most majestic utterances in the whole Bible. They sound out like the magnificent movement of a great symphony and, symphony-wise, announce the principal subject matter of all that is to follow. There are two points in particular that we must note. Firstly there is the contrast between 'times past' and 'these last days'. The point the Apostle is making is that in olden time God spoke to the fathers in fragmentary and varied fashion. The revelation He gave of Himself was not complete. He spoke in shadows, in illustrations; He spoke in the law, in history, through the varied wanderings of the chosen people from Egypt to the Promised Land; He spoke through the prophets - but in none of these was His last word spoken. Something, so to speak, still remained to be said. And that final word was spoken to men in His Son Jesus Christ. Christ is God's last word to man – in the sense that nothing more now needs to be said, for in this word God answers all the need of the human heart. In times of national emergency in Israel, when all was black on the horizon, the cry was, "Is there any word from the Lord?" That is the proper setting of these glorious words for us. In the darkening shadows that have stolen across our world, when men's hearts are failing them for fear, here is the one sure answer: "God... hath spoken... in His Son".

3) 1:1-2

The second point we must note in these verses is the marvel of the fact that God should speak at all to men, that this great Creator God, maker of heaven and earth, should want to speak with His creatures. This signifies to us that He does not wish to be alone in His creation. He does not will that His eternity should be a silent place. He wants the fellowship of our hearts! That is the astonishing, unheard of thing. Not only so, He speaks to man in a particular situation. He speaks in and into the silence and solitude caused by human sin. The opening chapters of Genesis tell us how this great silence and solitude fell upon God's creation, when man by his disobedience cut himself off and was cut off from God. Sin brought about an estrangement between man and God, and man was no longer 'on speaking terms' with God. And the fact that God speaks means that He breaks the silence. In Genesis 3, God came in the Garden and said, 'Where art thou?' We ought to understand these words as showing us how God broke the silence caused by man's sin and began to deal with the estrangement. He came seeking them, and this surely points away to the fulness of the time when in the Person of His Son He came to seek and to save that which was lost. God's word to man is therefore a reconciling word, and what we hear in Jesus Christ is the word of a great reconciliation. Man made the breach, but God humbled Himself and made the first overtures of friendship and reconciliation. God... hath spoken unto us by His Son!

4) 1:2b-3

These words exalt Christ almost more than any others in the New Testament. The Apostle is concerned to stress His unique, solitary excellence. He is the 'heir of all things' – that is to say, everything in the created order exists for Him - a stupendous claim that staggers our thinking, forcing us to the conclusion that such a One could not have been a mere created being (this is the point of the argument, of course, for He is immeasurably greater than the angels who were created beings), but One Who is eternal. Thus we come to the thought of His involvement in creation itself - 'by Whom also He made the worlds'. 'Before Abraham was I AM', He said, in the days of His flesh, and might well have added, 'Before creation was, I AM', for this would have been just as true. The New English Bible translates 3 thus: "...the effulgence of God's splendour, and the stamp of God's very being.... " The force of this description seems to lie in the significance it gives to the last statement in the verse, as if to say, "It was such a One who effected the purging of our sins, this eternal, all-glorious One, Who is God the Son". And it is this mighty work, including within its compass the Resurrection and Ascension to the right hand of the majesty on high, that constitutes God's word to men. It is a word of pardon and salvation that He speaks in Christ.

5) 1:4-6

The burden of the remaining verses of the chapter is to establish the superiority of Christ, and the revelation God gave in Him, over the angels. In these verses the contrast is made that whereas angels are servants, Christ is the Son. The force of this kind of argument may not be immediately apparent to us, but it surely was to the Hebrews to whom the Apostle wrote. We have only to think of the extensive and widespread activity of angels in Old Testament times (e.g. Genesis 28:10-17; Joshua 5:13-15; 2 Kings 6:15-17; Psalm 91:5-12) to realise how much store they set on such angelic ministry and how much they revered them - and how little disposed they would be to brook any suggestion that there could be anything higher or greater than this. 'Was not our Law ordained by angels in the hands of a mediator? What could be greater than this?' But this is precisely what the Christian gospel does claim. There is something higher and greater. The Jews may have the angels, but the Christians have Him Who made them, Him Who has been given a Name that is above every name, be it angel, principality or power, Him of Whom it is said that the angels of God are to worship Him (6).

6) 1:7-9

The next contrast is that whereas angels are subjects, Christ is the King Who rules them. Their sphere is one of service, and service is their function, whereas Christ is in the place of dominion. The application of the words of Psalm 45 to Christ in 8 is very striking, and we may think daring, but it is the simple truth and this is one of the central affirmations of the apostolic faith, that Jesus is God. Doubting Thomas first confessed this, when having met with the risen Lord he fell at His feet and said, 'My Lord and my God', and we have it underlined in a variety of ways throughout the New Testament by the apostles, as for example in the investing of His title 'Lord' with all the rich meaning of the covenant name of the Old Testament Jehovah (see also 1 Peter 3:15, where Peter says 'Sanctify the Lord - i.e. Jesus - as God in your hearts').

This was the staggering claim that this Christian message made, and it is as well that we should see that He Who confronts us in the gospel is neither historical leader nor religious genius nor supernatural being of angelic status but - God Himself. God hath spoken - in His Son. This is the force of the argument. How could angelic ministry compare with this?

7) 1:10-14

The final contrast in the chapter is between angels as creatures and Christ as Creator. This is perhaps the most absolute contrast of all, and the most conclusive, and the Apostle rises to sublime heights as he describes the unchanging, eternal Sonship of Christ. The whole created order shall pass away, but "Thou remainest.... Thou art the same, and Thy years shall not fail" (11, 12). Not only should this prove to be a conclusive argument as to the superiority of Christ over the whole created order, but it is also a source of encouragement and strength and assurance to weak and hesitant believers such as those to whom the epistle was first written tended to be, for it reminds us of the one unchanging reality in Christian experience amid all the changes and chances of this uncertain world - Jesus Christ, the same yesterday and today and forever. This is the true anchorage of life, and so long as ever we can look up and say with assurance, 'Thou remainest', we shall never finally fall or fail.

But more. Not only is Christ's unchangeable majesty in respect of creation emphasised, but His superlative position now forever at the right hand of God as the exalted and victorious Lord. 'Jesus takes the highest station', we sometimes sing, and this is the emphasis in 13. So that whether we think of Him - to use a paradoxical expression and talk as men - in terms of past eternity or future eternity, He towers over the created order as its rightful King and Head, and its eternal Hope.

8) 2:1-4

This is the first of the seven warnings in the Epistle. It is based on the statements made in ch 1. The point about establishing Christ's superiority over the angels is that the voice of Christ should be listened to more earnestly even than that of the angels. The 'word spoken by angels' (2) refers to the Law which was 'ordained by angels in the hands of a mediator' (Galatians 3:19). Christ's word, however, is greater and more authoritative, since He fulfils the Law and supersedes it. The 'things which we have heard' (1) refer to the word of the gospel, confirmed and sealed to them in the preaching of the apostles by signs following. The phrase 'let them slip' in 1 is better translated 'slip away from thee'. The NEB renders it 'for fear of drifting from our course'. 'Drifting' is the right word. It is a significant metaphor. It is the picture of a boat on a river being carried past the landing stage by a strong current. There are two important thoughts here. Firstly, the current of the Old Testament is one that should by right bring men to the proper landing stage. The Law is our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ. But very often there is misunderstanding of the Law: it becomes an end in itself and then it proves a current too strong for the frail bark that sails on it, and carries it away onto the rocks or out to the open sea. This in fact was what had happened with the Jews. They had misunderstood their own Law, and taken it to be a way of salvation in itself instead of a pointer to Him Who alone is the way, the truth and the life. And in that sad and tragic misunderstanding they had missed the mark and lost the prize of their high calling.

9) 2:1-4

The second point arising from the idea of drifting in 1 is this: the word of the gospel which was being proclaimed to them was a new word, whereas the word of the angels, the word of the old economy, had the force of established custom and tradition on its side. And the force of old established custom can be very great indeed. Someone has said, "There are currents of thought, feeling and action, which, if not resisted, carry down to the sea of death!" And those to whom these words were first written were in fact in danger of being carried headlong by the current of established religious custom. They were saying something like this: "We follow the customs of our pious forefathers, in observing the word of God spoken to them by angels, and we do not hold with the doctrine of Jesus which requires us to break with these old customs and embrace something new and revolutionary." And the Apostle says, "Beware! You are in the grip of a current which is going to sweep you right past the gate of heaven." The applications of all this to our contemporary situation is surely obvious. The 'new' word of the gospel is so often refused on these very grounds by those brought up in the traditional religious life of 20th century Scotland, in a tradition of good works which represents as great a misunderstanding of the gospel as that which Paul and the other apostles encountered in the Judaism of their day, a tradition that is carrying so many past the 'landing-stage' of grace out into the open sea without hope of salvation. To cling to old established tradition, to 'What we have always been used to', when that is proved by the Scriptures and by the teaching of Christ to be wrong is dangerous folly. This is the point of the warning in 3. "How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?"

10) 2:5-9

It is not always easy to see the thread of the argument here but thread there is in this closely reasoned epistle. The world to come - the new heaven and earth - is to be subject to men, not angels, therefore the new dispensation, which has as its purpose the ultimate fulfilment of the glorious destiny appointed for man by God, is greater and better than the old. We have here, in fact, a further corroboration of the thesis expounded in ch 1. For if the ultimate destiny of man is to rule over the world to come (8), then man, although for the present he may be lower than the angels, is better than they. And if man is better, how much more is the Son of Man, the Man Christ Jesus! This high destiny of man however, is by no means apparent, indeed the opposite. In spite of the amazing technological advancements 20th century man has made in his attempts to subdue the world to himself, it is only too true that he has succeeded in loosing dark powers over which he has no real control, and that they in fact now dominate his life, to the terror and dread of the world. No; it is not this kind of subjection of which the Scriptures speak, but one which has a moral and spiritual basis. That high destiny is perceived only by faith as we consider Jesus and think on what He is and what He has done in His atoning for us. We look on the one hand on the world with all its sin and misery, with all the dark sinister powers that oppress it; we look at man, disappointed in all his hopes of the ideal life, and ask, 'Are the promises of God in vain?' But then we look beyond man, and we see Jesus crowned with Glory and honour, and in Him we see the fulfilment of the high calling of God for mankind. In His victory we see the total healing of our life and the pledge and assurance that our ultimate destiny will come to pass. His presence in glory as a Man is the earnest and guarantee that one day we shall be there as men, as members of the new humanity, made perfect in Him, and without spot or wrinkle or any such thing.

11) 2:9-13

But now, Christ's being made a little lower than the angels opens up a wonderful passage as the Apostle explains why this was, and the rest of the chapter is taken up with an exposition of the death that He died for our sakes. And in this, incidentally, we surely see His immeasurable superiority over the angels. There are three statements of fundamental importance made concerning Christ's death. The first is in 9, where we read that by the grace of God He tasted death for every man. What does this mean? We once read a tremendous sermon on this text, in which the preacher went right through the New Testament in its reference to death as we know it, and pointed out how our Lord repeatedly called this, not death, but sleep (e.g. Lazarus: he is not dead, but sleepeth). But when the Scriptures speak of His death, it was not sleep, but death. There is a fundamental difference between Christ's death and death as we know it. What we know as death, gruesome and horrible as it is, is but sleep. He alone died, in the full meaning of the term. For death, in its fullest sense, means separation from God, for it is the wages of sin. No one has ever died as Jesus died, because no one has ever been separated from God as Jesus was. He tasted death, drinking its cup to the bitter dregs, so that we might never have to put our lips to it, This is the meaning of the terrible cry of dereliction, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" This is what it meant for Him to taste death. He went outside the gates of God for our sakes, that we might be brought home to the Father's house,

12) 2:14-18

The second statement about Christ's death is in 14 where we are told that through death He has destroyed him that had the power of death, that is, the devil. Through the death of Christ Satan is destroyed, not in the sense that he is put out of existence, but that he is robbed of his power. It means that since Calvary and Easter evil has lost the initiative in the world, and is under orders to the strong Son of God. We may use a simple illustration to make the point. When a current of normal voltage is passed through an electric bulb, it is captured, so to speak, by the filament, and held fast, and so the bulb lights up. But pass 100,000 volts through, and the filament bulb and all will be blown to smithereens. It is not nearly strong enough to hold the strength of current passed through it. In like manner, when man, in his sin, enters into death, death holds him prisoner, being too strong for him. But when Christ the mighty One passed through death, it was not possible that death should hold Him. He burst its bands and destroyed it as an effective prison house forever. In this way he is able to deliver those who through fear of death were all their life-time subject to bondage. O let us realise to the full that the death of Christ is the opening of the prison-house for all who believe in Him, and the spoiling of the great enemy of souls!

13) 2:14-18

The third statement about the death of Christ is found in 17. Here Christ is spoken of as making reconciliation for the sins of His people. The word in the Greek is the word translated elsewhere in the New Testament as propitiation. This is a word which speaks of the controversy that sin has raised between man and God and of the turning away of the divine anger by the atoning blood of our great Mediator. We are thus brought to the very heart of the idea of substitution. For this is the predicament, that while atonement, to be real and effectual, must come from man, man because of his sin cannot make that atonement. Not only so. The problem is so great, so infinite, that only a God could deal with it. And into this mystery our Lord entered, very God and very man, the God-man Mediator, and as God and man met the infinite responsibilities of the situation in the death that He died. Newman's wonderful hymn, 'Praise to the holiest' (C.H. 32) expresses this as surely and precisely as any outside Holy Writ in the double paradox of the words:

O generous love; that He Who smote
In man, for man, the foe,
The double agony in man
For man should undergo.

In man - for man, yea, God as man grappling with the mystery of iniquity and once for all making full atonement. What could not such a Saviour do for us!

