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THE BOOK of REVELATION

The Book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ is one of which it can be truly said that its different interpretations are legion. For this reason it has often been neglected, to the impoverishment of the spiritual life of the Church. The fact that weird and fantastic constructions have sometimes been placed on its message should not blind us to the truths that are enshrined in it. The oft-repeated words, 'He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the Churches' lay upon us the duty of patient study so that we may discern its truth for our time.

Commentators believe that John was an old man when he received the vision on Patmos, where he had been exiled for the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ, a lonely, barren, rock-strewn island in the Aegean Sea. The vision must therefore be understood in the first instance in relation to the circumstances of his time, and from that, application made to those of the present day.

I) I

In any study of a book such as Revelation, there are necessarily many preliminary, introductory considerations and questions to be settled before we can properly turn to the text. It is an undertaking bristling with difficulties, but it needs to be tackled in the faith that the Book has a living word to speak to the Church and the world today.

First of all, we must ask ourselves: What is the purpose of this prophecy, and what in fact is the purpose of prophecy in general? Take the latter first. The purpose of prophecy in general is never speculative, but moral. To imagine, as many seem to do, that predictive prophecy is something to speculate about and to make the plaything of our ingenuity is to miss the whole point of it. Everywhere in the New Testament that prophetic themes are stressed, this is what its writers say: 'Watch therefore, take heed, watch and pray'. We do not understand prophecy's message aright until we see that it is intent on stirring us to holy, earnest, watchful living, and renewed moral endeavour. But this also raises the former question: What is the purpose of this prophecy? For in fact it is maintained by one school of thought that the greater part of Revelation (chs 4-22) does not really apply to the Church at all. This view we reject in these Notes, if for no other reason than it seems pointless for the book to have been included in the canon of Scripture if it is not relevant to the Church and her needs. But this is a big question, involving bigger issues in interpretation as a whole, and we shall return to it more fully in tomorrow's Note. For today it will be sufficient to underline the moral challenge of the book by reminding ourselves of Peter's words in his second epistle (3:11) 'Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness?'

2) I

It surprises some people to learn that the Church has from earliest times believed in the doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ, and expressed it in its classical creeds and confessions. It is a common misconception to imagine that this doctrine was not believed from the time of the apostles until just over a hundred years ago when renewed interest began to be taken in it by some evangelical believers. It is not even true that what has become known as the pre-millennial interpretation of the doctrine had its origin in the early 19th century, for in fact this goes back to some early Fathers of the Church. It is only true that some of the ramifications and elaborations of this view arose comparatively recently, and it is these which loom so considerably in some interpretations of Revelation. According to the pre-millennial view, which is dispensational in the sense that it divides history into various dispensations or ages in which God's dealings with men differ, a highly complex and complicated pattern of events is due to take place in connection with the second coming of Christ. It is held that Christ will come for His Church, and His saints will be caught up to meet Him and will accompany Him to heaven; this marks the end of the Church-age or dispensation, and the Holy Spirit will be withdrawn from the earth. After this will occur the Great Tribulation in which Anti-Christ will be revealed and will manifest his power. During this period the gospel of the kingdom, as distinct from the gospel of grace, will be preached, and the Lord will have dealings again with Israel as a nation, bringing her to repentance, and the converted Jewish people will become His instruments in world-evangelisation. This period will end with the coming of Christ (again) to earth with His saints, and the Millennial reign of Christ will begin, when Christ's throne will be established at Jerusalem and the Davidic kingship re-established. At the end of the Millennium the final battle between good and evil will take place, and the great white throne of divine judgment will be set up and final judgment take place.

We trust that during the course of this present study the above view will be seen to be erroneous. What we must point out at this stage is that if it is true, then it implies necessarily that the greater part of Revelation does not really have more than an academic interest for the Church, for according to this view, the bulk of the book, from chapter 4 almost to the end has reference to events which took place after the rapture of the Church, after believers are taken home to be with the Lord. But this is not only to misinterpret Revelation, it is to misunderstand the whole conception of Christ's second coming altogether. As C.S. Lewis puts it, 'When the author walks on to the stage, the play is over'. When Christ breaks in to time the second time, time will be no longer. It will be the end. This is the view which the classical interpretations have always held, and we believe it is the correct one, as the Notes will seek to establish later.

3) I

As to the interpretation of the book as a whole, there are those who hold that almost everything in the book refers to what will yet come to pass in the future, and that, apart from the references in chs 2 and 3, none of it has yet happened. Others hold the opposite view, and maintain that most of its reference is to the past, and that it is possible to see the unfolding of its visions in the course of history between the first coming of Christ and our own day. Another and more intelligible and satisfactory view, however, is that the book presents a series of pictures, parallel to one another, seven pictures in all, each of them covering the whole period between our Lord's first coming and His second, and adding to the intensity of the preceding one, and building up to a grand climax in the end. Chapters 1-3 constitute the first picture, the vision of Christ among the seven candlesticks, a picture relevant for every age; 4-7 the second picture, also reaching from Christ's first coming to the second; 8-11 the third; 12-14 the fourth; 15,16 the fifth; 17-19 the sixth; and 20-22 the last. Within this analysis there is another major division that can be made. Chapters 1-11 portray the struggle between the Church on the one hand and the world on the other, while the second half of the book, chapters 12-22, takes us, so to speak, behind the scenes to the unseen conflict between Christ and Satan, which lies behind the conflict between the church and the world. (This analysis and interpretation is expounded fully in the commentary on Revelation by W. Hendriksen, 'More than Conquerors', and is one of the ablest and most satisfying available in the bookshops today).

4) 1:1-3

There is a special promise of blessing given at the outset to those who read this book. This is not only to encourage people who might otherwise be hesitant to tackle such a formidable task in seeking to interpret its message. It is called the revelation of Jesus Christ, and this simply means that we can see Christ in reading it. That is the blessing that it promises. If this be so, then the scope of the book is thereby defined for us: it is evangelistic, in that it will enable men to 'behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world'; it is edifying and upbuilding, in that it reveals Christ as the fountain of life and fullness for the believer; it is comforting in all the pressures and crises of life, in that it assures us of an ever-present, all-powerful Saviour Who stands by us in all our need; it assures us of the reality of victory in that it displays Him in the greatness of His Majesty and Glory as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Notice, however, the sequence of the verbs in 3 - 'readeth, hear, keep'. No blessing is automatic or mechanical. When we read, we must hear with the inward ear, and in such a way as to awake in us the moral response of obedience to all that we hear. Without this, all reading of the book will be in vain, and the search for a true understanding of it will be fruitless.

5) 1:4-8

There is a great fitness in the 'descriptions' given in these verses of Christ, for they indicate the kind of Christ that we are likely to see in the book of Revelation. This in fact is the first significance of what we read, for it is the greatness and majesty of Christ that is revealed to John - and to us - right from the outset. Over against all possible circumstances that might beset the believer is the unassailable fact of a mighty, all-powerful Christ, Who in His Person and work transforms every situation and makes us more than conquerors in Him. This is the force of John's emphasis here. How differently he might have - and could have - begun! He was in exile, and in all probability constantly watched by guards; he was bereft of all that believers hold dear in their experience, fellowship, worship, service; his circumstances were such as might have daunted the bravest and most intrepid of men. And yet, he has scarcely begun his writing when he launches into a great doxology of praise and exultation, 'Unto Him that loved us...!' This is the blessing the book of Revelation brings - it is the blessing that first came to John himself, in the triumph of grace over all that was merely natural in his situation. He was in exile, yes; he was isolated from his fellow-believers, yes; he was a prisoner, yes; but above all, and over all, he was a son of the King, and it was the recognition of this that made everything different, everything! And any book that can bring this recognition home to the minds and consciousness of believers is well worth the reading!