14) 3:1-6

The 'wherefore' in 1 links the exhortation the Apostle is about to give to what he has just said in ch 2. In view of Christ's atoning and reconciling work, he says, consider Him, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession (not profession). And, having compared Christ with angels, he now proceeds to compare Him with Moses. The next three chapters deal with this comparison; here, however, our attention is focused on the idea of Christ's Apostleship, and His Priesthood is taken up in 4:14-5:10. In what sense, then, is it said that Christ is the Apostle of our confession? Well, the comparison here is between Christ and Moses, and the writer is concerned to demonstrate the superiority of Christ over Moses, and we will best understand this word 'the Apostle of our confession' in terms of Moses' apostleship. Moses was an apostle in the sense that he was sent by God to be the deliverer of His people ('apostle' literally meaning 'One who is sent'), and it is in this sense that Christ is compared with him. It is not Christ's prophetic office that is under consideration so much as His redemptive office. As Moses was sent to lead Israel out of Egypt, so Jesus was sent from God to be the world's Redeemer, to lead men into the land of life of rest. Later in the chapter we read of Israel's experiences in their wilderness journeyings and this is surely the key to the understanding of this word. Christ our Apostle is counted worthy of more glory than Moses and that for two reasons: (i) Moses was a servant in the house of God, Christ is the Son; (ii) Moses' faithfulness was a type of something to come, and foreshadowed the greater faithfulness of Christ in a greater deliverance. The transient, passing nature of Moses' apostleship is therefore stressed, in contrast to the abiding and eternal nature of Christ's.

15) 3:7-11

These words bring us to the second warning of the epistle. The quotation is from Psalm 95:8-11 and the words 'provocation' and 'temptation' are rendered in the RSV as they are in the original, Meribah and Massah. They refer to incidents that took place in the experience of Israel (see Exodus 17:7) in which they murmured against the Lord in their unbelief (see also Numbers 20:13). The former reference stands almost at the beginning of the wilderness journey whereas the latter is at the end. This may be the force of the mention of forty years in 9. The fact is that all the way through the wilderness the Israelites were characterised with this attitude of unbelief. We may recall that Stephen, when giving his masterly summing up of Israel's history in Acts 7, ended with the words 'Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye'. This was the simple truth about the Jews down their long history, and it is this propensity that our Apostle is warning them against here. And the force of the warning is this: If when Moses was disobeyed in the wilderness, disaster befell the people, how much more disastrous will it be if the voice of Him Who is greater than Moses, even Christ, is neglected and disobeyed?

16) 3:12-15

These words crystallise the real nature of the problem and the warning - an evil heart of unbelief. This was the root of the matter so far as the Israelites were concerned - not amiable weakness or unfortunate failing, but hearts infected and corrupted and hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. This is to call an ugly thing by its proper name. Unbelief is not an affliction to be struggled with, but a sin to be confessed and forsaken, and it is part of the deceptive power inherent in sin that we should so often fail to realise this. How easy it is to be deceived in the spiritual life, especially when there is such a subtle fifth-column within us aiding and abetting every outward temptation to yield to the deception! A constant watch needs to be kept against the snares and wiles of Satan. To help us in this the Apostle adds, 'Exhort one another daily'. But there is exhortation and exhortation, and we scarcely think he would hold any brief for the kind of Christian who conceives it as his duty to go around putting everybody right. It is bad psychology as well as unhelpful spiritually to be constantly censorious and self-righteously critical in one's attitude to others. It is paradoxical but true that those who are most fitted, by reason of their spiritual maturity and discernment, to admonish and exhort their fellow-believers, are less inclined and more restrained than those who are not. This is why, when they do exercise this spiritual discipline, their words are worth heeding. Nor must we forget that the inspiration and example of a faithful and consistent walk is often a much more eloquent exhortation than many words could ever be.

17) 3:16-19

The AV rendering of 16 is not clear. It should read, along with 17 and 18 as one of a series of questions the Apostle asks, thus: 'For who, when they had heard did provoke? Was it not all who came out of Egypt by Moses?' This makes the question similar in form to the others in 17 and 18. The force of these questions is that it was the very people whom God brought out of Egypt, and who were destined for such great privileges by Him, who failed so disastrously and brought judgment upon themselves. It is not enough to begin well; it is necessary to hold fast the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end (14). A good beginning does not of itself ensure a good ending; many who begin well fall away after a time, as was the case with that whole generation. Their exclusion from the Promised Land does not, to be sure, imply forfeiture of salvation, but loss of reward and blessed fulfilment of their destiny. But this could be a cause for relief and complacency only to hearts that are still under the deception of Satan, for in the glory it will be everything just to hear the "Well done, good and faithful servant; enter thou...." These, we are told, could not enter in because of their unbelief (19), and this is the real application for the believer who is unfaithful. Israel as a whole may not have been concerned, in their blindness of heart, not to have been allowed to enter in, but Moses certainly was, and it should be highly disturbing to us - aye, much more so than it often is! - that such a giant as he forfeited the reward of long years of faithfulness by his lapse at the end (Numbers 20:12; see also Deuteronomy 32:48-52). Well might the Apostle say, 'Take heed, brethren...!'

18) 4:1-2

It will be useful at this point to stand back a little, as it were, to see the pattern of the Apostle's thought. He has already, in ch 1, described our salvation in Christ in terms of lordship over the world to come; and in ch 2, in terms of deliverance from sin and Satan through the great atonement and reconciliation wrought by Christ our merciful and faithful High Priest. Now he pictures salvation under the aspect of rest, and this is the theme of the whole chapter. Salvation is so many-sided that we cannot hope to comprehend it under one image. That is the first point here. The second is to notice how the Apostle links the Old and New Testament times together (2). The gospel preached was the same in both dispensations - a gospel of rest. We should beware therefore of assuming - as some do to the misunderstanding of the Scriptures and the impoverishment of their spiritual experience - that God's dealings with Israel were on the level of material blessings rather than spiritual. This is to fail to see the true meaning of the Old Testament story, and the New Testament, both here and elsewhere, such as 1 Corinthians 10, refuses to countenance such a misinterpretation. Salvation by grace through faith is the one unifying theme of the Scriptures.

Note also the continued emphasis on fear (1), The Apostle is not afraid to use this as a moral restraint and constraint upon his readers. According to the Scriptures there is a moral power in fear, and we need not be over-concerned about the assertion the psychologists make about its crippling and disintegrating power in people's lives. There are some lessons that God can teach us only by making us afraid. It is good that we should have a healthy fear of falling short as believers. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom! Not that the Apostle stresses it exclusively. He is much too wise for that. Indeed there is a finely balanced alternation of hope and fear throughout which is both healthy and wholesome. We may well trust the 'psychology' of the Holy Spirit in His dealings with us!

19) 4:2

We pause another day at this verse to consider the implication of the words 'not being mixed with faith'. There are two ways of taking this, dependent on which translation is followed. If we take it as it stands in the AV the idea is that faith is the all-important ingredient without which the mixture is incomplete and is unsuccessful. In baking it is said that the skill lies in the mixing. It may also, however, refer to the deeper 'mixing' which takes place when food is assimilated by the body and absorbed into the system and converted into energy and body tissue. This is very telling in relation to what we sometimes call 'head-knowledge' in things spiritual. It is possible to acquire a very considerable amount of knowledge of the faith in this way, but unless it is assimilated, to become 'part of us', it is not only valueless but also positively dangerous to the spiritual life. The truth of the gospel must not only be grasped by the mind, but responded to with heart and will.

Another translation, however, puts it thus: 'They were not united in faith with those who heard'. This seems to mean that when the Word was preached there was a division among those who heard it, and some did not hear it in the fellowship of faith. This is only too true in experience, and bears witness to the dividing power of the Word in the lives of men - to some a savour of life unto life, to others a savour of death unto death. No one is ever the same after hearing the Word of God; either we are drawn by it, as our hearts respond in faith, or we are hardened, as we resist its claims. There is no middle course. Solemn thought!

20) 4:3-10

This is a difficult passage, and understanding is not made easier by the AV rendering of some of the verses. The NEB or the RSV will help greatly here. The 'if' in 3 and 5 is certainly wrong, and the phrase ought to read, 'They shall not enter....' We should read 7 as in the RSV, 'Again He sets a certain day', 'Today', saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, 'Today, when you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts'. 'Jesus' in 8 does not refer to our Lord but to Joshua. So much for details of interpretation. Now as to the meaning, there are those who take the passage to refer to the higher realms of Christian experience, but this is to misunderstand the message. The general context should make it clear that the Apostle is using the idea of rest as an illustration of God's salvation, as he has used other ideas in previous chapters. What he is saying is this: there is a rest, because God speaks of it in His Word. What is this rest? It is not merely the creation rest, nor is it the rest of Canaan. Both these were types of a deeper rest of faith which was offered to the people in the old dispensation. Psalm 95 - from which the quotations are taken - speaks of rest and since this was written after Israel entered Canaan, it cannot refer to the rest of Canaan, but to something later - later even than David who spoke of it as something to come. Always - in Old Testament times - there was this prophetic pointing forward until the day when the Son of God Himself came in the flesh and said, 'Come unto Me.... and I will give you rest'. Christ is therefore the fulfilment of the Old Testament promise of rest.

21) 4:11-13

Since it is by faith that we enter into God's rest and salvation, the enemy is unbelief (11), and this is just as true today as it was in the days of the Israelites. Their long history of failure in this respect is held up to us as a grim warning and as something against which we must at any cost arm ourselves. 'Let us labour', says the Apostle. There is, it would seem, a play upon words and a paradox here, for the 'work' of faith to which the gospel summons us is to cease from works, and 'ceasing from works' is the hardest thing on earth to do, when we are proud of our works and are depending on them for our acceptance with God. A drowning man may find it extremely difficult to stop struggling when a would-be rescuer bids him to, but his safety will certainly depend on his doing so. He must cease his own efforts to save himself and commit himself to the 'works' and 'efforts' of another. But this is in fact to cease from himself, to 'die' to his natural inclinations altogether. This is the inner meaning of repentance, and explains why so many 'good-workers' are unwilling to humble themselves to receive the gift of salvation from Christ. It is a proud independence of spirit that keeps them back. And it is this that the Word of God, quick and powerful as it is (12), searches out and exposes in a man's heart, discerning his thoughts and intents and revealing the bitter root of unbelief within him.

22) 4:14-16

The picture the Apostle gives us in 12 of the Christian life is one in which 'we expose our whole existence at every point to the cutting edge, the trenchant judgment of the Word of God'. This is the whole point of attending upon the ministry of the Word - it is in order to allow its discipline to do its gracious work in us, fashioning us, moulding us, renewing us. And lest we should be too disturbed by this picture - and at times it can be very challenging and frightening! - we are given this wonderful assurance in 14-16 about our great High Priest. The paradoxical thing about the Christian life is that the more we dare to expose ourselves to the discipline of the Word of God, the more we come into contact with this merciful and faithful High Priest. The sharpness of the Word may indeed break our hearts, but it is then that we meet with Him Who heals the broken in heart and binds up their wounds. That is the wonderful thing about God's dealing with us - although often sharp and painful, it is also exquisitely tender and loving. Indeed, His tender grace often comes to us in stern garb, dressed as the Word that is quick and powerful, sharper than any two-edged sword, and when in faithless fear we shrink from that cutting sword we are in fact closing our hearts to His tender grace. This may explain why some lives seem so devoid of that blessed experience - they have refused the healing hurt of the disciplines of God. We may take comfort and encouragement from these verses, in the realisation that our great High Priest is never very far behind the cutting edge of the Word. This should help, more than most things, to allay our fear of the Word and encourage us the more boldly to submit to its ever deepening work in our lives.

23) 5:1-6

We come in this chapter to a consideration of the High Priestly work of Christ. First of all the Apostle discusses the office of High Priest in general, going back to the Old Testament writings for the picture he gives. The priest is 'for men... to God', just as a prophet is 'to men.... for God'. There are two points to note here. First of all, the phrase 'gifts and sacrifices' (1). There is a distinction in the two terms which is very important. Sacrifices for sin we can well understand, but there is something else necessary in the divine-human relationship. If we think in terms of what God requires of us as His creatures, leaving out the question of sin altogether for the moment, we may realise that His desire is for the love and devotion and homage of our hearts. These are the 'gifts' that are well-pleasing to Him. This stands even when the question of sin has been dealt with by sacrifice, and it is this twofold respect in which Christ our High Priest 'stands in' for us in the substitutionary atonement He made on our behalf. Secondly, a high priest must have two principal 'qualifications' - and we may well apply this to all who seek to serve God in the gospel - he must have compassion (2), and he must be called of God (4), not the one without the other. It would be difficult to decide which was the more important. Certainly no one who does not feel the constraint of the gospel - 'woe is me if I preach not...' should venture into the service of the Lord, but that is only one element according to this word, and if a man conscious of the call of God does not also have a heart touched with the feeling of the infirmities of men, he will not make much headway. An unfeeling 'high-priest' is a contradiction in terms. But of this more tomorrow.

24) 5:1-6

The word translated 'compassion' is not the usual word used in the New Testament for Christlike compassion and sympathy. The NEB translates it, 'He is able to bear patiently with the ignorant and erring', but the word is fuller even than that, and almost suggests 'standing in the middle of the human situation'. This could mean two things: not only that a true High Priest must get right alongside men in their needs and be one with them in all the cares and anxieties that beset their lives, but also that he should be able to strike a 'happy mean' in relation to his dealing with their sins, that is to say, he must avoid the two extremes to which we are all too prone to deviate in our attitudes to the sins of others - on the one hand being too hard and harsh in our treatment of offenders and on the other being far too soft and lenient, not to say sympathetic with them in their sins. It is right neither to excuse and condone sin, nor to be unfeelingly condemnatory of it. We have known those who are hard, critical and censorious in relation to the sins of others - and no one would ever dream of going to them if he had fallen into sin. But there are also those who are far too soft and sentimental with sin and sinners - and strangely enough in our best moments we know also that it does little good to go to such people when in trouble, for they heal our hurt too slightly. But there are those to whom we can go unhesitatingly with our failures: we know it will be a painful business, for they will not spare us, and may whip us soundly, but we know also at the same time that their hearts are full of tenderness and gentleness towards us. They love us too much to let us off. That is the mark of Christ. He has compassion on the sinner, but shows no mercy on his sin. He supremely and perfectly fulfils this word about the 'happy mean' and those who are most Christlike in His service approximate most closely to His example.