6) 1:9-11

There is a multitude of circumstances through which we pass in our Christian experience which, although outwardly very different from John's, constitute a common ground between him and ourselves - the trials, the temptations, the pressures and distresses of life. Thus John can say to us as he said to those of his own day, 'I am your brother and companion', and this entitles us to apply his resources to our own needs. What in fact did John do? He recognised that as a believer he partook of two lives, and he allowed the one to have complete ascendancy over the other. 'I was in Patmos' he said, but added 'I was in the Spirit'. There was an unseen world alongside his visible experience of exile and imprisonment, more real and more vital by far, and this hidden life, and his participation in it, transformed and transfigured his whole situation. This is a very practical issue. It is open to us to brood upon our life in Patmos, turning it over and over in our minds until we become completely immersed in it, and embroiled in an ever-darkening depression. But John challenges us to lift our eyes to what we are in the Spirit, and remember our position in Christ, and insist upon being what we are. It is then that His mighty voice breaks into the darkness with love and power, reminding us that He is Alpha and Omega, the first and the last (Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet), that is to say, any and all tribulation through which we may pass as believers is bounded on every side by the living Christ. He is there before it begins, and He is there after it is over. 'John', says the living Christ, 'you are in Patmos, but Patmos will have an ending, and when it has ended, I will still be the same. Every Patmos is bounded by My everlasting arms'.

7) 1:9-11

The AV does not make the sense of John's words plain enough in 9. 'Tribulation' should be linked with Christ just as 'Kingdom' and 'patience' are. John is our companion 'in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ'. It has been pointed out that these three words give, so to speak, the pattern and format of the Church's life on earth, and describe what we may expect in our experience as believers. First of all, the Christian life involves tribulation. 'In the world' said Jesus, 'ye shall have tribulation'. A moment's reflection will make it plain that this is in fact inevitable, for to be a believer means to have been translated into a world which must necessarily stand in irreconcilable antagonism to this present evil world. To be 'in the world' but no longer 'of the world', as Jesus puts it, necessarily means that tension will arise. The Church of Jesus Christ is on alien soil, and because this is so, the cross will ever be the badge of our discipleship. But we are also at the same time companions in His kingdom, and this more than offsets the other. The Church of Jesus Christ is also a royal kingdom, and the King of glory reigns in it. The meaning of the gospel is that the kingdom of God has breached this broken and fallen world, and though we do not yet see all things put under His feet, for the reason that His kingdom is as yet hidden and not manifested, we have the glad assurance that one day it will be displayed in all its grandeur and majesty. And in the meanwhile, the Church works on and waits in patience till He come. As one commentator puts it, 'patience means the faithful obedience of the Church to Jesus Christ till He come'. This is why the characteristic exhortation in the letters to the Churches in chapters 2 and 3 is 'Hold fast till I come'.

8) 1:11

We must pause for another day at Christ's words to the Apostle. It is very impressive to realise that in the midst of the gathering crises of the end-time as recorded in the book of Revelation, the most important thing, and that which comes first of all, is a word of challenge and exhortation and teaching to the Church, not to the outside world. The concern, when events are gathering to their final climax, is with the Church, not the world. This is more in line with the general emphasis of the New Testament than we might at first imagine. Paul's epistles were written for the edification of believers, not as evangelistic tracts. Look at his prayers. They are almost all for believers, not for the unconverted. This does not of course mean that the New Testament is not concerned with the unconverted, and no one could think for a moment that Paul had not a burden in his heart for them. What it means is that both he and the New Testament writers as a whole saw that it is far more important to speak to the Church than to the world, for this reason, that when the Church can be made to shine as she ought, and be herself, then the evangelism of the unconverted will follow as a matter of course. It stands to reason that if the light that is in the Church flickers, burning uncertainly, those outside are unlikely to be enlightened. This is the real justification of a teaching ministry. Until the Church becomes herself, there can be little point in speaking of outreach. Outreach with what, if the light that is in her be darkness? Evangelism, rightly considered, is simply a question of making the Church to shine.

One further point is important here. John was commanded to write what he saw and send it to the Churches. This must surely mean the whole vision (not, as some have mistakenly supposed, the contents of chapters 2 and 3 only). The whole of the Revelation was given by Christ for the Church, and therefore all of it has relevance for the Church's life and experience.

9) 1:12-16

There are two points to be noted particularly in this first vision given to John. The first is that no matter what extremity of tribulation and pressure comes upon the people of God, the living Christ stands in the midst of it with them whether they realise it or not. Has He not promised, 'I will never leave thee nor forsake thee'? What John is taught here is that independent of any consciousness or sense of His presence, and indeed even in the teeth of the most realistic impressions that deny it, He is there. One is reminded of the words of the hymn, 'Workman of God' (C.H. 520), which are indeed an apt commentary on this point, stressing as they do that 'God is on the field when He is most invisible'. Secondly, and even more important, is the impression of great magnitude that is conveyed in the words that describe the Christ Who appeared to John, with eyes like flame of fire and voice as the sound of many waters. Above all else this is the conception of Christ that the Church needs in time of pressure and tribulation. There are occasions, certainly when we think of the compassion of Christ, the gentleness and tenderness of the Saviour, but we must beware even then, true as these insights are, of denuding Him of His true majesty and greatness. We need to remember that it is true majesty that can speak with infinite tenderness, and that it takes real greatness to be sensitively gentle with the weary and heavy-laden. What John needed, however, surrounded as he was by the barren rocks of Patmos and the cruel jailors, and the wide sea cutting him off from fellowship with all the saints he loved, and with the arrogant might of Rome frowning upon him, was the sight of majesty and glory, and this is what was given him that day. We see the point of such a Christ saying 'Fear not'! Who could fear with such a glorious Lord standing with us?

10) 1:17-20

The dispensational view of prophecy holds that 'the things that are' (19) must necessarily refer to things then existing, namely the churches, and that 'the things that shall be hereafter' speak of a time after the 'church period' ends. This means, it is maintained, that chapters 2 and 3 alone refer to the church, and that the bulk of Revelation, from chapter 4 onwards, deals with events taking place after the Church age has finished. But this is an arbitrary division of the book, quite missing its real point, as well as misinterpreting the meaning of the verse. There is nothing to indicate that John had in mind any such clear-cut separation of the letters to the Churches from the rest of the book, nor is it necessary to suppose that this is the only way of understanding what he means. It is surely more to the point to take his words to refer to the book of Revelation as a whole, that is to say, the letters to the Churches depict conditions which were then to be found in John's day, and also conditions which would obtain after his day; likewise, 'things which shall be hereafter' refer to events about to come in John's immediate future, but also in the much further future, down to our own day. In other words, both the letters to the seven churches and the remainder of the book have a double meaning, being not only 'things which are' but 'things which shall be hereafter'. This interpretation both preserves the unity of the book and gives it a relevance that is unmistakable for our day.

11) 2:1-7

It will help, as we begin to study the letters to the seven churches, to remember the analysis of the book suggested earlier (see Notes for Tuesday 17th). The first three chapters together form one picture of the entire period from Christ's first coming to His second. This alone should be sufficient to show that these letters cannot be confined in their meaning to John's day only, but have wider application. This is confirmed by the repetition at the end of each letter, 'He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches' - each message was to be heeded by all the churches.