25) 5:7-10

The Apostle is referring to our Lord's fellow feeling with us, and turns our thoughts to the agony of Gethsemane, as if to say, "This is how 'human' He is". In what sense however can it be said that He was heard in that 'He feared?' (The NEB translates it, 'Because of His humble submission His prayer was heard'). This cannot refer to His prayer 'Let this cup pass from Me', for in fact He did drink it, to the dregs. It speaks rather of the (unrecorded) cries for strength and help from God to enable Him to walk the way of the Cross appointed for Him. This was the prayer that was heard (see Luke 22:43). And it is certainly striking to note the marked change that appears in the gospel record when Jesus moved out of the Garden. Troubled and burdened as He was when He entered it, His demeanour was thereafter marked with a serene calm that spoke of a battle that had been won and of prayer that had been answered. Then, in (8) the phrase 'He learned obedience...' This does not mean that Jesus learned to obey by the things He suffered, as if to suggest that before He suffered He was not obedient. That could not be. Rather, it means that He learned what obedience to the Father's will costs in the things that He suffered. It was thus that He was made perfect (9), in the sense of being brought into His full destiny as the Redeemer of God's people. It was His sufferings that brought Him 'into His own', as it were, as the Author of eternal salvation.

26) 5:11-14

The New Translation puts 11 thus: "About Melchizidek we have much to say, much that is difficult to explain now that you have grown so dull of hearing". There is a great challenge for us here. Hebrews is an epistle we do not read very much because it is so difficult to understand. But when we say this we are in fact passing judgment on ourselves according to the Apostle. He says that his teaching is difficult only to those whose ears are dull of hearing and not truly open to the gracious word of the Lord. This is only too true of the teaching of the gospel in general - does not Paul take the same line in 1 Corinthians 2, 3? - and we may learn from this that the real problem in our lack of grasp and understanding of spiritual truths is not that we are inadequately endowed with intellectual gifts, but that we have refused to grow up spiritually. The Apostle's point here is not that they are babes in Christ - for to be a newborn babe in grace is a natural stage, albeit the initial one, of Christian experience - but that they have remained babes when they should have been growing steadily and developing senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Arrested development is just as tragic and heartbreaking in the spiritual life as it is in the natural. It is a living death, and a travesty of what life ought to be.

27) 6:1-3

Chapter 5 ends with a statement about two kinds of Christians - babes and mature believers. The message of chapter 6 is that not only is it highly unsatisfactory to remain babes, but also highly dangerous. This is the point of the caution in 3 - 'if God permit'. Too much preoccupation with first principles - contentment with 'the simple gospel' - along with an unwillingness to 'go on' can bring its own penalty of spiritual disqualification. So far as the deep things of the Spirit are concerned, it is possible to be left of God for want of seeking Him. As someone has put it, 'there is a timelimit to the opportunity to go on'. It is interesting to see what the Apostle includes in 'first principles' that need to be left behind (not in the sense of dispensing with them, but of going on from them refusing to let them become preoccupations or 'hobby-horses' (!) in our spiritual lives). There are those who never get beyond their preoccupation, not to say obsession, with baptism or the gifts of the Spirit (laying on of hands). This, we learn, is not, as they suppose the mark of an advanced position, of being 'far ben' in the things of the Spirit, but on the contrary of immaturity. It is not too much to say that by their harsh, obsessional addiction to such views, they have excluded themselves (and, it may be, forever) from real advancement to a gracious maturity of experience. They have chosen to dwell in that particular sphere, making these things their life, and God has left them to their choice. Solemn thought!

28) 6:4-8

This passage is, by common consent, one of the most difficult in the entire epistle, if not the whole New Testament. Several interpretations have been offered in explanation of the solemn, frightening words. One is to take it as referring to the possibility of a man who has been truly saved falling away again and being eternally lost. But this would be to contradict the whole weight of evidence in the Scriptures that salvation is forever and cannot be lost or forfeited, Everlasting life would not be everlasting if it could be interrupted by anything whatsoever. When a man is in Christ he is a new creation, and the new creation, unlike the old, does not pass away. God elects men from all eternity, and in Christ we are predestinated from before the foundation of the world to inherit eternal life. It is unthinkable that such roots could ever be plucked up. We take first, then, a word of encouragement and assurance from this passage, and especially offer it to sensitive souls for whom such words are invariably a source of terror and anxiety. We refer to those who have dread of having committed the unpardonable sin. If salvation is forever, then a true believer cannot commit the unpardonable sin. And those most frightened about this are the very least likely to have done so. Take comfort, troubled one, if this is your secret dread, for it cannot apply to you.

29) 6:4-8

Another explanation of these words is that what is described is a 'spurious conversion'. Enlightenment is spoken of, it is true, but light in the mind is not the same as life in the soul. It speaks of 'tasting the heavenly gift and the good word of God', but to taste is one thing, to swallow another. We may remember in this connection our Lord's parable of the sower, and the seed which sprung up having all the evidence of true growth, then withered. But, convincing as this interpretation may be, it seems to make shipwreck of the phrase in 4, 'It is impossible'. Certainly when a man undergoes a spurious conversion, especially if, as is often the case, he has been swept off his feet by an emotional wave without having experienced a word of regeneration by the Spirit, it is subsequently far more difficult to reach him with the gospel. But can we say that it is now impossible to reach him? It is questionable whether, in the light of either Scripture or experience, we could venture so far as to say so. Nor can it refer to backsliding, deadly and dangerous as this can be, for backsliders have been known to be completely restored, and God promises in His Word to do so (Hosea 14:4). There remains only one more possible interpretation, and it is that the words refer to true believers falling away, not from salvation, but from their reward. That is to say, a believer can so trifle with eternal things that he becomes 'disqualified' in God's sight. To this we shall turn in detail in tomorrow's Note.

30) 6:4-8

The interpretation of these words which refers them to the possibility of a believer becoming a castaway, in the sense of being disqualified and thus losing his reward, seems, in our present state of spiritual understanding, to be the most likely one of all. We should bear in mind that the Apostle has already been referring in previous chapters to Israel's failure to enter into the Promised Land because of unbelief. Now, Israel was God's covenant people, and they were not finally disowned as to the inheritance of eternal life, but they lost the privilege of inheriting the land and were turned back into the wilderness. The parallel is therefore with His new covenant people, the Church, failing to lay hold of His promises for them and enter His destiny for them. The awful words 'it is impossible....' (4) must therefore refer to some significant crisis point in the sin of unbelief which is really a point of no return. Later on in Hebrews (10:26, 27) the Apostle speaks of 'sinning wilfully', and this, it would seem, refers to just such a point, when human sin passes beyond the stage of having in its composition the element of frailty and weakness, 'All we like sheep have gone astray', which makes sin forgivable, and becomes pure rebellion. This is very frightening, for who is to draw the line between the one and the other? It may be that God draws the line when we are not conscious of His doing so, and says 'Enough!', and swears in His wrath, 'They shall not enter into My rest'. Certainly, the only way of avoiding the danger of sinning wilfully is to strive with might and main, and inasmuch as lieth in us, not to sin at all. This is the point of the warning here. Therefore, let us go on, lest we go back.

31) 6:9-15

Having uttered the stern warning of the previous verses, the Apostle assures his readers that they did not belong to that category in that 'things that accompany salvation' were evident in their lives (see 10). It is clear that what he has in mind is the quality and fruitfulness of Christian living rather than the possession of spiritual gifts. 'By their fruits shall ye know them', said our Lord, and this, ultimately, is the only possible proof of the reality of any profession of salvation. The force of this gracious assurance however, lies in 11, in the words 'unto the end'. For they were being tempted to turn back, after having begun so well, and revert to the old ways. And so Abraham is instanced as an example not only of faith but of patience, thus demonstrating that patience (patient enduring -15) is one of those things that accompany salvation. The evidence of the reality of Abraham's response to the call of God was that all along, and at every point of his experience, he was prepared to wait patiently for the fulfilment of God's faithful word to him. What Paul says of him in Romans 4 in another connection, is true of every subsequent experience in his life - 'he staggered not but was strong in faith.... being fully persuaded....' We may well call this the moral enterprise of faith. This is how faith 'works', and only when it works thus can we be sure that salvation has really taken root in our lives,

32) 6:16-20

There is a great wealth for us in a true understanding of this passage. Alternative translations should be consulted in order to realise the full force of the Apostle's words. The RSV puts 16 thus: "Men indeed swear by a greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation". J.B. Phillips has, "an oath is the end of all quibbling". And God, so anxious to convince men of His trustworthiness, not only gives them His promise, but also condescends to follow the practice of men and confirm His Word with an oath. How much more should this be regarded as final for confirmation? So that now there are two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to prove false, so that "we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us" (18). The idea of hope as an anchor of the soul is a wonderful one, and will require further thought in tomorrow's Note. In the meantime, we must note the insistence here that ultimately, everything in the Christian life depends upon faith in God's faithful word. It is written of Abraham that he 'believed God' - so simple, so uncomplicated, but so utterly demanding. This is the life of faith. 'Standing on the promises' - to understand aright what this means is to have comprehended all the deepest issues of spiritual life and to ensure steadfastness and true growth in grace. By this alone can we endure to the end.

33) 6:16-20

It is significant that the Apostle's word here about hope being as an anchor of the soul follows upon the discussion of the possibility of 'falling away' or being weak and wavering in faith. This picture from the sea and the ships and the storms is a well-chosen one. These early Christians were certainly storm-tossed, and subject to various pressures that were like to bring their faith into jeopardy. And the Apostle's advice is: "Fix your eyes on the hope that is set before you: that will steady you and keep you unmoveable whatever the storms that beat upon you". Reference has already been made to Israel's failure at Kadesh Barnea. By this token we may fairly say that if only they had fixed their hearts upon God's promises to them of Canaan rest and blessedness, they would have been steadied on that critical day when the spies brought back the adverse report from the land. This is one of the more important lessons, not only of the Epistle to the Hebrews, but also of the New Testament itself. For wherever the hope of glory, the blessed hope of the coming of the Lord and the fulness and consummation of His Kingdom, is spoken of, it is spoken of as an incentive and encouragement to holy and steadfast living. There is nothing in the world so practical, rightly understood and grasped, as the doctrine of the last things. It is certainly true, both in the life of the Church and in the individual, that as and when our real hope is fixed upon things to come our lives will be steadied and given a certain quality and one might say, stability, which nothing will shake. To know that our real life is hid with Christ in God is to know that even in the deepest distresses we have nothing to worry about in this life, for life here is but an incident to be lived certainly with a due sense of responsibility, but always in the recognition that it is but the preface or prelude to the timeless life that is in God. That is one of the meanings of 'entering within the veil'. Have you cast this anchor in the storms of life?

34) 7:1-3

We come now to the significance of Melchizedek, and in so doing resume the thread of the thought which was left at 5:11. The statements made in this chapter are from one point of view clear enough, but it is the context and significance of what is said in relation to the rest of the argument that we must try to grasp, and it is here that the difficulty lies. Bear in mind that the Apostle has been setting the New Covenant and dispensation of Christ against the Old, showing the immeasurable superiority of the New. Thus, Christ is better than the angels, than Moses, than Joshua; and now, Christ's Priesthood is shown to be superior to the Old Testament Aaronic priesthood. The Apostle displays this superiority - if we may anticipate the argument of the chapter - by pointing out that Jesus does not descend from the tribe of Levi, from which tribe the Aaronic priesthood came, but from Judah, a tribe that had no part in the Old Testament priesthood at all. Christ is a priest after another order, that of Melchizedek. It is to answer the question, "Who is this Melchizedek, and how is his order of priesthood superior to the Levitical order?" that he therefore proceeds to expound the references to Melchizedek as they appear in Genesis. And the first point is this: Melchizedek stands in the sacred record as one having neither beginning of days nor end of life, having no genealogy. This does not mean that he was an eternal figure in the sense of having a timeless, continuing existence. It is rather that the fact of there being no record of his origin or end is taken by the writer as an illustration of the point he is trying to make. Melchizedek just is, and as such he stands as a type, or foreshadowing of a greater than Himself Who was to come, Who really is eternal, Who really abideth continually. That is the meaning of the Apostle's reference to that mysterious Old Testament figure.

35) 7:1-10

The second point the Apostle makes is that this mysterious priest received tithes from Abraham, thus showing that Abraham, and in him his descendant, the sons of Levi, recognized his superiority over them. Anyone who could bless Abraham who had the promises must be great indeed, for it is always the less who is blessed by the better (7). All this may sound rather an ingenious and unusual way of reasoning, but it is not by any means a fanciful one, but imbedded in the structure of the Scriptures. For the phrase 'after the order of Melchizedek' is a quotation from Psalm 110 - an acknowledged Messianic Psalm, and one which is quoted in the New Testament almost more than any other Psalm. Without doubt it is a prophecy and prediction of the coming reign of the Messiah, and as such - and here is the significance of its being quoted here - stands as a confession and acknowledgement that the sacrificial system of the old economy was unable to deal with the problem of sin. It was ineffectual, because it had no inherent worth, Its sacrifices were but shadows cast upon the course of history by the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world and thus pointed beyond themselves to the One Who was to come, Whose Priesthood would really be effectual and sufficient for the needs of men. And this the Apostle now proceeds to deal with in the rest of the chapter,

36) 7:11-19

'Perfection' in 11 means 'achieving its desired and intentional end'. If in fact the Levitical priesthood had been able to effect what it in fact only illustrated and foreshadowed - namely, bringing men nigh to God (19) - there would obviously have been no need of any other priesthood to take its place. And the fact that David (in Psalm 110) speaks of another that would, in the fulness of time, supervene is ample proof of the weakness and unprofitableness of the old order (18). But to change the priesthood implies and involves a change of the whole constitution, so to speak. It is this that leads to the thought of a new covenant being instituted, and this the Apostle comes to in 22 and elaborates later in the epistle (ch 8).