One necessary preliminary consideration in a study of these letters is to ask why they stand at the outset of the prophecy. Their significance is surely this: The unfolding drama of the conflict between the Church and the world, between Christ and Satan, indicates increasing intensity and pressure, tribulation indeed. The first need therefore, as we have already indicated, is a word to the Church, and in that word Christ stresses the things that will prove fatal in the Church's life, and also these qualities and characteristics that will enable her to stand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. One commentator puts it thus: 'John is about to tell of the coming persecution, and to comfort the Church with the assurance that Christ Himself will protect and deliver it. But something is needed on its own part. It must be inwardly sound, free from all erroneous belief, immovable in its fidelity. In the latter portions of the book the Church is regarded simply as the Church, the people of Christ over against the heathen empire. In these introductory chapters the Church is contrasted, not with the surrounding world, but with its own ideal. It must be a Church in reality as well as in name, or in the dreadful trial that is coming it will break down'.

12) 2:1-7

All seven letters follow a similar pattern. First of all there is Christ's designation of Himself, followed by His commendation of the church in question: then come words of warning, if not condemnation, and finally His counsel and exhortation. It is important to see that these designations of Christ come from the general description of Christ given in the vision of chapter 1. It is as if the total vision were now being broken up into its component parts, as white light can be broken up by a prism into all the colours of the spectrum. The various aspects of the vision are made to match in a very wonderful way the different needs of the Churches. For example, one of the problems in Ephesus was the danger of false apostles (2) and false teaching. And to this Church Christ announces Himself as the One Who holds the seven stars in His right hand, Who walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks. The assurance that is given is that, yielded to His control, the Church may be sure of its ministers. Let the Church be under her Lord's sovereign control and submitted to Him, and the problem of ministry - both in quality and quantity! - will be solved.

The thought that Christ 'comes' to His people in such a way as to match special and particular needs is a very encouraging one, and explains how it often happens that in a service of worship where the Spirit of God is present, one believer may be searched and challenged to the very heart of his being, another may be wondrously comforted and assured, one to be rebuked and convicted, another to be encouraged and uplifted - all by the same Word, in the same sermon, from the same passage of Scripture, because He matches His gracious sufficiency to individual needs throughout the congregation. Such is our wonderful Christ!

13) 2:1-7

Repeated in each of the seven letters are the words 'I know thy works' (2). This is both encouraging and challenging to us - encouraging in that He sees the motive of earnestness and love that lies behind some faltering, feeble, ill-executed work we have sought to do in His Name, and judges accordingly. Others may criticize and be contemptuous of our stumbling, but He says 'I know thy works'. But we should not, in taking heart from this, miss the tremendous challenge His words bring to us. Christ sees what is to come upon His Church, and His all-seeing eye penetrates all the life of His people, searching out all that ought not to be, to rectify and cleanse, in order that they may stand in the evil day. It is as if He said, 'Send this message to My people: know what is coming upon the earth, and we must get down to fundamentals, for nothing but basic, fundamental integrity in Christian faith and conduct will stand the test in the evil day'. This is the explanation of much of the discipline that comes upon us from the Word of God. The purging us all in love and deep concern, because He wants us to stand and to endure. It is certainly not without significance that in all the letters except one (that to the Laodiceans) the idea of tribulation is prominent, and this we may interpret both as the outward pressures from the world around them and also the inward pressure of the (17) Word in their spirits, as it did its purifying and renewing work in them, to enable them to stand firm and unmovable in their testimony.

14) 2:1-7

The Church at Ephesus was in many respects a very vital one, as is clear from the commendation Christ gave it. (We note in passing Christ's approval of their intolerance of those who were evil (2). It is more than refreshing to read this in an age when toleration is so fashionable, being, as G.K. Chesterton pungently remarks, the particular virtue of those who do not really believe in anything!) But they had lost their first love. G. Campbell Morgan points out the contrast between them and the believers in Thessalonica, whose work of faith, labour of love, and patience of hope (1 Thessalonians 1:3) so gladdened his heart. 'Work, labour, patience' are the words Christ uses here, but faith, hope and love are missing. This is terribly searching. It means that a Church - or an individual - may retain the outer framework of a living testimony when the heart of it has died. The work goes on but it is no longer a work of faith: the labour goes on, tireless, dauntless, but it is no longer a labour of love; the patience is still there, but it is no longer the patience of hope. This is what had happened at Ephesus. In Jeremiah 2:2, the Lord's complaint against His people was that the 'love of their espousals' had waned. Nothing is sadder than to see two people who used to love one another grow formal and get used to one another. Life goes on just as usual, the outer framework of the relationship is still there, but the nuptial love is away and something deep and blessed has disappeared. It is significant that this divine complaint comes in the first of the letters to the Churches, for every other defection or failure springs from it. Our love to Christ is the most important thing of all. Let us ask ourselves: Is it the same with me today as it was when I first found the Lord? Or has service become a substitute for love to Him, and crowded love out?'

15) 2:8-11

With great fitness our Lord addresses Himself to Smyrna - in the throes of persecution and tasting death for the testimony of Christ - as the First and the Last, Who was dead, and is alive. As the conqueror of death He is able to give them a crown of life. It is this paradox of death and life which explains the seemingly contradictory parenthesis 'but thou art rich' which follows the reference to their tribulation and poverty. How can you be rich when you are poor? The simple answer to this is: Tribulation works! 'Our light affliction', says Paul, 'which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory'. This is why Christ can say to His beleaguered people, 'Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer' (10), for 'these things' will in the sovereign purpose of God be made to work glory for them. The fact is, there is a real sense in which we create our capacity for glory by the things that we suffer for Christ's sake. Our lives are vessels that are being shaped for glory by the way in which we react to the pressures and tensions of Christian experience. Something of this wonderful and awesome principle is seen in the blessed effects it has upon us even in this life. Spurgeon once said 'Suffering enlarges the heart by creating the power to sympathise. We ought to be grateful for occasional griefs if they preserve us from chronic hard-heartedness'. We may use Paul's words about godliness (1 Timothy 4:8) in this connection, and say that tribulation and poverty are 'profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come'.

16) 2:8-11

There is good evidence both in Acts and in early Church history that some of the fiercest opposition and persecution the Church had to bear was from the Jews, who at times joined with the heathen powers in doing despite to the Christians. This is what lies behind the reference to 'the synagogue of Satan' (9). It is one of the great mysteries that the message of the cross should have become such a decisive stumbling-block to the Jews, of all people, 'to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God and the promises; whose are the fathers, and of whom, as concerning the flesh Christ came, Who is over all, God blessed forever' (Romans 9:5). But it was precisely because the Jews misunderstood their own Scriptures, and resisted the implications of their own calling that they developed such an implacable hatred of the Christian gospel. Rightly understood, their own religion was fulfilled in Christ, and therefore a real Jew would necessarily give Christ his allegiance, (this is what Paul refers to in Romans 2:29, 'He is a Jew, which is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit and not in the letter'). Those who do not, may say they are Jews (9) but are not, but are of Satan. ('Ye are of your father the devil'). This casts much light on two facts in our own experience. In the first place it helps us to understand why in a congregation the deepest resentment at the message of the gospel comes not from the casual and uninterested attender, but from the 'devout and honourable' folks (see Acts 13:50) who though thoroughly immersed in the work of the Kirk, have never really understood the message of the gospel, and are maddened by its insistence on the new birth. It also explains why, even within the context of true Christian experience, and among those who are truly born again of the Spirit of God, we sometimes find people unwittingly doing devil's work in a fellowship. An unsanctified and uncrucified believer is a far greater danger, and a source of much deeper distress and hurt, than a solid phalanx of worldliness. Satan often finds his most powerful instruments among those who are nearest to us, but who resist the truth. Judas Iscariot was one of the Twelve.