It might help us, in this closely reasoned and intricate argument, to think of Paul's teaching about the law in Romans 8 and Galatians 3. In Romans 8:3 he speaks of 'what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh', and this is certainly the point here, although our writer is thinking more in terms of the old system as a whole. The 'better hope' in 19 corresponds to 'God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin' (Romans 8:3) - and this was effectual in bringing men to God. It is of this that the contrast between Aaron and Melchizedek speaks, for the one priesthood was after the law of a carnal commandment, that is, owing its existence to a system of earthbound rules (NEB) or by virtue of a command imposed from outside, but the other, after the power of an endless life, a life that cannot be destroyed, is a reference to Christ's risen and exalted life at the right hand of God. His is therefore an eternal, unchanging Priesthood, by virtue of which, as we shall see in 25, He is able to save to the uttermost them that come unto God by Him.

37) 7:20-25

The contrast is continued in these verses. In the old economy, priests were made without an oath (21); there was a long succession of them, since death necessarily brought changes in the priesthood; but this Priest, Jesus the Son of God, was consecrated by the oath of God (21) , and, Melchizedek-wise continues forever and has an unchanging priesthood, and therefore is able to save to the uttermost. A rather wonderful illustration of what this phrase 'save to the uttermost' means is found in the Old Testament picture of the high priest in Exodus 28. On the shoulders of the high priest's garments were two onyx stones which bore the names of the children of Israel, and it was said that 'Aaron shall bear their names before the Lord on his two shoulders for a memorial.' Also, on the breastplate of the high priest were twelve precious stones, one for each of the tribes of Israel, each bearing its name. The symbolism is surely clear: the high priest upholds the people before God, and bears them on his heart before the Father, and to Christ our great High Priest and Advocate with the Father this gleams and sparkles with blessing, for this is how He saves us - by exercising such special personal care over us in all the needs and concerns of our lives and upholding us in time of need. Well might Jude say in his epistle, 'He is able to keep you from falling' for with such upholding how could we not know an uttermost salvation!? He ever liveth to make intercession for us, and so His upholding is unchanging. Not only so. He is our Advocate with the Father, and the Holy Spirit is His advocate with us, and is the executor, so to speak, of His gracious and powerful intercession in our lives. Wonderful, wonderful salvation!

38) 7:26-28

The force of 'became us' in 26 is, as J.B. Phillips puts it, 'Here is the High Priest we need', perfectly fitted to our condition and need. This is true in more than one way. It is certainly true in terms of His Saviourhood, because only a holy Saviour could make atonement for sin. But it is also true in this sense, that only a holy Saviour could have compassion on us for our sins. This is not always or even often true with men, for holiness in men can take a forbidding turn, so that the more holy they are the less approachable they become. Now, the ultimate test of the reality of our sanctification is that sinners should find us approachable, people they can come to in their need, not easily shocked, and above all not censorious. Such an one is Christ, our Great High Priest, Who is at once completely firm with us and wonderfully gentle. This is what true holiness is and does, and this is how it should look in us. One of the deepest lessons in the spiritual life that we can ever learn is that the more holy and separate the life we lead, if it is real and authentic, the closer we will come to those who need our help and the closer they will come to us. But to be so sanctified in the other sense that men are frightened to approach us is at once our failure and our condemnation. Not for nothing does this Apostle emphasise the humanity of this Divine High Priest.

39) 8:1-5

The Apostle brings his argument about the kind of high priesthood that men need to a triumphant conclusion by his statement in 1 - we have such a high priest in Jesus Christ. This in fact is the climax of the point which was mentioned first in chapter 3, when we were asked to 'consider the apostle and high priest of our confession, Christ Jesus'. Now we are ready to pass on to the next consideration, which is the Tabernacle. The point here is the same as previously - the superiority of the true tabernacle over the old, inasmuch as the old tabernacle was simply a shadow, a pattern, of the glorious reality in the heavens, the house of God not made with hands. It is here that Christ's priesthood is exercised, not on earth, for the exercise of priesthood on earth was conferred by law on the sons of Levi, and Christ was of the tribe of Judah (4). The 'somewhat to offer' in 3 must refer to His offering of Himself for our sins, and both the old tabernacle and all the sacrifices offered therein were simply visible illustrations of this invisible reality to which the Epistle wishes to direct our attention. The test of faith is that it should be able to lay hold on the things that are unseen and eternal, beyond all visible representations of them in the Christian revelation only the intangibles are real.

40) 8:6-13

The Apostle however leaves the subject of the Tabernacle for a moment, to deal with another subject arising from it. For Christ's more excellent ministry (6) in the true tabernacle leads him to the idea of the covenant. His supreme ministry in fact was to initiate God's new covenant with men. This however opens up a tremendous subject and we will do well to pause for a little here in order to make certain things clear. The point made in these verses is that the first or old covenant was faulty, and that this necessitated the institution of a new one. Now, there is a certain amount of confusion about what the Scriptures teach about the covenants, but we will not go wrong if we remember that both the old and the new covenants (testaments) belong to the idea of the everlasting covenant of grace, made by God with His Son with a view to the redemption of the world. There are two developments of that covenant: the old, which was preparatory and partial, and the new which is final and fulfilling. And the relation between the two is that of promise to fulfilment, rather than of law to grace. If then the old is merely preparatory, foreshadowing something that is to come, then obviously it vanishes away when the reality which it foreshadows appears. John the Baptist, the greatest prophet of the old economy, said (of Christ) - and his words express perfectly the relation of the old and the new - "He must increase, but I must decrease". Exactly. The old is ready to vanish away when the new is come. But more of this in tomorrow's Note.

41) 8:6-13

The old covenant was restricted in its scope and intention, in that it related, not to all mankind, but to God's chosen people, the Jews. But it had an outward reference – 'in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed'. That is to say, Abraham and his seed were chosen, and God entered into covenant with them, in order that through them the world might be blessed. From Abraham there was to descend One Who would turn men from their sin, Jesus, the seed of Abraham. The whole Old Testament is the story of the fulfilment of that promise made to the patriarch. There were two great purposes in general in the whole history of the Old Testament: first to mould this family and this nation from the loins of Abraham into an instrument of blessing for the whole world; and second, to convince them that something more was needed, that in and of itself the old covenant could not save, but that in fact it pointed beyond itself to that which was to come. Thus, through the operation of the various means which God employed in this extensive 'education' of the chosen people, they began to recognize that sin was not something that could be got rid of by the blood of bulls and goats. This meant in turn that they began to look beyond themselves and indeed beyond the Old Covenant itself, realising that it was not big enough to deal with their problem. And the prophets began to see visions and dream dreams of One Who was to come, until in the fulness of the time He did come, to initiate a New Covenant which not only could cover sin, but deal with it and finally put it away. This is the significance and meaning of these glorious words (8-12).

42) 8:6-13

One further question needs to be discussed before we leave this chapter. The teaching has been that the new covenant came because the old was faulty and ineffectual. But this must be understood in the particular context of the Apostle's argument. For the question must inevitably arise, if we take the above statement in an absolute sense, "If the old covenant merely foreshadowed, but could not provide, a remedy for sin, what was the position of all Old Testament believers?" Had they in fact forgiveness, because on this thesis in the epistle to the Hebrews, it would almost seem as if they did not. This, however, cannot be the meaning of the Apostle, for in fact later on, in ch 11, he indicates that the patriarchs of old had a living and indeed victorious faith. The Old Testament symbols, shadows as they were, were surely efficacious for those who trusted, but - and this is the point - they had, so to speak, a provisional salvation, dependent upon the sacrifice that Christ was in the fulness of the time to make on the Cross. This is the real significance of the appearance of Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration with Christ and of their discoursing with Him, as Luke informs us, about the decease He was to accomplish at Jerusalem, reminding Him, as it were, that the entire Old Testament economy depended upon that death for their standing before God. Now, until that death on the Cross, the sins of the old economy were covered. At the Cross they were removed. (This is the meaning of the phrase in Romans 3:25, "to declare His righteousness for the remission of sins that are past"). The Cross in fact stands at the centre of history, having a backward reference as well as a forward one, casting, so to speak, its shadow backwards and forwards at the same time, availing as to eternal salvation both for the saints in the old economy and for those in the new.

43) 9:1-10

The means whereby God's people made their approach to Him was the tabernacle, and to this the Apostle now turns. In 5 he says that he cannot at this point in his argument speak particularly about the details of its furniture, but we must remember that he was writing to people who were familiar with the whole conception as we are not, and so we must pause, as they did not need to, in order to become clear in our minds as to the general structure and significance of this central Old Testament institution. The Tabernacle had three sections, the outer court, the holy place and the holiest of all. In the outer court, when you approached it from the gate, there was first of all the altar of burnt offering. Beyond it there was the laver in which the sacrificial washings took place. Beyond this was the door leading to the holy place, in which were three articles of furniture; on the right the table of shewbread, on the left the seven-branched golden candlestick, and beyond these the altar of incense facing the door into the holiest of all. Within this inner sanctum was the Ark of the Covenant in which reposed the tables of stone given by God on Mount Sinai. This was originally all the ark contained, but at a later stage of Israel's history there were added Aaron's rod that budded and the pot of manna as a kind of memorial of the wilderness wanderings of the people. Now the significance of these articles was symbolic. They spoke in shadows and illustrations of the Christ that was to come and it was because they did that believing souls coming to the Tabernacle and doing sacrifice there to God were accepted by Him and their sins covered until the time of the new covenant when they would be taken away.

44) 9:1-10

What then is the language that these symbols speak? In the outer court the altar of burnt offering spoke of the reality that no kind of approach could ever be made to God apart from sacrifice; guilt must first be put away. Next, the laver spoke of the necessity for cleansing from the defilement of sin. The shewbread in the holy place spoke of Christ the bread of life and of the power of God to supply His children's daily needs; the candlestick spoke of Christ the light of the world and of God's power to lead men out of darkness into the light of life. The altar of incense was not one on which sacrifice for sin was made, but rather it was the sweet-smelling 'sacrifice' of incense that was made there, and spoke typically of the offering believers made of themselves to God in devotion and consecration. As to the holiest of all, in the old economy the high priest entered in once a year, not without blood, to make atonement for the sins of the people. Apart from this solitary entry no one was allowed into the inner sanctum - and, as is said here in 8, the Holy Spirit signified that the way into the holiest - into God's presence - was not yet made manifest. Now the point in chapter 9 is that with the coming of Christ the veil separating the holiest of all from the rest and barring man's entrance into the presence of God was taken away and the way made open and accessible to all.

We may see how beautifully illustrative of New Testament truths the Tabernacle is when we place the epistle to the Romans alongside it. Paul's teaching on justification in chapter 3 corresponds to the altar of burnt offering; his teaching on union with Christ in chapter 6 to the laver which cleanses the defilement of sin; the provision of the Spirit in chapter 8 to shewbread and candlestick; and the great call to consecration in chapter 12 to the altar of incense where the living sacrifice is made. How wonderful!

45) 9:1-10

The three compartments of the Tabernacle may well seem to some to reflect three different levels of Christian experience and living, and indeed something of this nature may have been in the Apostle's mind as he unfolded his argument. For there are Christians who are quite content with the initial states of Christian experience: forgiveness is their concern, and beyond this they seem unwilling to go. 'Let us go on', said the Apostle in 6:1, leaving behind the first principles. But they never go on. You cannot say that they are not Christians, but it is true that they have never grown in grace and their lives do not bear the marks of the Lord Jesus upon them, and none of the fragrance of Christ is about them. They have remained, so to speak, in the outer court of the Tabernacle. Then there are others who have advanced somewhat from first principles, but have never got to the life that the New Testament holds out as the birthright of all true believers, the life represented by the inner court, or Holy Place. Still less have they penetrated into the Holiest of All, which speaks of communion with God in His Word. We recall how in olden time God, in speaking of the formation of the Ark of the Covenant, with the tables of stone within, said, "There I will commune with My people". Paul expresses the reality of this intimacy of fellowship when in Philippians 3:7-10 he speaks of counting all things loss "that I may know Him in the power of His resurrection". O may we never be content with less than the deepest and best in Christian experience. God save us from paddling in the shallows when we should be launching out into the deep of His love and grace!

46) 9:11-15

The contrast between the old and the new is continued in these verses, and this time emphasis is laid upon the blood of Christ as over against the blood of bulls and goats. There is a whole theology embedded in these words. We may look at it this way: why could the blood of bulls and goats not cleanse away sin? Precisely because bulls and goats are not moral beings and therefore their blood could have no moral value. The word 'blood' in Scripture signifies life laid down in sacrifice, and to speak of the blood of Christ means the sacrificial death that He died. Now why was His blood efficacious? Because it was the blood of One Who had never sinned. He 'offered Himself without spot' to God. That is the all-important factor. The sacrifice He made was of a life that was pure and spotless and holy and consequently wholly well-pleasing to God. This is the atoning element in Christ's work. God is holy, and demands holiness from His creatures, and nothing but this will satisfy Him. But holiness is what no man can offer God, for all have sinned and come short of His glory. But Christ offered Himself without spot on our behalf, and atoned for our lack of holiness by offering Himself in our place, laying on the altar of sacrifice a perfect righteousness, thus making up to God for what we could never give Him. It is this that gives His blood such infinite value and explains the phrase in 14, 'How much more....' It is indeed the dynamic of the gospel, and the repository of all saving and sanctifying power for the lives of men.