17) 2:8-11

One of the most moving of all documents that have come down to us from the early Church is that which gives an account of the martyrdom of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, which took place in 155 AD. It well illustrates the solemn warnings of our Lord here - it is impressive to note that He did not promise deliverance from the persecutors, but exhorted the saints to be faithful unto death, i.e. even if faithfulness led to martyrdom - and gives some indication of the wonderful spirit of dedication which prevailed among the believers in Smyrna. The saintly leader was apprehended by the soldiers, and brought before the pro-consul, and commanded to swear by the genius of Caesar, and call Caesar Lord. 'Swear, and I will release thee; curse the Christ', said the official. And Polycarp said, 'Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He hath done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my King Who saved me?' The proconsul then said, 'I have wild beasts; if thou repent not, I will throw thee to them'. But he said, 'send for them. For repentance from better to worse is not a change permitted to us; but to change from cruelty to righteousness is a noble thing. Then said the proconsul again, 'If thou dost despise the wild beasts, I will make thee to be consumed by fire, if thou repent not'. And Polycarp answered, 'Thou threatenest the fire that burns for an hour and in a little while is quenched; for thou knowest not of the fire of the judgment to come, and the fire of the eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. But why delayest thou? Bring what thou wilt'. The mob straightway brought timber and faggots from the workshops, the Jews giving themselves zealously to the work. Thus was Polycarp burned at the stake.

18) 2:12-17

The significance of our Lord's designation of Himself as 'He which hath the sharp sword with two edges' may be seen in relation to the situation then prevailing at Pergamos. The 'sword' refers surely to the Word of God, and the Word is the weapon by which the Church may defy the hosts of Satan (13), and root out error in its life and fellowship (14, 15). The important thing for us to notice is that it is possible to dwell where Satan's seat is, and still hold the faith. Faithfulness in situations of extreme difficulty and pressure is not an impossibility for the Christian, and unpleasant or uncongenial circumstances should never in themselves be made a pretext for contracting out of bearing a true and consistent witness there, and seeking a place where being a Christian will be much easier. It is a constant temptation to want to withdraw from some godless office or the pagan environment of some workshop, and we should beware lest the deceitfulness of our hearts lead us to persuade ourselves that the Lord is guiding us elsewhere, into some Christian atmosphere where the strain will be less. We may not withdraw from the place of His appointment just because it is hard and difficult. Christ wants witnesses where Satan's seat is - how otherwise will Satan's captives be set free? There must be no wrong or self-regarding application of the apostolic word in 2 Corinthians 6:17, 'Come out from among them and be ye separate'. We can be in the world without being of the world.

19) 2:12-17

Christ's complaint against His Church in Pergamos was that there were those that held the doctrine of Balaam. To understand this we need to turn to Numbers 22-24; 25:1-3, and 31:16. Balaam, it would seem, when he saw that God's people could not be cursed, sought to corrupt them by persuading them into a social alliance with Moab whereby they were enticed into idolatry and immorality. Their 'separation' was defiled, and they lost their pilgrim character as the chosen people of God. There is a solemn warning here for us today. Evangelicals have without doubt held the truth, and championed the Bible and the fundamentals of the faith, and often endured persecution and contempt because of their faithful witness. But the people who have so resolutely withstood all the attacks on the faith may be assailed in other ways. Is there not a danger today that they are being slowly and imperceptibly seduced by subtle forms of worldliness that are gradually sapping their vitality and robbing them of their pilgrim character. Modern man has sought out many inventions, and there are far more opportunities for being worldly now than in former generations. We must as Christians make up our minds about being pilgrims and strangers on the earth. We must learn the grace of doing without things and of living simple lives. The lesson of the first of these letters is 'losing our first love'. That is where Satan begins - he displaces Christ in our affections with the hankering for 'other things'. The simple, one-track life is possible only when the grand passion of our lives is Jesus Christ.

20) 2:12-17

'Hidden manna' and 'a white stone' are promised to those who overcome in Pergamos. What do these signify? In the first place, the hidden manna is the reward of those who refuse to eat 'things sacrificed unto idols' (14). God is no man's debtor, and those who for Christ's sake refuse the corrupting and insidious forms of worldliness which constantly tempt God's people to abandon their pilgrim character are given to taste the best delights and satisfactions of His love and grace. When believers, like Nehemiah, refuse to come down to the level of the world, God honours their faithfulness to Himself with all His resources of grace and power. As the Psalmist says, 'No good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly'. The white stone and the new name refer surely to the reward of faithfulness hereafter, and have been variously interpreted. Much depends for a true understanding on whether the new name is one which the believer receives or whether it is the name of Christ. In the former, it would signify the attaining of a new status and the entering into fullness of life and joy in the Lord. If Jacob the supplanter became Israel the prince with God on earth, how much more will we receive a new name when the wrestlings of life have finished their gracious work in us and we shall be saved to sin no more! In the latter, it would mean that the overcomer will be brought into a depth of intimate fellowship with the Lord Whose sweetness only those who experience it will ever be able to appreciate, unique for each one, and exclusive to each one. Who shall say that these are not both and equally meaningful for the believer.

21) 2:18-29

Once again there is significance in the designation our Lord gives Himself in His address to the Church at Thyatira. The 'eyes like unto a flame of fire' speak of His all-seeing knowledge of the situation there, penetrating to the heart of it, and 'His feet like fine brass' announces the fact that He is coming in judgment. Within the Church at Thyatira there is an evil for which no remedial measures are sufficient. It is one that admits of no correction. Judgment is appointed and so He comes to deal with it. Light is thrown on the nature of the problem in Thyatira when we learn that it was an industrial centre 'with many trade guilds and a highly organised social life'. These trade guilds were as much a 'closed shop' as modern trade unions; it was difficult, if not impossible, to get work without belonging to them. Obviously this would create problems for Christians. Not only so. At the guild meals food was served which had been sacrificed to idols. This Jezebel seems to have been urging on the Christians at Thyatira that association in compromising activities (which would certainly be inevitable in such a situation) was not harmful and could be indulged in without fear. This is an issue that is of the utmost relevance today, and the message of the Scripture is just as unequivocal now as it was then. When business interests (whether in management or labour) clash with Christianity, the issue is clear-cut and plain: we either nail our colours to the mast or deny our Lord. There can be no middle way, no compromise, as this Jezebel suggested. To falter here is to go over to the enemy's side.

22) 2:18-29

The fact that these letters to the churches are relevant to the life of the Church in the present day obliges us to ask what 21 and 22 mean in the context of the life of a fellowship. They can mean only this: that when evildoers in a fellowship, who exert a malign influence on others to their spiritual hurt and hindrance, fail to repent even when in longsuffering grace the Lord has been very patient and forbearing with them, He will lay them low in a bed of suffering and affliction as a chastisement for their sins. That this is a doctrine embedded in the Scriptures we cannot doubt. It is echoed unmistakably in 1 Corinthians 11:30-32 by Paul, 'For this cause (i.e. because of their continuing abuse of the holy mystery of the Lord's Supper) many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. When we are judged we are chastened of the Lord'. It is evident also, for those who have eyes to see, in the life of the Church today. Nor need this surprise us, although it should make those determined to run athwart the divine purposes pause to think soberly; for what sort of Lord would He be Who left evil influences unchecked indefinitely among His people. Does a good parent remain unmoved and indifferent and inactive at the prospect of the break-up of his family life? Will he not take steps, however drastic, to prevent it? And will not a holy Lord, Whose eyes like a flame of fire search out all that is perilous to His people's welfare, act otherwise? He is a real Lord, the ever-living One, Who demands, on pain of punishment, that we take His grace seriously!

23) 2:18-29

In this particularly difficult situation in Thyatira, our Lord said to the faithful, 'I will put upon you none other burden. But that which ye have already. Hold fast till I come' (24, 25). It is the realism of our Lord's words here that should strike us forcibly. There is no facile exhortation to press on with a forward work of evangelism or extension, or engage in what are at other times right and proper pursuits for a living Church. To stand firm in a crisis situation is as much as we may be able - and expected by Christ - to do, and we will be wise to avoid laying on ourselves burdens which Christ Himself does not see fit to lay upon us. It is unwise to take as our watchword such a catch-phrase as 'the best defence is always attack', for catch-phrases are not invariably true in all circumstances, and if we believe our Lord's words, not true here. If to attack means leaving our lines of communication uncovered, then attack can be suicidal and lead to the loss of the battle. Yet this is what well-meaning, earnest but blundering strategists urge upon us often in the Christian life, and out we have to go, willy-nilly, ill-equipped, untrained, unarmed, laying ourselves wide-open to the enemy's wiles. Nor is he slow to exploit our folly. We would do well to remember Paul's words about the battle: 'So fight I, not as one that beateth the air'. Little is gained by showering blows and ammunition on an enemy that is not there! There is a time for advancing, but it is not always that time. Sometimes all that can be done, and all Christ expects of us, is to hold fast until the danger within the fellowship is overcome.

24) 3:1-6

Here, as in the previous letters, our Lord matches His designation to the need of the Church in Sardis which had a name that it lived, and was dead. He calls Himself the One that 'hath the seven Spirits of God' - that is, the One Who can give life. Commentators tell us some particularly interesting things about Sardis. It was one of the very wealthy cities of Asia Minor, and was situated geographically in a well-nigh impregnable position. There were two occasions in its history when the city was under siege, but it was careless because it thought it was impregnable, and the besieging armies found Sardis' weak spot and entered the city like thieves in the night. This illuminates our Lord's warning word to the Church there, 'If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief'. It seems that the Church partook of the atmosphere of the city; life had become too easy for them. An easy and voluptuous decadence had gripped the city's life and had penetrated into the life of the Church also. This, it should be clear, carries a very pointed warning for our own time. The dangers for the Church of living in an affluent society are very real and very considerable, chiefly the temptation to be beguiled by an imperceptible and ever-increasing spirit of materialism from the simplicity that is in Christ. Significantly, there is no mention in this letter of any danger of persecution by the Jews, or pressure about emperor-worship; there was no internal heresy. They were untroubled without and within. They had 'never had it so good' - and a spiritual paralysis was upon them! Is there not a message here for the Church of our day?

25) 3:1-6

The Church at Sardis had a name that it lived, but it was dead. There is almost a modern ring about these words, and we have only to paraphrase them somewhat - 'Such and such is a very active church' - to draw the parallel in our own time. What do we mean by an 'active' church? There is very little doubt that what many people mean is a church where there is 'something on' every night of the week, and which is bulging at the seams with organisations. But there is activity and activity, and there are some forms of activity that are the evidence of death, not life, and the salvation of some churches would be that these should all cease forthwith, and let the breath of the living God breathe through the life of the congregation once again. We heard a year or two ago of a minister who wanted to start a Bible-study group in his congregation, and had to hire a hall along the street because every conceivable corner was filled up with 'activities' of various kinds. It was a terribly active church and statistically it would cut an impressive figure, but there was no room in it for the Word of God! It had a name that it was living, and was dead. There is a lesson here not only for churches, but also for individuals, for it is perilously easy for individuals as well as fellowships to be engulfed in activities of various sorts at the expense of real life in the soul. The tragedy of the situation is that we can deceive ourselves into thinking that we are alive when we are dead.

26) 3:1-6

Scholars interpret the words 'strengthen the things which remain' (2) to mean that they should allow strength to come into these external things which had no life in them - things which gave them a name that they lived - so that they might pulsate with the living presence of God. It was in fact a call to them to allow the Spirit of God to course through them to make them alive. One is reminded of the vision of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37 with its question 'Can these bones live?', and this lends force to the challenge to allow the energy of the Holy Spirit to touch and transform the deadness of institutionalised religion in any age. James Denney has a telling passage in which he exposes the barrenness of 'official' religion in our Lord's own day. 'It was part of an established system of social order with which all their worth-while interests were bound up and their one concern was to maintain the existing equilibrium. Living religion the Sadducees dreaded. A religious movement perturbed them and they did not know what to make of it. When the Christian religion began to put forth its irrepressible expansive power after the Resurrection we are told that they doubted whereunto this would grow. They did not want growing things at all in this sphere. A religion that grew, that operated as a creative or recreative power, that initiated new movements in the soul or in society, a religion that gave men new and infinite conceptions of duty, making them capable of self-dedication and martyrdom, so that you could never tell what mad, disturbing thing they would do or try.... such a religion the Sadducees could only regard as the enemy. They were more than willing to give religion the formal acknowledgment which its place in the social order required, but a religion which - for anything they could tell - might explode the social order, was something with which they could hold no terms'. This is the situation for which Christ was prescribing, so to speak, the breath of the Spirit. Who shall say we do not need such a prescription today?

27) 3:7-13

The city of Philadelphia, authorities tell us, was built for the prime purpose of being a 'missionary' city to spread Greek influence and civilisation in the hinterland of Asia Minor. Christ takes this up and says, 'Behold I have set before thee an open door', for into that city of opportunity the gospel had come, and all the avenues of outreach that were open for the spirit of Hellenistic culture were accessible to Christ and His Church. What He was saying was, 'Just as the Greeks established this city in order to spread Greek culture, so I have planted my Church in this strategic position in order that it might be a missionary Church to reach out to the hinterland of Asia with the unsearchable riches of My grace'. What should impress us here is the use Christ makes of natural advantages and opportunities, and the vehicle He makes of them for His own sovereign purposes in the gospel, and this should encourage us to be alive ourselves to opportunities of capital being made out of secular dispensations. The instance made known by Col. Thomson some time ago, from behind the Iron Curtain is a case in point, in which territorial adjustments and boundary-revision opened a great and effectual door into Russia itself for the gospel, and brought large numbers of believers from Poland into Soviet citizenship. There is nothing too hard for the Lord!

28) 3:7-13

G. Campbell Morgan suggests that the words about the open door form a parenthesis, and that the meaning is that the Lord had opened a door for them, and that, little in strength as they were, they had taken their opportunity and gone through it. The opened door was not His reward for their faithfulness, but rather the opportunity in which they had proved their faithfulness to Him. This is the real challenge of the letter. So often we fail to go through open doors, pleading lack of strength or gifts for the work of God. But both Moses and Jeremiah were chided by the Lord for adopting such an attitude when they were called to serve Him. One hesitates to think what would have happened if they had persisted in that attitude; certain it is that when we persist in it, and close our eyes to opportunities that lie to our hands, the work of the gospel suffers loss and harm. The glory of the Philadelphian Church is that, weak and feeble as it felt itself to be, it rose to the challenge of the open door before them and went through for Christ and His Name. And if yesterday's Note has any personal significance for us, then we may be sure that the open door is where we live and where we work, in the natural circumstances of our lives, in the office and in the home. It is these that Christ proposes to make capital of for the gospel, and will, when we have eyes to see the open door before us.