47) 9:16-24

An interesting and instructive second meaning of 'covenant' is now taken up in 16. The new covenant is likened to a last will and testament, which comes into force after the death of the testator. When once he dies, the terms of the will stand, and cannot be altered. In this connection we may recall our Lord's words, "For their sakes I sanctify myself that they also might be sanctified through the truth". That, so to speak, is one of the clauses of the will, which comes into force through His death! Then once more, the emphasis upon blood (18-22). Even the old covenant, which was only a shadow, and could not deal with the problem of sin, needed blood - for this reason: it pointed forward to the great fact that blood needed to be shed in order for the remission of sins. Interestingly enough, the Old Testament ordinance referred to in 19 concerns the cleansing of a leper - an instructive parallel for the leprosy of sin. In 21 there is seemingly a reference to the act of the high priest on the day of atonement of sprinkling blood on the mercy seat and the horns of the altar 'to make atonement for the holy place'. In 23 the Apostle goes so far as to maintain that the pattern of things in the heavens needs to be cleansed, and there is at least a suggestion here - substantiated by other parts of the Scriptures - of the far-reaching effects of man's sins, going far beyond the bounds of humanity. We recall that verse in Job (25:5) which tells us that the very stars are not pure in His sight. This is the universal, even cosmic effect of the sin of man, and it serves to throw into even greater relief the glory and majesty of Christ's redemptive work. How infinitely great must that redemption be!

48) 9:25-28

There are two points to note here, as the Apostle continues the contrast between the many offerings of the Old Testament priests and the once-for-all offering of Christ. First of all, there is a threefold mention of Christ's appearing - in 26, it is said that once (which means here 'once-for-all') in the end of the world, (i.e. the last days, which were ushered in by His coming) hath He appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. This 'appearing' embraces the thought of both Incarnation and Atonement, which after all are but two aspects of the same movement. Then, in 24, Christ is spoken of appearing in heaven for us, and this surely refers to His Ascension, which is the climactic movement, so to speak, of the drama of redemption which began with Incarnation. Then, in 28, it is said that He shall appear the second time without sin unto salvation - this is the final consummation of all He came to do for us men and for our salvation.

The second thing is this: in 28 it speaks of His appearing to them 'that look for Him'. There is a beautiful picture here. Turn back to Luke's gospel, chapter 1:8-22. In the story of Zacharias (v 21) it is said that the people waited for him to come out of the temple. Why? Because the custom of their religious ordinance was that they should wait eagerly for his re-appearing as the sign that sin had been covered and atonement made. Zacharias ought to have come out to proclaim forgiveness to the people. This is what lies behind the Apostle's words 'them that look for Him'. We are in fact in that position now, awaiting the consummation of a great redemption. He will appear without sin - as evidence that sin has forever been dealt with - unto salvation. This is our blessed hope. Well might we wait eagerly for Him! 'Even so, come Lord Jesus'.

49) 10:1-4

The contrast between the frequency of the old offerings - signifying their insufficiency - and the once-for-all offering of Christ continues here. In passing we may note the similarity of the teaching to that in the Epistle to the Romans. Here the Apostle states: 'The law.... can never... make... perfect!'; in Romans 8:3 Paul says, 'What the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh...' It is a perfect parallel, with only this difference, that in Hebrews it is the ceremonial law, with its sacrificial enactments, while in Romans it is the moral law with its inexorable sanctions that is in mind. In both however, the central lesson is the same - what the law (ceremonial or moral) could not do, Christ has done, once for all, in His death and resurrection.

The statement in 3 is likewise significant from this standpoint. It means that the whole Old Testament system is an eloquent witness to its own insufficiency, and that is why God instituted it. This is what the Apostle is teaching. 'The blood of bulls and goats' in its very impotence was pointing away from itself to Christ's coming and His sacrifice as the only power sufficient to remove the sins of the world and procure forgiveness for men. (For the reason why the blood of bulls and goats could not take away sin, see Note on 9:11-15).

50) 10:5-10

The point these verses is making is not that the New Covenant abolishes sacrifices in favour of something else but that it rejects animal sacrifice in favour of that personal sacrifice God willed for Christ and for which He prepared by appointing for Him the body of His Incarnation. It is in this body that Christ fulfilled all the perfect will of God - 'Lo, I come to do Thy will, O God' (9) - and, as we have already seen this is the atoning element in His sacrifice on the Cross. The quotations here are from Psalm 40, and we may say that their particular significance is that the Psalmist saw that what God wanted supremely was obedience to His will, and perceived, however dimly, the lineaments of One Who would give that perfect obedience to God. It is by this will - i.e. by the perfect performance of it by Christ - that we are sanctified. Once more we see the parallel to the teaching of Romans, where in 5:19 Paul says, 'By the obedience of One shall many be made righteous'. It was the value of this perfect obedience in the offering of the body of Christ that made His death atoning and efficacious. Only some of our great hymns stress this aspect of our Lord's death, but those that do capture some of the wonderful depth and richness of the apostolic teaching. See Hymn 703, particularly the lines,

My Saviour's obedience and blood
Hide all my transgressions from view.

51) 10:11-18

Once more we have the contrast in 11, 12 between the repetitive nature of the old covenant sacrifices and the once-for-all offering of Christ. Notice the significant phrases, 'sat down' (12) and 'perfected for ever' (14). They speak of a work that has been completed. In God's sight the work (of redemption) has been done, and no more offering for sin is required (18). This is what constitutes the incomparable superiority of the new over the old.

The quotation from Jeremiah 31:31-33 does not receive its full point in the AV, and a modern version should be consulted. It should read thus: "After the Holy Ghost says, 'This is the covenant...', He then adds, 'And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more'. In other words the heart of the new covenant is the remission of sins, their removal, being blotted out from the very memory of God. And if this be so, obviously there can be no kind of need for further offerings for sins that are no longer remembered by God. It was precisely because Jeremiah could see that the old covenant could not do this that he realised that another, new covenant was necessary. That new thing has come, says the Apostle here, in Christ, in Whom we have forgiveness for the past and the gift of new life with hearts inscribed with the laws of God (16).

52) 10:19-25

We come with these verses to the end of the doctrinal exposition and the beginning of the exhortation which the Apostle bases upon it. The pattern is - and here we are in harmony with all the other New Testament writings - "Since these things are so, since these are the facts of the situation, therefore there are certain things that we ought to do, as a consequence". But notice carefully what in fact he does say. He is not exhorting us here "to have boldness to enter in by the blood of Jesus". The exhortation begins at 22 "Let us draw near...." In 19-21, he sums up, so to speak, the argument of the previous chapters under three heads, and on the basis of this gives a threefold exhortation. There are three basic realities, he says, which as believers we possess - we have boldness, we have a living way, we have a high priest. To match this, he adds, "Let us draw near" (22), "Let us hold fast..." (23), and "Let us consider..." (24). The word for 'boldness' has a particular meaning in the New Testament, and is associated with 'boldness in speech'. It is the word used to describe the apostles' attitude when preaching the gospel. What the Apostle is indicating here is that through Christ's finished work in death and resurrection, we have now boldness of speech with God. Through Christ we are now 'on speaking terms' with God. Recall, for a moment how the epistle opens, "God.... hath spoken unto us in His Son". He instituted the gospel to break the silence, the estrangement, that sin brought between Himself and mankind, and through that gospel we are now on speaking terms with Him. That is the boldness of which the Apostle speaks, and which is ours in and through Christ. Wonder of wonders, that we should thus be allowed to speak to Him.

53) 10:19-25

The 'new and living way' is consecrated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh. The reference here is once again to the Old Testament tabernacle, in which the Holiest of All was separated from the Holy Place by a veil, which excluded men from the presence of God, and through which the high priest was allowed to pass only once a year on the day of atonement. When Christ died, we are told that 'the veil of the Temple was rent in twain, from the top to the bottom' (Matthew 27:51), signifying that by His death the way into the Holiest was now open. This veil, the Apostle says here, represented His flesh. We recall how John says, "The Word was made flesh" but the reference here is not merely to Christ's Incarnation, for it is not by His having been made flesh that the way is opened, but by His having become sin for us. His body was broken for our sakes. It is this that sets an open door before us which no man can shut. The word 'new' (20) has as its root meaning 'newly-slain' and this is surely significant as indicating that the basis of our access to the Father is the Lamb that was slain. The living way is not merely a way that leads to life, but one also that gives life. For we go on this new and living way into fellowship and in fellowship with our great High Priest. Such are our privileges under the New Covenant, and it is on this basis that the exhortation in 22-25 is based.

54) 10:22-25

The modern versions rightly translate 23 as 'the profession of our hope and this makes the Apostle's threefold exhortation highly instructive and significant, both in that it corresponds to the familiar pattern of New Testament epistles with their emphasis on the work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope, and also in that the remaining three chapters of the epistle are devoted to a lengthy exposition of 22-24: chapter 11, faith; chapter 12, hope; chapter 13, love. In 22, the meaning of 'hearts sprinkled and bodies washed' is that we are to have both the inward life and outward cleansed. There is no reference to baptism: moral, rather than ceremonial, cleansing is in view and the Apostle is speaking of the necessity of outward life and practice corresponding to inward cleansing. There is so much in 24 to challenge us. This simple word, 'Consider one another' cuts right across our self-preoccupation and self-centredness. The fact is, we usually have so little time to think of anyone but ourselves, and many of the sins of the saints arise precisely here. We hurt people so terribly by our thoughtlessness – not by active malice, but simply because we did not think. And the reason we did not think was because we were too engrossed in ourselves. Even in our prayers we are so taken up with our own spiritual state that we have scarcely ever reached the point of serious intercession for others. How few have 'a heart at leisure from itself to soothe and sympathise'! We cannot have too much encouragement towards this blessed end. Indeed, the Apostle's word is 'provoke', and this indicates how prone we are to lapse from such an attitude even when once we have begun to think a little of others. There is a mass of un-cooperation that requires constant prodding and disturbance, and we must help one another in this as, left to ourselves, we sink so easily into apathy and self-absorption.

55) 10:26-31

Again a solemn warning to remind us how critically important it is how we react to the truth of God, and this time, concerning wilful sin. What is wilful sin? The Apostle seems to have something definite in mind when he uses this phrase, and we need to understand it properly. In an earlier Note it was pointed out that there are two elements in sin, human frailty and weakness on the one hand, and revolt and rebellion against God on the other, and in greater or lesser proportions these are always combined. It is possible for one aspect to predominate and be in the ascendant in any particular act of sin, and it is possible for the one to increase until it almost eclipses the other and brings a man's heart into a state in which he deliberately flouts the authority of God. This means that his sin has passed beyond the realm of human frailty and weakness and verged on the demonic. This is the point at which wilful sin becomes a possibility, and it really speaks of a point of no return, a point at which nothing more can be done, even by God, for such an one. We recall how Jesus prayed, 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do', and Paul said, 'I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly and in unbelief'. But when a man does know what he is doing, and still deliberately turns his back upon Christ, when his problem is not a fatal weakness of nature, but pure rebellion against God, then he has reached the danger point. This is very frightening, but the Apostle means it to be. We may well ask, 'How do we know when we are in danger of sinning wilfully?' There is only one answer: we must strive to the utmost of our power to see to it that we do not sin at all!

56) 10:26-31

This warning is given in relation to the possibility of 'going back' and 'falling away' and failing of the grace of God, and is significantly couched in terms of turning away from Christ. And the first evidence of this is lapsing from worship (25). When gathering together in the fellowship of God's people is no longer an attraction, when hearing and studying God's Word no longer appeals, when pleasure in the things of God is so reduced as no longer to be sought after - this is the downward path that leads to spiritual shipwreck. To look upon incarnate goodness and no longer like it, to look on the suffering heart of God as seen in Christ crucified and turn away - this is to have chosen judgment for oneself. There remaineth no more sacrifice for sins when Calvary is spurned. God can do no more; He has nothing more to offer such an one. To refuse all that God has at such infinite cost offered necessarily means to do without Him, and to hand oneself over to His wrath. Well might the Apostle say, 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (31).

57) 10:32-34

The Apostle now recalls to his readers how it had been with them when first they began in the Christian way and how they had endured reproaches and afflictions and lived with their eyes and their hearts fixed upon the eternal hope. His point in doing so is surely clear and this is what constitutes the challenge of the passage for us - he is comparing their present wavering and faltering condition with those earlier days of faithfulness in order to prod them into an awareness of the beguiling deceitfulness of sin through which they were in danger of being led away from the truth. The thought here is echoed in Cowper's famous hymn, 'Where is the blessedness I knew when first I saw the Lord...?' This is a very disturbing passage. It is asking us with a quiet insistence, "Are you where you once were, spiritually? Can you look back to a time - a year ago, two years ago, ten years ago - when your heart was ablaze with the love of Christ, but now there is only a flicker of flame?" Ah, says the Apostle, remember what you once were, and get back to that earlier dedication. It is the only safe way!

58) 10:35-39

These words form a natural introduction to the next chapter which deals with the heroes of the faith, and what follows there is really an exposition of the phrase, 'Cast not away your confidence'. The Apostle shows how the saints of old held fast their confidence and stood firm and steadfast amid all kind of difficulties and pressures. This is the point here. And, having given such solemn warning in the previous verses of the disastrous consequences of falling away and going back, he now proceeds to encourage his readers with the assurance that the reward of standing firm and steadfast is very great. There is 'great recompense of reward'. The Lord rewards at compound interest, so we may gather from His own wonderful words in the parable of the Talents: 'Well done, good and faithful servant, thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things!'. Paul argues in similar fashion in Romans 8:18: 'I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us', and in 2 Corinthians 4:17, 'Our light affliction... worketh a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory...'. It is all a question of keeping our eyes fixed upon the unseen realities of the situation. Given this, argues the Apostle, then all will be well. The just shall live by faith - not by sight, resting upon the promises of the God of truth that cannot lie, resting patiently and unwaveringly until hope changes 'to glad fruition, faith to sight, and prayer to praise'.