29) 3:14-22

This is the saddest letter of all. There is no commendation given, only sharp censure. We have already seen the peril of the 'active' Church in Sardis, and here is another that did not know the truth about itself. Full of complacency, it did not realise its poverty and wretchedness in the sight of God. They were rich in the wrong things, and it was this that had caused their spiritual poverty. It is always so. The gold of the gospel does not mix with anything else; where one is the other must go. They had opted for the other, with disastrous consequences, the worst of them being the spirit of luke-warmness that had devastated their life. None of the tensions and pressures that marks the life of the other churches can be seen here - no one was sufficiently enthusiastic in Laodicea to be bothered with such issues. It was a situation of complete compromise, in which they were neither cold nor hot. A religious life of sorts still persisted, but it was neither the one thing nor the other, and - let us face it - Christ expressed his disgust at it in unmistakable terms (16). How are we to define luke-warmness? Luke-warmness exists when you have believers who are utterly orthodox in belief but have no concern for the lost; who believe in hell but do not pray for souls; who insist on belonging to an evangelical fellowship which has Bible-study and Prayer meetings but never come to them. It is this living lie that draws our Lord's severest strictures. Indifference and complacency are things that even Christ can do nothing with save reject and repudiate. Opposition and antagonism he can overcome, or if not, use in His service in spite of men, but indifference is like a creeping paralysis that destroys the possibility of further use. There is such a thing as a conscience being seared as with a hot iron and rendered finally inoperative.

30) 3:14-22

The wonderful words with which our Lord concluded His letter to Laodicea, 'Behold I stand at the door and knock' have been variously interpreted. It has been held to mean that the end is near and that a new age is about to dawn, It is a summons therefore to be ready before the King and Judge of all the earth arrives. Eternity is always knocking at the door of time, and it is always later than we think. It has also, of course, been taken as a great gospel invitation, and with this no one could ever quarrel - many a soul has entered the Kingdom of God through the ministry of such a verse. We should notice nevertheless that this was a word spoken to a Church, and the extraordinary picture it portrays is that of a church that has squeezed Christ its rightful Lord outside. Here was a Church that had no room for Christ! Can we doubt that this bears a message for our own day? Why is the living Christ kept out of the life of His Church so often? Is it for fear of what He might do if He were allowed in? Are men saying, 'We are frightened to let You in. We will consider it. You promise not to upset everything and cause too much of an upheaval. But you are not getting in here to change everything'. This, so often, is the shame of the Church in our time. We have kept the living, revolutionary Christ out of His rightful place, and crowded Him out by interesting, educative, pleasurable things. But He wants in, and is prepared to come, if even one man hears His voice and opens the door. We should not miss this hopeful application of His words in 20. It only needs one man to open the door and the Christ of God will come into any church, and do His transforming work. What a word of encouragement for some isolated, lonely witness in a difficult situation, in a fellowship that has no room for the Saviour in its corporate life! Work on, pray lone witness, and be quick to answer the door when He knocks!

31) 4:1

Chapter 4, all shades of interpretation agree, commences a new section of the Book. On the view we have already decided to follow, it opens the second vision, continuing to the end of chapter 7, and again covering the entire Church-age from Christ's first coming to His second, and describes conditions obtaining throughout the whole period. This has, however, been vehemently disputed as an interpretation by those who hold 'dispensational' views of prophecy, and we must needs pause at this point to establish the position we take, and vindicate it with adequate evidence and reason for holding it.

It is asserted that between chapters 3 and 4 of Revelation the Rapture of the Church takes place (see 1 Thessalonians 4:16) and that therefore what is related from chapter 4 onwards, concerning the fearful tribulation that is to come, has no application to the Church since it has been removed from the scene. If this view is correct, however, then the interpretation we have already given in chapters 1-3 must go by default, for there we assumed the existence of a Church in tribulation, as indeed John (1:9) and Jesus (2:9) seem to do. Two things in 4:1 are significant in this connection. It is sometimes held that the words 'Come up hither' refer to the Rapture of the Church, but this is surely very precarious as an explanation of the words, which, after all, were spoken to John, not to the Church, and it is fanciful to make them refer to anything else than John's own immediate experience. Also, there is a vital connection between the 'door opened in heaven' and the 'door' opened in 3:20, which maintains the continuity of thought and message. He who admits Christ unreservedly will be admitted into the secrets of heaven. Indeed, we might very legitimately take chapter 4 with its vision of the Throne as an explication of the promise Christ has just made in 3:21 that those who overcome will be given to sit with Him in His Throne. The new vision, therefore, is a fresh incentive and encouragement to the Church to hold fast and be faithful in the midst of all its tribulation.

32) 4:1

The significance of the vision of the Throne, towering over the affairs of men, is that it underlines the message of the sovereignty of God, and is therefore a repetition, an elaboration and a variation of the message of chapter 1 which showed us the living Lord, to Whom all power is given, in the midst of the candlesticks. It speaks to precisely the same circumstances and the same people, the Church, encouraging it to keep on trusting, because God is on the Throne and no tribulation can finally harm them. It is another 'Fear not' like that in 1:17. Indeed, chapter 4 may be said to be an exposition of that wonderful verse.

The question whether the Church is to pass through the tribulation or not must be answered, it seems to us in the affirmative, for the following reasons. If we compare 1 Thessalonians 4:16 and 1 Corinthians 15:52 and Revelation 11:15 with Matthew 24:30-1, it should become clear that, if any consistency in interpretation is to be maintained, the same event is referred to in each case, namely, the return of Christ, associated with the Last Trump. But in Matthew 24:27-29 it is clearly indicated that this takes place after the tribulation of those days - that is, having passed through it, the Church will then be called home to be with Christ forever. This seems to be a decisive answer to the question. In addition, however, we may say this: Having examined every reference in the New Testament to the word or thought of tribulation (sometimes the word is translated 'affliction', 'anguish', 'persecution', 'trouble') we conclude that there is no real scriptural evidence for supposing that there will be any specific 'great tribulation' at the end-time involving the Jews only. All that can legitimately be adduced from the evidence is that tribulation is the hallmark of Christian experience, that it will be the lot of Christians all through the Church age, and that it will intensify greatly at the end-time prior to the Second Coming of Christ, when Satan will know that his time is short.

33) 4:1-11

The significance of the vision of the Throne may legitimately be given more than one interpretation. First of all it may be taken as giving us a glimpse of what one day will be, beyond the ages of history, 'once the tumults of time are stilled, and the wildness of a fallen world is tamed' (T.F. Torrance). Much is made here of the sea of glass, clear as crystal, and we are referred to the vision of Daniel 7, from which John seems to borrow much. There the sea is convulsed, depicting the turmoil of the world, throwing up monsters and fearful powers of evil and darkness. But here, in John's vision the sea is no more raging, but still and calm; no longer are there monsters arising to terrorise creation. The living creatures around the Throne are worshipping and adoring the living God. All is subdued, and the marks of creation's revolt against God are now gone. In other words, John is given to see the end of the story. This is how the final chapter reads! It is the final consummation of the gospel, and of Christ's victory. It is the assurance that Satan is already a defeated foe, and the issue is not in doubt. We are, in other words, working towards a victory that has already been won. This is the practical relevance of the chapter for the Church. The victory is won!