59) 11:1-40

This is unquestionably one of the high mountain peaks of the biblical revelation. It is a glorious chapter, full of inspiration and encouragement which is of course the Apostle's intention. These heroes of the faith went forward (cf 6:1, 'Let us go on') in faith and patience and they therefore bear witness (12:1) to the reality and possibility of such a life in the midst of tremendous and sometimes almost insuperable difficulties, and encourage us to run with patience the race that is set before us.

There are two ways of studying this chapter, panoramically and in detail, and we shall do both. First of all we shall look at it in its general sweep, in the context of the argument of the epistle. We must see all that is said about the patriarchs and their response of faith to God's Word to them. In 1:1, the Apostle began by saying, 'God... hath spoken... in His Son'. Faith is our response to His Word, our acceptance of the invitation into fellowship with Him. We must also see the particular emphasis he is making. He is pointing out what is stressed in other New Testament epistles that the experience of pressure and opposition that his readers were undergoing is not untoward and out of the usual - as Peter says in his epistles (5:9), 'the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world'. It is precisely in the milieu of adverse circumstances that the Christian life has to be lived. It was in the teeth of opposition and antagonism that the heroes of faith endured, and it is to this that their lives bear witness.

60) 11:1-40

There is another point to be noted before we turn to a detailed examination of the chapter. It is that a very definite principle of selection seems to have been used by the Apostle. It is very fascinating to see how on occasion he passes over many of the outstanding incidents in the life of the character he is considering in order to emphasis one aspect which to him seems all important. Think for example of Jacob - his was an eventful, turbulent history, but the Apostle passes over it all and concentrates on his death bed. Bethel, Peniel - great crisis-points in his life are not even mentioned, but his dying action in blessing the sons of Joseph is. His point in this is to interpret the fulfilment of the divine purposes in a man's life. It is not the highlights in a man's life that are necessarily important, but the part he plays in, and the contribution he makes to, the redemptive purposes of God in history. These men had a part - a strategic part - to play in the divine plan of the ages, and God's primary concern with them was that they should be brought to the place where they could play their part. It is this that explains all the pressures that came upon them - God was at work bringing them into their true destiny in His purposes for the world. This is a royal way to think of life, but it is the way the Bible invites us to look upon it, and it is certain that when we do, many mysteries and many questionings find an answer of hope and peace. By faith we understand....

61) 11:1-2

We turn now to this glorious chapter in some detail. The statement in 1 is so well-known that we sometimes pass it by without understanding its meaning. J.B. Phillips translates it thus: "Faith means putting our full confidence in the things we hope for, it means being certain of things we cannot see." We need to be clear in our minds that "things hoped for" must be understood specifically, and not in general terms. Future salvation - i.e. salvation in its fullest sense - is what the writer has in mind, as a recollection of what has gone before in the epistle makes plain. At the end of chapter 10, he has been assuring his readers that the promise of God will not fail - "He that shall come will come", and here he says that faith in the promise is assurance of, and confidence in, its ultimate fulfilment. In the same way, 'evidence' means 'proof' or 'certainty'. This is very wonderful, for it means that a man can be sure of salvation in the 'here and now' without having to wait in an agonising uncertainty until the 'there and then'. As the Westminster Confession teaches, "Such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus... may in this life be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace... This certainty is not a bare conjecture and probable persuasion, grounded upon a fallible hope: but an infallible assurance of faith, founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation." This is the glad heritage of the children of God. We may know, beyond any peradventure, that we are saved, that we are eternally accepted, in Christ. And true faith is the assurance and certainty of this unseen hope!

62) 11:3

When we studied this verse in detail in a Sunday morning service, we discovered three lessons in it. In the first place, it asserts a spiritual basis for existence and reminds us of the spiritual dimension that underlies all life. This is a simple, but much-needed lesson today, for one half of the world disputes it and in the other half there are multitudes who, while paying lip-service to the reality of spiritual things, live on an entirely materialistic level, to all intents and purposes in practical atheism. God is not in all their thoughts except perhaps on an odd Communion Sunday. God and their own hearts witness how they think of Him

Secondly, in the words 'By faith we understand' we have a principle that applies to all spiritual life. True understanding of the meaning and mystery of life is possible only to one who has faith in Christ. Faith is the key to life, it is that which brings coherence to what is otherwise perplexing and baffling in human experience.

Thirdly - and this is one insight into the particularly difficult words at the end of the verse - the things which are seen (the visible creation) are not made out of other visible things, but out of nothing. This is the miracle of creation - God spoke matter into being, and before He spoke, there was nothing. This reveals a principle full of significance, for it tells us how God always works, whether in creation or redemption. When God comes to men in their sins, there is nothing in them to which He can appeal, so that when He visits them with salvation, something new is created, something that was not there before. As Paul says, "If any man be in Christ he is a new creation". It does not need much imagination to see what boundless possibilities there are for lives which allow the great Creator God to work in them, bringing into being in them all manner of beauty and loveliness, "Think what Spirit dwells within thee"!

63) 11:4

The story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4 has a monumental significance in that it is the record of the first home and family. It has many lessons for us. In the first place here was a home with religion at its heart; coming before God was, it would appear, a familiar and much practised habit with them. Not only so; it was a home where the things of God had been imparted to the children - how else could Abel have known how to draw near to Him? (See Proverbs 22:6). And yet it was a home that was clouded and darkened by sin, and we can only explain this tragedy that came upon them in terms of the sin of disobedience that had marred the lives of their parents in the Garden of Eden. "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap".

Back to Abel, however. He was moved by faith to offer an acceptable sacrifice by which he obtained witness that he was righteous - i.e. accepted as righteous before God. This is a faint shadow of the great sacrifice Christ offered for men in the fulness of the time on Calvary. We sometimes speak of the gospel being the dawning of a new day for humanity. Yes, but how does a day dawn? There are the first faint streaks of light in the eastern sky, barely perceptible, and scarcely piercing the darkness of the night. But that light slowly and steadily increases until finally the sun rises over the horizon. And so it is in the spiritual sphere. This story is one of the first suggestions of the light that was finally to break upon our sin-darkened world in the coming of Jesus Christ. Wonderful, isn't it, that Abel should have witnessed it?

64) 11:5-6

The brief story of Enoch, recorded in Genesis 5:22-24 is surely a testimony to the possibility of faithfulness in the darkest and most difficult circumstances, for he lived in the midst of the gathering darkness of the Cainite civilisation, prior to the judgment of the Flood, when godlessness and corruption were increasing dangerously on the earth. His 'translation' apart from death is a faint hint or shadow of a glorious alternative to death which God has prepared for the end time, and of which Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 15:51, "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed... " What we need to notice here is that while this translation was 'by faith', and therefore by the grace of God, Enoch's faith was of such a kind that it could be said of him that 'he pleased God'. It was not faith as a mere formal or technical attribute, nor was it faith merely in its initial and elementary, though genuine, aspects, but faith which brought him 'far ben' into a sweet intimacy of fellowship and communion with God. It was faith's full flower, for Enoch had entered into the fulness of spiritual experience in which he knew God as a Rewarder of all the deepest longings of the heart. Such a life is not without its cost – in surrender and yieldedness, as the word 'diligently' indicates (6). It is a word which sums up all that the Bible means when it speaks of the deep things of God. It echoes the words of the New Testament Enoch, the Apostle Paul, in Philippians 3:8-10, when he says, "I count all things loss.... that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection...." Such a life cannot be had for less!

65) 11:7

We have only to remember our Lord's words in Matthew 24:37 - "As the days of Noah were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be" - to realise that what we read here is not merely ancient history, but a word harshly topical for our own time. The story of the corruption in Noah's day (Genesis 6) makes grim reading, but it is perhaps significant that what our Lord focused attention upon was not the acts of violence and depravity but the fact that in all they did God was left out - "eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage... and knew not until the flood came and took them all away" (Matthew 24:38, 39). It was the complete secularisation of life that finally brought judgment upon that evil generation. It was this that Noah's faith discerned, and it led him to do two things - he preached righteousness (2 Peter 2:5), warning his generation of things not seen as yet by the eye of the flesh but plainly visible to that of faith; and he prepared an ark of refuge which finally brought his family - and could have brought many, many more - through the judgment of the Flood to a new world beyond it. The important phrase here is 'things not seen as yet'. Faith, as we saw in 1, is the evidence or certainty of things not seen, and it would be well for any generation, and perhaps particularly ours, to beware of dismissing as far-fetched and fanatical the warning voices that men of God raise when with the eye of faith they truly discern the signs of the times. But alas!, like Noah's, theirs are voices crying in the wilderness, voices not heeded, and warnings scorned and neglected by a generation that refuses to see its coming doom, H-bombs and radioactivity notwithstanding. History proved Noah's so-called 'lunatic fringe' fanaticism to be sober, grim fact. This is a habit history has. For us also, time will tell.

66) 11:8-16

The Apostle next turns to the wonderful story of Abraham for illustration of the principle of faith, and it is natural that, with such a magnificent example before him he should devote a considerable part of the chapter to it. There is so much to learn from the patriarch's life. For one thing, we notice that for him faith was obedience. It was no formal, intellectual matter, no acceptance merely of a series of doctrines, but something that involved his whole being. He stepped out on God. There is a sublime simplicity about it all: God spoke to him, and he obeyed the voice of God. What this obedience cost him we can gather even from these verses, and certainly more fully from the record in Genesis - it meant the severing of every natural tie and the surrender of every natural love in his life in order that God might be all in all to him. But the cost of this discipleship must be seen in its proper setting. God is no man's debtor and when He calls to such a life He sees to it that there are immeasurable compensations. "I am thy shield and thy exceeding great reward", He assured Abraham, and called him into a blessed friendship with Himself beyond all telling, in which he found a fulfilment infinitely more rich and satisfying than anything he could possibly have known otherwise, and in which he achieved his true purpose and destiny in life in the mind and intention of God. And that is life worthy of the name!

67) 11:8-16

It is very striking to see what in particular in the Genesis story gripped the Apostle and impressed his spirit: Look at 10, 13, 14, 16; the inference is obvious. Abraham had a forward look, his eyes were on the world to come. This is not something immediately obvious to us as we first read the story, but it was clear and plain to the Divine Chronicler, and we may trust his Spirit-given insight. It throws a flood of light on Abraham's experience and on Christian experience in general. For it means that when God called Abraham to go out, He gave him a stake in the world to come. And not only so: He planted in his heart a hunger that nothing but the world to come could ever satisfy. Something decisive happened to Abraham that day in Ur of the Chaldees - there was awakened within him, in a vibrant and compelling way, a yearning and a hunger for God's eternity. To understand this is perhaps the biggest lesson a man can ever learn. It has enormous significance - practical significance - in our daily lives. Long ago, St. Augustine prayed, "O Lord, Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee". This is true of every man - there is a God-shaped blank in every human heart. But when God calls us to Himself in the gospel, it is quickened and intensified a thousand fold, and made to yearn for Him. This is how we are to understand Abraham's 'forward-look'. It was the deep in his heart calling out to the deep of God's eternal love. Not every Christian has learned this truth about himself, and it is this that explains why so many spend so much of their lives hoping for satisfaction and fulness of life from things - and people - that in the very nature of things can never give them. Read Hymn 441 'O the love that drew salvation's plan'.

68) 11:17-19

In referring to Abraham's offering up of Isaac, the Apostle once again emphasises one of the supreme characteristics of his life. The experience of Mt. Moriah was simply the visible evidence of a principle, which marked his entire earthly walk. A spirit of utter sacrifice actuated him from the day he stepped out at the behest of God right to the end of his life. To this the Apostle now draws our attention in these verses.

Note first the spiritual nature of the sacrifice. It says, 'Abraham offered up Isaac', but in the Genesis story he was stopped short just as he raised the knife to slay his son. In principle however he did really offer him up, from which we gather that it is not the outward form but the heart of the sacrifice that is the chief matter. It was the intention of his heart that made the sacrifice a sacrifice - not the presenting of the gift but the obedience and devotion of the soul.

It is certainly not by accident that the whole story in Genesis, and the very language in which it is presented, bears a very startling similarity to the story of Christ. The offering up of Isaac is a type of the offering up of Christ on the Cross. "Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" asked Isaac. And John the Baptist said, "Behold the lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world". When Abraham offered up the promised seed on the altar he was simply foreshadowing the offering up of his promised Seed, Jesus Christ, on the Cross. And if this be so then the awesome thing is that in this tremendous experience God was giving Abraham a revelation of how the promise made to him that in his seed all families of the earth should be blessed was to find fulfilment. Not only so it bears witness to the fact that this is to be the pattern for all on whom God has laid His mighty hand for service. The chosen of God has a baptism to be baptized with, and it is ever straitened till it is accomplished.

The fact that Abraham 'in a figure' - i.e. in principle, received Isaac back from the death is meant to teach us the wonderful truth that life, not death, is the final goal of true sacrifice. How wonderful. How very wonderful.

69) 11:20-22

Isaac, Jacob and Joseph are covered each in a single verse. This does not mean they are of little importance, for doubtless the Apostle could have made much apt comment on these lives so different from each other. His concern, however, is not to elaborate, but to select what is particularly relevant to his purpose. And we learn two things: first, that the supremely important fact in these patriarchal lives was that they fulfilled God's purpose and destiny for them, playing the part, so to speak, that God cast for them in the great drama of redemption - each in turn passed on the living hope to the next generation; and, second, they died in faith, having continued to the end, in spite of all the vicissitudes of their experience and the turbulence of their days. Jesus once said, "He that endureth to the end shall be saved", and it is this that the Apostle is wishing to underline, in view of the tendency in his readers to lose hope in face of the pressures around them and give up the fight. The patriarchs had the forward look and this, the Apostle would maintain, is what steadied them and kept them faithful. The question that this poses to us is: Is our belief in the unseen world-to-come strong enough, real enough, to anchor us in a life of faithfulness down the years, to the very end? In fact, nothing else will do this.