34) 4:1-11

Another equally valid and relevant interpretation of the vision is that it gives us an assurance of what even now is true, that God is on the Throne now, and that all the events of the world are in His hand. Above all the turmoil, torment and tribulation of the world there towers the Throne of God. The Lord Omnipotent is King! Now, the conception that lies behind this idea is a very daring one. For the picture presented here is of two seemingly contradictory sets of facts. On the one hand, the travail of the people of God, their persecution by evil men, their suffering and even their death, and on the other the claim that God is sovereign and in control. How can this be? How could He be sovereign with these things happening? The answer is: 'All things work together for good to them that love God'. Someone has said, 'Life at its worst is not the enemy of faith, but its opportunity, and through faith will become the pathway to a blessedness for which there are no words'. Paul says, 'Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory' (2 Corinthians 4:17). The truth expressed here is that, no matter what may come upon us, God will turn it to good, make capital out of it, and make it contribute to our ultimate glory. A right attitude to all the suffering and travail ('he that overcometh') will mean its transfiguration into the sovereign purposes of God. The monsters that have arisen in world history in any age, rage by His sovereign permission!

35) 4:1-11

The emphasis throughout the chapter on the Creator God may have a deeper significance than at first appears. It makes us think back to Genesis 1 where we read of the Spirit of God brooding on the face of the deep, bringing forth order out of chaos. Is this, then, the meaning of the vision? Is the God Who in the beginning commanded the light to shine out of darkness brooding over the chaos and turmoil of our world, calling forth a new creation that will serve and worship Him? Is this that we endure the birth pangs of the new order that is to be?

The significance of the door opened for saints under pressure is surely that their prayers and cries do not meet with a frigid silence from God, but 'enter in' to His presence, and that help comes down from heaven to sustain and deliver them. One is reminded of the experience of the martyr Stephen, when he saw the heavens opened and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God. Just as in Stephen's case Jesus was standing to welcome Stephen, so here John is given to know that there is an ever-ready Saviour at God's right hand, to welcome His faithful martyrs home to Himself, and to issue forth in His own time to vindicate His people and establish His Kingdom. More than once David prayed, 'Arise, O Lord', in time of trouble. In this vision we are given to see how ready our Saviour God is to do just that. The door is open, and He is coming to help and deliver!

36) 4:1-11

We can well imagine what associations the rainbow round about the Throne must have had for John and his first readers. For the rainbow was the covenant sign of their covenant God. In Genesis 9, in the story of the Flood, it was the sign that the storm was over, and here it was the assurance to the stricken saints of God that the victory which they longed to see was not in doubt but already an accomplished fact. This is something that is not as fully appreciated as it might be. As Christians, we do not work towards, but from, victory. Victory was won at the Cross, and in the experience of the Church it is a question of realising a victory that has already been accomplished. We recall hearing of an anxious passenger on board ship as he saw storm clouds on the horizon. On asking one of the crew whether it was likely to be a severe storm, the reply was 'That storm has already passed us. It will never touch us.' That is how it is with storms of evil that threaten life today. For those in Christ it is always true that nothing can finally harm them, for He has already triumphed in His cross, and evil no longer has the final word in human life.

The blessing of this vision is sealed to John in the fact that four and twenty elders appear in it, representative of all the redeemed of God gathered into His Kingdom through the death of Christ. It was an assurance to him and through him to all the suffering saints of every age that there is a place for them around the throne, echoing our Lord's own words in the Upper Room, 'In my Father's house are many mansions.... I go to prepare a place for you... Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid' (John 14:2, 27).

37) 5:1-5

This chapter fills in the substance and detail of the vision of chapter 4, and explains to us, so to speak, how God reigns and controls the world. The answer is: 'Through Jesus Christ our Lord'. He is the central figure in the vision. All that we saw to be true in the vision of the Throne is true because of Christ.

The continuity of the theme with what has gone before is emphasised by the words 'Weep not' in 5, as compared with 'Fear not' in 1:17. John's distress represents the tears of earth at the mystery of things, and they are dried by the knowledge that the Lion of the tribe of Judah has prevailed to open the book. This is the significance in relation to the rest of the book - it is the same message of assurance and encouragement to hard-pressed saints as we have already seen. The repetition again and again of such an assurance is very wonderful. It is as if our Lord knew - of course He knows! - that in times of trouble and trial we need such a word not once but many times, to sustain us and hold us firm and steadfast. Nor indeed is this ever unnecessary; yesterday's grace will not suffice for today's needs, and the promise needs to be - and is - renewed day by day by a Lord Who was tempted in all points like as we are, and suffered, being tempted. The noble words of the 58th Paraphrase underline the reality of this high-priestly ministry of Christ more movingly and tellingly than anything else ever written. It will well repay some thought as we read this chapter.

38) 5:1-5

Many are the interpretations given to the book with the seven seals, few of them lacking in some relevance and significance. It is held, for example, that the book which no man can open speaks of the fact that man is not master of his own destiny - it is in the hands of Christ. Man tries in vain to unravel the agony and mystery of life and fulfil its real purpose. But human history will not break its inevitable course, and the continuity of sin cannot be broken by any human hand. Indeed, all 'easy' solutions of the problem make shipwreck on the rock of man's past.

Man cannot undo the past. As Omar Khayyam says,

'The moving finger writes, and having writ
Moves on; nor all thy piety nor wit
Can lure it back to cancel half a line,
Nor all thy tears wash out a word of it.'

'The handwriting', declares Paul, 'is against us' (Colossians 2:14),

But a more general meaning even than this is called for, of which the above is only a specialised application. For the book with the seven seals is the book of human destiny, in the sense of containing God's purpose for the world, unfolding the principles of God's government of the world. The idea is not only that Christ alone can make them clear - Christ is the key to history - but also that He has charge of these purposes. The fact that the book is sealed indicates God's plan unfulfilled and unexecuted, and unless it is opened God's purposes for the world are not carried out. The book contains, if you like, the 'blue-print' for the establishing of that wonderful vision in chapter 4 of the sea of glass. No wonder John wept, for if the book remained closed it would mean that God was defeated by His own universe and that evil had triumphed. This is the real force of the 'Weep not' in 5, for he is told that the Lion of the tribe of Judah has prevailed to open the book. The full significance of this we see in the following verses, which we read tomorrow.

39) 5:6-14

Someone has suggested that the picture we have in chapters 4 and 5 of the Throne and all the elders and beasts around is just as if everything was waiting for some event to take place before these sovereign purposes could be fulfilled and carried out. There is almost an atmosphere of expectation as John looks on. There is a hush, so to speak, as if they were waiting for something, when suddenly, lo! a Lamb in the midst of the Throne, as it had been slain. The suggestion is that what John is seeing in this vision is an enactment, so to speak, of that moment when all heaven waited for the Ascension of the victorious Son of God. We think of the words of the hymn

'Look, ye saints, the sight is glorious,
See the Man of Sorrows now,
From the fight returned victorious,
Every knee to Him shall bow'

and realise that they capture something of the drama of the scene that unfolded before John's eyes. It is, in fact, a vision in terms of the words of Matthew 23:20 and Philippians 2:9ff. Christ says to His disciples immediately prior to the Ascension, 'All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth', and He straightway ascended to take that power and open the seals of the book. And Paul says of Him that because He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, God 'hath highly exalted Him and given Him a Name which is above every name, that at the Name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth'.