70) 11:23-27

It is clear that like Abraham, Moses stood out for the Apostle as a supremely important figure and again he devotes considerable space to a consideration of his life. The summary that he gives is masterly in its selection of salient features and its penetrating grasp of the basic issues that faced Moses in his experience. In four words, like swift strokes of the brush, he sketches the complete picture of a man given over utterly to God. "By faith Moses... refused... choosing... esteeming... had respect..." How much these simple words tell us of the man's dedication. Like Abraham, it was a dedication that cut across all natural desires and aspirations. Note that while his refusal is mentioned first in the text (24), it was surely his decision to cast in his lot with the suffering people of God that led him to it, and we may learn from this something of what it costs to make this decision of faith. It always involves a refusal of the world - inevitably, since the unseen world of faith and this present evil world are in irreconcilable opposition to one another and mutually exclusive and we do not understand the gospel aright if we do not realise this. But he proved, as Abraham did, and as all who walk this way prove, that the true goal of sacrifice is not death but life, and he entered a spaciousness of life, in intimate communion with God, that can only be described as 'glory begun below'. "The Lord spake to Moses face to face, as a man speaketh to his friend" (Exodus 33:11). This was his reward on earth before ever he entered into the infinitely greater reward in heaven. God is no man's debtor. "Them that honour Me I will honour", He says. And by faith Moses knew this, He lived with eternity's values in view. Do we?

71) 11:23-27

Moses "endured, as seeing Him Who is invisible" - there is a sense in which this great and sublime statement sums up the whole of Moses' life. 'Endured' is an active word, not passive, and it speaks of fortitude, virtue and manliness and describes his steadfastness and immovability as the leader of the people of God. To think of him as 'putting up with' adverse circumstances falls far short of the true meaning of the word; it is 'coming out on top', and New Testament phrases such as 'more than conqueror' and 'having done all, to stand' are much nearer the mark. To live steadfastly these forty years of pilgrimage in the wilderness, to be the one constant factor amid all the changeable moods of a fractious people, to tower in splendid isolation above their pettiness and inconstancy, a mighty, rock-like figure - this is the story of Moses. The whole of Exodus and Numbers records the tremendous fact. Turn there where you will, and whatever else you will find of changing circumstances and conditions, you are sure to find Moses standing steadfast and unmoveable, always abounding... What a figure! What is the secret? He had got through to God, and communion with Him, as friend with friend, was the deepest reality of his life. And when this is a man's secret resource and the truest thing about him, he will be able to endure anything. As Daniel said much later, "The people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits" (Daniel 11:32).

72) 11:28-29

The Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea are next instanced as occasions on which faith was the controlling principle. The Passover is an excellent illustration of Christ's redemption and the New Testament invites us to think of it as such. The particular point underlined here is surely that Moses ventured upon the Word of God. The commandment concerning the slaying of the lamb and the sprinkling of its blood was accompanied with the assurance, "When I see the blood, I will pass over you", and led by Moses, the children of Israel took shelter under the divine provision. We see then, that for Moses faith was faith in God's word. This is even more clearly seen in the story of the crossing of the Red Sea, and in this connection we may learn something of fundamental importance for Christian life. The Israelites were in fact in a position of extremity. They were quite literally hemmed in. The geography of the place is said to have been rocky crags on the one side and frowning Egyptian fortresses on the other; behind them the pursuing hosts of the Egyptians, and in front of them the waters of the Red Sea. Surrounded on all sides, but upwards a clear sky and a living God! They were shut up unto faith. And it is only when we despair of any other help that we can truly lean on Him. True faith is born in despair, and in that extremity it is possible for men to go forward. Faith for them consisted in going forward in obedience to God's Word, venturing wholly upon it. That was how they got across. For nothing can be impossible when God speaks the Word. Not that God told them what He would do to the waters - they had no idea how the miracle would happen, or even whether it would. Their responsibility was to venture, His to see them through. The world says, 'Seeing is believing' but in the life of faith the opposite holds good. 'Believing is seeing' - and in that order. By faith Moses...!

73) 11:30-31

The story of Jericho continues the glorious account of the achievements of faith. Nothing could be more thrilling than the dramatic downfall of the heathen city through the faith of these warriors of God - faith in His promise and obedience to His commands. One practical lesson it teaches for the spiritual life is that the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but spiritual, and that when we are content to use the weapons God provides for us we also shall see strongholds pulled down and inroads made into the kingdom of darkness. But it requires faith to believe that the weakness of God is stronger than men - and this is perhaps why preaching - one of God's chief means of saving men - has so often been at a discount in the life of the Church. A recovery of belief in the power of biblical preaching would have a revolutionary effect in the nation.

But what is this in 31? Joshua - Rahab? No, there is no mistake. Rahab had heard tell of the God of Israel (see Joshua 2:9-11), and faith had come by hearing, and a silent and effectual work of salvation had been wrought in her. And the wonderful thing was that she was redeemed into the glorious purposes of God, and by His grace was caught up into His plan for the redemption of the world. For her name appears in the genealogy of our Lord (see Matthew 1:5). She was brought into a noble destiny, lost and broken as her life had once been. That is what the grace of God can do, and what a word of hope it is! There is no life so useless and marred but it can be taken up and used in the purposes of God, and it is never too late for faith to be born in a human heart. Rahab stands in Holy Scripture as a reminder of the possibilities that exist for people in the unlikeliest places and circumstances if only they can hear the Word.

74) 11:32-35

It would be tempting to take each name mentioned here individually for comment and discussion, but we had better follow the example of the Apostle as he brings to a close his catalogue of faith's heroes, and concentrate rather on his final observations on these wonderful lives. We may conveniently sum up the gist of these verses here under the heading of 'faith's achievements', just as the following verses may be styled, 'faith's sufferings'. We single out two phrases in particular for comment. Through faith they 'subdued kingdoms'. If this tremendous phrase means anything at all for us, it means that faith can lay siege to the whole nation and ransom it from the growing paganism and materialism into which it is sinking, reclaiming it for righteousness and for God. This is the force of the references to the period of the Judges, and even more so Samuel and David - for was not this what they did, in the energy and with the inspiration of a living faith in God? These men achieved things because they had faith; we have only opinions (as someone has rather cynically put it) and therefore have problems instead of achievements. That is the fundamental difference between our experience and that of the saints of old. They were sure of God; we do not really know Him.

75) 11:32-35

'Out of weakness', the Apostle continues, 'they were made strong'. This also is the result of faith, and what encouragement it gives us. We might well tremble and falter when thinking of the challenge of yesterday's words and feel we are not made of the stuff it takes for such heroic living. But we err if we think that the men of faith were naturally endowed with strength and vigour for the tasks appointed them. Precisely the opposite is the case. Elijah was a man of like passions as we are; Gideon was the least in his father's house (Judges 6:15), and all the indications are that he was a timid and fearful man. But his very weakness became God's opportunity, so to speak, for God clothed Himself with Gideon, and the transformation was thus effected. His strength was made perfect in Gideon's weakness. Human weakness is the 'door' by which God comes to reach the world He longs to bless and save. This is a great lesson to learn. Some of the Church's most greatly used men have been so in the face of truly gigantic weaknesses and dangerous and disastrous weaknesses of nature and temperament, men whom in their weakness God met and took up to use for His glory. Ah, afflicted and tormented one, do not think of your weakness as a liability. It is a potential qualification for service, and through faith it may be transmuted into strength such as you had not dreamed of. Be of good courage.

76) 11:35-38

These verses underline the sufferings of faith. It costs to have such a faith such as we have seen in this chapter, and we have seen, in figure after figure, how great a price these men paid to be what they were and accomplish what they did for God. We have only to think of the persecutions and sufferings in the history of the early Church to realise that spiritual advancement comes only through tribulation. But these are two things to remember. The first is that discipline is a means of sanctification. God is on the throne and He makes all things work together for good to them that love Him, and the things that happen to us are used for the furtherance of the gospel (Philippians 1:12). We need not shrink from the arduous disciplines and pressures of the life of faith, for these are the very things that will make men of us. The second thing to remember is that when we suffer for Christ's sake, we are bearing His reproach and 'filling up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ'. Calvary is 'reflected', so to speak, in the experience of the faithful, and such suffering and sorrow become somehow 'redemptive' and men are blessed and saved through our suffering testimony. Behind the lives that have ever told for God, in blessing to others, there has always been a continuing experience of sharing the sufferings of Christ. "I bear in my body", cried Paul, "the marks of the Lord Jesus", and all over Asia and Europe men were rising up to bless the day they heard this dear man, "in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling", preaching Christ and Him crucified. It is ever so. Suffering faith is fruitful faith. 'Christ crucified' can be preached effectually only by crucified men!

77) 11:39-40

These all died in faith, concludes the Apostle, receiving not the promise. The whole dispensation of the Old Testament was one of promise. The New Testament age is one of fulfilment. It was reserved for our time, he says, to see the fulfilment of the promises made of old to the patriarchs and saints. We must bear in mind the point of this long and wonderful chapter about the heroes of faith. Throughout, the Apostle is concerned to prove that the new age is in all respects better than the old. This is why he emphasises the fact that these heroes 'received not the promise'. They were not to be 'made perfect' without us - that is, they died 'in faith', without seeing the fulfilment of their hope. The significance of this is surely that if they, living as they did in the early light of the new dawn before the sun had risen, waxed mighty in faith, how much more ought we, upon whom the sun of righteousness has risen with healing in His wings, manifest the grace and power of God in our lives. If they lived steadfastly in the old dispensation which was imperfect, how much more ought we in the new, which is far better. This is really an unanswerable argument. What more could be given than has been given in the gospel of Christ? If a sufficiency of grace was present in the promise to sustain an Abraham, a Moses, throughout a long and arduous experience, how much more is there given us, who have not only the promise but the Promiser Himself to indwell our heart. God help us to see it!

78) 12:1-2

These two verses form the proper climax to the 11th chapter. Having illustrated, at length, the meaning and the possibilities of faith in the lives of the saints of the past, the Apostle now applies his words to the present - 'we also...', 'let us...'. That is the point of the 'wherefore'. And so he exhorts his readers to run with patience the race set before them. The 'cloud of witnesses', on which he bases his appeal, refers of course to the great catalogue of the faithful, but he is not suggesting that these men of faith, having run their race, are watching us as spectators watch a race. That is not the point. The meaning is that these all bear witness to the life of faith, and to its possibility. To every protestation from us that such a life is too difficult, too hazardous, too costly and idealistic, these witnesses give the lie. No, they say in unison, it is not too costly, too difficult. It has been done. We did it. And it is possible for you too! Such is the Apostle's argument, and it must effectually silence every misgiving in our hearts when faced with the challenge of discipleship. These saints of old were ordinary people made extraordinary by faith and enabled to live victoriously, and the same resources are available for us as to them. There is therefore no excuse for not running the race set before us. To this race we will turn our attention tomorrow.

79) 12:1-2

The words that the Apostle uses in describing the 'race' are deeply instructive. It is not the length of the race that he has in mind, but the effort and discipline involved in it. The word in the original is one from which we get our English word 'agony', and it implies wrestling and battling. It is the discipline of the Christian life, the cost of discipleship that is at issue. Furthermore, the word translated 'set before us' is a very curious and graphic one; literally translated, it would be 'it is already there'. And the point is this - as soon as ever we engage to be the Lord's, and begin the Christian life, the agony, the wrestling, is already there, straightway. We find an impressive example of this in Romans 7:21, where Paul says, "I find then a law that, when I would do good, evil is present with me' - at my elbow! - and the battle is already there. It is probably in this light that we should try to understand the 'weights' and the 'sin that doth so easily beset', which latter phrase literally means "the easily clinging around us sin" - the picture being of the flowing, oriental robe which the athlete would certainly cast off so as to have unfettered freedom in running the race. Interpreters have been careful to distinguish between 'sins' and 'weights'. Many wrong things cling to a man's life and either hinder him from starting the race at all, or effectively hamper his running when he has begun. But there are also many things that are not wrong in themselves but become wrong because they are given too much place in the life and therefore hold a man back. In a race there are certain basic priorities. There must be no encumbrances. Something that may be good and even beneficial in itself may prove deadly to the athlete who has his eye on the prize. It must therefore be laid ruthlessly aside, at whatever cost!

80) 12:2

If the 'cloud of witnesses' speak of the possibilities of faith, and the words 'let us run....' of the challenge of faith, then 'looking unto Jesus' is the inspiration of faith and for faith. In saying this the Apostle is simply underlining what he has been saying throughout the entire epistle - his whole concern has been simply to fix his readers' attention on the excellency and sufficiency of Christ. But it is important to realise that he is doing more than pointing to Christ as a great Example - he is setting before us the finished work of Christ, His death, resurrection and ascension, as the ultimate source of faith and its only true continuance and development. In the Greek, the words are arranged thus: "looking unto the author and finisher of faith, Jesus Who...." The placing of the words is important. You cannot separate in the verse what He did from what He is. It is Christ in His Person and Work Who is the author of faith, and therefore 'looking unto Jesus' is not to look at the life of Jesus as an example to be followed so much as coming to a fountain of living water and drinking deeply, drawing from, the finished work of Christ supplies of virtue and power sufficient to keep us steadfast and unmovable day by day. This is how the Christian life both begins and continues, not by the doubtful inspiration of a historical figure taken as an example, but by coming in contact (by the 'look' of faith) with a living dynamic that renews and transforms life. As the old, old hymn says, 'There is life for a look at the Crucified One'.

81) 12:3-11

The Apostle now proceeds to unfold the purpose and function of suffering in the Christian life. This is a remarkable passage, full of enlightenment and encouragement for hard-pressed believers. We should note two points in particular. The pressures that come upon Christians may certainly originate in Satan, but God permits this and uses it for His own ends. Satan may fire the arrow, but God intercepts it in mid-air and extracts the poison from the point, so that by the time it reaches us it is fraught with blessing. But a certain attitude to it now becomes all-important. We must realise that God is in it - hence the Apostle's excursus on the meaning of chastening. Secondly, the word translated 'chastening' could very accurately be rendered 'education'. This is very illuminating. God's sovereign grace transforms Satan's attacks into an education for His children! We might well entitle the chapter 'With Christ in the School of Suffering'. There is much here to think about. Sometimes children are difficult and fractious in school and will not learn their lessons, and teacher is obliged to 'keep them in' after school hours to go over the lesson again with them. And pupils have been known to be 'kept back' when the others go forward, to repeat a year. Do we not sometimes suffer more as Christians than we need to do, because of our slowness to learn the lessons God is teaching us? Does this throw any light on your problem?

82) 12:3-11

The Apostle quotes from Proverbs 3:11, 12 in reminding his readers that there are two wrong reactions to such disciplines. 'Despise not the chastening of the Lord', don't take it lightly in the sense that you remain blind to its meaning and purpose, and fail to see the hand of God in it. In this connection, we might well quote Job's words, 'That which I see not, teach Thou me' (Job 34:32). Secondly, we are warned not to faint under it, but by faith see that in the midst of it God is on the throne, and rightly relate yourself to it. This is important, for if we do not, black discouragement will set in, and this is almost a greater problem in the Christian life than sin. It is so in this sense; if a man falls into sin, he can weep his way back to the Cross and find forgiveness and restoration there, but if a man falls into despondency, his attitude is, 'What is the use of going on, I might as well give up', and he does not come to Christ for help, but wallows in his darkness. How earnestly the Apostle seeks to stir us from this. 'Look away from your chastening' he cries 'to the "afterward" (11)'. This is the whole point. O for clear sightedness to see through the discipline to the blessed intention and purpose of God in it!

83) 12:12-17

Exhortation and warning are finely blended in these verses, as the Apostle reminds his readers that trials are no cause for despondency. J.B. Phillips translates 'lift up the hands which hang down' (12) very graphically - 'Take a fresh grip on life', and hearts in the grip of black discouragement need no word so much as this. Certainly, to see the purpose and intention of God in the trials we endure will go a long way to bracing the spirit. 'Straight' in 13 has the force of 'going in the right direction', and we may think of the ploughman ploughing a straight furrow by keeping his eyes fixed on the post on the other side of the field. There may be a suggestion also here of the very winding path that Israel took on the way to the Promised Land. They had to turn back at Kadesh Barnea because of unbelief. They did not learn the lesson of their chastening and discipline, but murmured against God and rebelled. The reference to 'that which is lame' in 13 is illumined considerably by the more modern renderings. Phillips puts it, 'On the right path the limping foot recovers strength' and the NEB has, 'Then the dislocated limb will not be put out of joint, but regain its former powers'. These translations seem to suggest that there is a healing power at work on the right way, and this is one aspect of the 'living way' that we should not miss. Christ is the way and He is the fount of healing. Are we limping in our spiritual lives? Then we must get back on to the straight road that will make us strong again.

84) 12:12-17

There are two things in particular that we must notice in this solemn warning. The first, paradoxically, should give us great encouragement, but it also gives the reason why it is such a serious thing to neglect it. It is that the grace of God is in the trials that we endure as Christians (15). Embedded in the dark experience through which we pass there is a wealth of grace waiting to be appropriated, and it is when we learn to recognize that this is always true, no matter what the trial may be, that we make capital out of it and build character and calibre into our lives. But it is also possible for believers under chastening not to learn from it - this is the second point - and when this is so they become embittered. The story of Naomi in the book of Ruth affords a striking example of this. Naomi reacted wrongly to the discipline she underwent and it coloured her whole experience and turned her into a bitter old woman. The connection between 16 and what preceded it is not easy to follow, but it is probable that the Apostle is indicating that when a man fails of the grace of God - as Esau surely did - there are scarcely any depths to which he will not sink, not excepting even immorality. We note finally that there is an 'afterward' in the life of sin (17) just as in the life of grace (11). For Esau it was irrevocable and final. The 'repentance' mentioned here refers to Isaac's firm refusal to change his mind concerning the blessing (see Genesis 27:33ff), and not to Esau's repentance. The blessing was lost to him for good.

85) 12:18-24

The force of this reference to the privileges of the New Covenant as compared with those of the Old is this: If it were simply a matter, says the Apostle, of coming to the provisions of the Old Covenant, which made nothing perfect, there might be some excuse for failure. But the fact is, we are coming to the New, where there is sufficiency of grace for every kind of need in the spiritual life. No one therefore need falter or fail. The NEB translates the first part of 18 with the words 'Remember where you stand'. This is the real issue; if we remember where God has placed us in Christ, then the whole situation becomes transformed for us, whatever our circumstances be. There is an almost perfect example of this in the first chapter of Revelation, where we find John on the lonely isle of Patmos for the testimony's sake, cut off from fellowship, with nothing save the rocks and the waves and the desolation of exile. But he remembered where he stood. 'I am in Patmos, yes, but I am also somewhere else. I am come to Mt. Zion....' - and for him Patmos was transformed into the general assembly of the first-born, and he walked among the angels of God and the spirits of just men made perfect. And it is not possible to live in such an atmosphere for long without the spirit becoming elevated. John found it so at all events, for he started singing and praising God, 'Unto Him that loved us....' (Revelation 1:5). To be more conscious of our position in Christ than of our position in the world, this is the secret. Remember, says the Apostle, where you stand!

86) 12:25-29

Again there is the warning note, this time in the light of what we are to receive as the reward of faith, a kingdom (28). We should link 25 with the opening verse of the Epistle - 'God... hath spoken unto us in His Son'. What He has said in His Son is that there is a life of victory and perfect deliverance possible for all who trust in Him. At all costs therefore we must listen to His voice, and respond to it in obedience and submission. The further reference in 25 is to Israel's rebellion against Moses and their subsequent punishment in the wilderness. If neglect of his word brought such judgment, how much more will neglect of Christ's! Again there is the contrast between old and new dispensations. Sinai shook when God spoke then, but heaven and earth will shake when He speaks His final word in the new. A day is coming, says the Apostle, when all the temporal things that beguile our hearts from the things that are unseen and eternal will be removed. Then it will be seen that only abiding values will remain, the gold, silver and precious stones of the eternal verities, while the wood, hay and stubble of life will be burned by fire. Live therefore for eternity, and aim for the crown. The last verse (29) suitably rounds off the metaphor. God is a consuming fire; this is why we must cleave to the unseen and eternal realities. Fire can be a blessing or a curse, dependent upon our relation to it. It can warm and comfort us, but it can also scorch and burn and destroy. The fire of God will one day touch all human life; if the things that endure have been built into our lives by our continued submission and obedience to the Word of Christ, then that fire will transform and transfigure us and will become the instrument of our final glorification. But if through wilful disobedience or carelessness we neglect the things of the Spirit, there will be nothing in us able to stand the test of fire, and we shall suffer loss (cf 1 Corinthians 3:15). Reward and loss! Dare we by our slackness jeopardise the one and incur the other?

87) 13:1-3

This final chapter of the epistle is the exposition of 10:24, as chapter 12 was of 10:23, and chapter 11 of 10:22. Remember where you stand, the Apostle has said, and now we see that our stand is in the love of God, and must express itself in love to others. To remember our position is to step out of self-love into love of the brethren. The primary reference in 2 is to wandering Christians moving from place to place because of the persecutions known to have been experienced by the early Church, but this surely does not exhaust its meaning. Hospitality is a Christian grace and a necessary expression of our concern for our fellows. Many a Christian home has proved that their generosity has indeed brought them the blessings of heaven itself in the angels of God that they have welcomed into their midst. (The reference to the angels surely derives from the story of Abraham in Genesis 18). Any stranger indeed might conceal, not only an angel of God, but our Lord Himself, for did He not say, 'Inasmuch as ye do it unto the least of these... ye do it unto Me'. The Apostle strikes a particularly tender note of compassion in 3. Someone has said, 'Christianity means caring', and caring means sharing (the meaning of 'compassion' is 'to suffer with'). Phillips translates the second part of the verse, 'Think of all who suffer as if you shared their pain'. But this is sacrificial work, and only a love that has crucified self can do it. We are generally too taken up with ourselves to enter into the needs of others with any real degree of compassion. The need for this is just as great today as it was in the days of the early Church. We have only to think of our fellow-believers in China or behind the Iron Curtain to realise this. Nor do we need to go so far afield; there are burdens enough and agonies to share all around us, did we but have sensitive enough hearts to realise it. O for grace to seek them out!

88) 13:4-6

The NEB translates 4 thus: 'Marriage is honourable; let us all keep it so, and the marriage bond inviolate; for God's judgment will fall upon fornicators and adulterers'. The essence of this word is incorporated in the marriage service of all the Churches, and the inviolable nature of the bond underlined. Think of phrases such as 'So long as you both shall live' or 'Until God shall separate you by death' or 'Till death do you part'. It is difficult to see how, if vows including such phrases as these are made, divorce could ever be contemplated. Death is the only recognized separator - indeed not even death itself can separate those made one in the sight of God, it only interrupts their earthly fellowship. What God joins together He joins forever.

The warning against covetousness has a wider application than merely to money - it is possible to covet place and position, another's lot or circumstances, or another's gifts or profession. The great challenge here - and at no time is this more relevant than in this discontented age of ours - is to learn to accept the limits which God has been pleased to set upon our lives, and face life honestly within those limits in a spirit of contentment. The essence of a wrong desire - and discontentment is a wrong and diseased attitude - is that it can never be satisfied, however much it acquires, and the sooner we realise this the more chance there is of coming to terms with ourselves. For the Christian there is one great circumstance offsetting all else, the constant presence of the Lord Himself. He is our peace and contentment, not things or possessions or fulfilled ambitions.

89) 13:7-16

It is not easy to see where the famous statement in 8 fits in with what is being said in these verses. It could be taken with 7, with the following meaning: "Imitate the faith of these men, for their hearts were centred upon the unchangeable Christ". Or, it could be taken with 9, as meaning "Christ is unchangeably the same, therefore novel and strange doctrines are not needed, and when they detract from His Person and Work they are wrong." It may however be meant to stand alone, as an interjection to remind us of the one great constant factor in all Christian experience. And what a glorious verse it is. It reminds us that what He was to the saints of old He is today and will be tomorrow. Not only so - and this is, legitimately, to allegorise - He is able to deal with all our yesterdays, all the lost hours, all the wasted days and years; He answers all our todays, He is sufficient for our daily, present and pressing needs; He will meet us in all our tomorrows, the same unchanging, all-sufficient Christ. This is the heritage of all who trust in Him. The challenge in what follows, particularly in 12, 13 is plain: the true believer must come out from the old associations bearing the contempt and reproach that will certainly come when he does so. But, costly as such a stand will prove, the compensation is infinitely worthwhile. What the Apostle underlines is not so much that we have to go 'without the camp', but that we go forth unto Him, and unto fellowship with Him. And a real Christian counts the world well lost if he gains Christ. No one who has found the sweetness of fellowship with Christ through making a clean break with old ways and associations has ever regretted doing so. 'All things loss' is not too great a price to pay for this blessedness!

90) 13:17-19

We may link 17 with 7 as we ponder the right attitude to adopt to spiritual leaders. The Scriptures teach that authority, not equality, is the regulative principle in the Christian fellowship. Equal in dignity before God as we all certainly are, we are not equal in function, and since this is so, some must have the rule in a fellowship, and others must learn to obey them in the Lord. The fact that this idea is repugnant to many in the Church today is some indication of how far we have departed from the scriptural pattern. The fact is, however, that in any living fellowship both leadership and discipline are necessities if the life and well-being of the fellowship is to be maintained. Those who are really appointed of God to be leaders will be least likely to take advantage of the powers given to them. Indeed, they will regard it as a painful duty, to be fulfilled with considerable unwillingness, when they find it necessary to reprove those over whom God has set them. This, added to the fact that they will have a tireless concern for the souls of the people, gives them the right to expect submission to their authority. A man who has our best interests at heart, and who is not prepared to allow us to take lower ground than he knows we can occupy, is a man we can utterly trust. In this sense it can be truly said of him, 'Faithful are the wounds of a friend'.

91) 13:20-25

The Apostle's closing words are suffused with the glory of his wonderful benediction in 20 and 21. Something of the tremendous potential of these words may be seen if we link the opening words with some that come later - "The God of peace.... working in you...." This, in fact, sums up all that he has been trying to say throughout the epistle. Here is the answer to faltering, wavering footsteps, to hearts tormented by doubts and fears and forebodings, to pressures within and without that are sometimes like to overwhelm us - there is a God at work in us to counteract these things, the God Who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus. Not only so. Merely to counteract them would be a negative, defensive action, and God does not stop there. He is intent on working in us 'that which is well pleasing in His sight', and we have every guarantee that this will be fulfilled in us, come what may of opposition and persecution from the devil to hinder it, for He has covenanted to do so, sealing that covenant in His blood. O how wonderful to look away from our own fitful strivings to the serene and majestic movement of the divine purposes, to think of Him Who says, 'I will work, and who shall let (hinder) it?' (Isaiah 43:13), and realise that nothing will finally be allowed to stand in the way of His sovereign purposes being fulfilled in us! In this respect, the Apostle closes his epistle very fitly with 25, for the last word is indeed with the grace of God. Grace makes it all possible and will at the last crown the work with perfection, to the praise of His glory.