40) 5:6-14

This vision, seen by John, is thus the completion of the picture given in chapter 4, and the explanation of it. God is on the throne, and even now controls all history, and this is how He does it, through the atonement and victory of Jesus Christ and His entrance into heaven for us. Christ takes the book with the seals as of right - His victory on the cross earns Him the right to open the seals and to bring into its accomplishment and fulfilment the glorious purposes of God. This is the force of the word in 5 - 'The Lion of the tribe of Judah hath prevailed...' - the word in the original is 'hath conquered'. It is an explicit reference to the victory of Jesus Christ over sin and death and hell and Satan and all the powers of darkness. The Son of God has conquered in such a way as to give Him the right to open the book of God, and before John's astonished gaze we see here and in succeeding chapters the unfolding of this book with the purposes of God moving right through to chapters 20-22, where John says, 'And I beheld, and lo, a new heaven and a new earth...'. This is the logical outcome and fulfilment of the opening of the book by the Son of God. We may therefore sum up the message of this chapter very fully by saying, 'The cross of Christ is the very heart of all things, and everything in time and in eternity depends on Christ crucified and risen.'

41) 5:6-14

Christ is the centre of history, changing its course from meaninglessness and chaos to a glorious purpose of fulfilment. The plan for the world is made possible through His victory, and all the sovereign mysteries of His purposes can now go into gear, so to speak. Evil has lost the initiative in the world; it no longer has the last word. It is easy to see what a tremendously practical message this is - and was to John, when the Roman Empire in all its arrogance and power was oppressing the Christian Church. They were throwing Christians to the lions, pouring tar over them and setting them alight, using them as torches on the avenues of the imperial palace in Rome, and in the midst of these terrible atrocities God was saying to them, 'Fear not, evil does not have the last word, since Jesus has risen and taken the book'. Everything in this sense centres on the cross - the cross is the watershed of history and eternity, the turning point of history. Up to the time of the cross history was going in one direction, but now it has received a new direction, one in which its fulfilment becomes possible and indeed inevitable. This is what may be called 'the cosmic significance' of Christ. It is central to the teaching not only of the New Testament but also of the Old that not only mankind is involved in the victory of the cross; all creation is involved. As one of our hymns puts it

'Earth and sea and stars and mankind
By that stream are cleansed all,'

This is in fact evident in this chapter, where not only the elders, but also the beasts and all inanimate creation. and all animate creation join together in the song of Praise. The entire created order has an. interest in this glorious victory and the appearance of the Lamb from the place of shame and sorrow to occupy the place of honour and glory,

'Jesus takes the highest station,
O what joy the sight affords!'

We must beware of holding small and pigmy views and understandings of the gospel. Christ is a cosmic figure towering over the entire 'cosmos' as its rightful Lord and King. That is what John saw. Could anything have been more suited to his position, when the Church was passing through the fires of tribulation?

42) 5:6-14

There is still another point which we must note here. The Lamb holds the seals in His hand. In the next chapters we are to see the seals opened, and the plagues poured out upon the earth, representing all the woes and tribulations that come upon men. The meaning is plain; these things happen by His sovereign permission. It is this fact that gives us the key to history. The distresses and crises that come upon the nations do so by Christ's permission and direction. This is why the Christian cannot ultimately despair, for he knows that even if the earth be removed and the mountains cast into the midst of the sea, all will yet be well, for he has seen the vision of the sea of glass and the turmoils of earth set at nought. What it means therefore is this - and this is an awesome thought indeed! - through that very tribulation and distress through which the world passes, and in which His Church necessarily shares, He is going to bring about the new heaven and the new earth. God allows, nay ordains, the travail and agony, in order that from it He might bring forth newness. It is doubtless mystifying to many, and a stumbling-block to some, that the seals could be said to refer to the distresses of the world, and that there should be so much rejoicing in heaven at the thought of Christ breaking them one by one, if in fact what was to come from them should be disaster upon disaster. But it is precisely out of these agonies and travails that the new creation emerges. They are its birth-pangs, and so sovereignly is Christ in control of them that He can make them, dark and sinister though they be, the process by which the world of His ordaining will be born. It is the sheer, breathtaking wonder and magnificence of this conception that sets all heaven rejoicing and praising Him. Well might they sing a new song when they see how firmly Christ holds the key of history in His hand!

43) 6:1-8

With chapter 6 we come to the main heart of the book of Revelation, which deals with the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven vials of wrath. Our study will show that these are linked together, the seventh seal containing and opening up the seven trumpets, and the seventh trumpet leading to the vials of wrath. This linking is integral to the whole thought of the book, for while each section, as we have already seen, purports to cover the entire age between the two comings of our Lord, the progression of thought is plain. The seals refer to the woes and persecutions and tribulations that come upon the earth and which are shared by Christ's people. As one commentator has put it, 'Wherever and whenever Christ enters upon the scene of history in the fullness of His saving power, there and then the sword is bound to appear. Christ's disciples become cross-bearers, peace is taken from the earth. The earth is drenched with the blood of the followers of the Lamb'. But God hears the cries of His oppressed people, and in answer to their prayers come the trumpets of judgment. These however are warning judgments, not final. It is only when they are ignored, when God's initial, warning plagues do not result in penitence and obedience, that the final vials of wrath are poured out. Such is the pattern of the main section of Revelation.

44) 6:1-8

The vision of the 'Four horsemen of the Apocalypse' as this passage is sometimes called, seems to owe much to ideas in the Old Testament, especially Zechariah 1 and 6, which should be read in connection with this chapter. The meaning, in general, is clear enough, and may fairly be summed up in our Lord's own words in John 16:33, 'In the world ye shall have tribulation but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world'. But differences are very marked as to detailed interpretation. According to one view the first horseman (on the white horse) represents Christ Himself going forth conquering and to conquer. It is maintained that the symbolism used, the crown, etc, is consistently used elsewhere of Christ. This is in harmony with the central theme of Revelation - the conquering Christ. The gospel will win the day. Next, the second horseman (red) represents religious persecution. This also is consistent. Wherever Christ and the gospel advance, persecution follows. The third horseman (black) represents famine, poverty and hardship suffered by God's people for the sake of their testimony. The fourth (pale) represents death. War here is indicated with all its horrors, famine and pestilence. (These seals represent what happens, not consecutively, but during the entire Christian age, and unfold inevitable principles operating in human life and experience. There is, however, another interpretation of the four horsemen, and to it we must turn next, in tomorrow's Note.

45) 6:1-8

Some hold that the first horseman represents anti-Christ himself, and is a manifestation of spiritual evil of terrific demonic intensity, going forth seemingly to conquer the whole earth. It might be thought that two such diametrically opposed interpretations of this picture must necessarily mean that one of them must be ludicrous, and it is sometimes held indeed that this second view is ludicrous. But we must consider it in all seriousness. It is true that the vision seems like Christ; it is so like Christ that it deceives people into thinking that it is Christ. But recall what Paul says of the anti-Christ in 2 Thessalonians 2:4, '(He) opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God'. Now the measure of his success is the measure in which he succeeds in deluding and deceiving large numbers of people into believing that he is the Christ (did not Christ Himself speak of the possibility of even. the elect being deceived?). His purpose is to make himself, and his programme, like Christ and His programme. The whole point about successful counterfeit is that it is so terribly like the real thing that it can be scarcely distinguished from it. How do we suppose that the false sects have been so successful in our time? Is it not because they measure up so nearly to the true divine pattern? This 'imitativeness' is of the essence of the satanic activities in the world in every age, none more so than in our own, in the spectre of communism which haunts and terrorises our time. This is so much to the point that we must spend further time tomorrow considering it.

46) 6:1-8

As a comment on the 'imitativeness' of evil movements, we quote the Rev. Thomas Swanston 'Many critics of Communism aver that the success of dialectical materialism is due to the fact that it sets itself up in opposition to a rarified and other-worldly religion. And without any shadow of doubt, the nature of Russian Orthodoxy compels her to be sundered from the real issues of life and very divorced from the simplicity that is in Christ. Men are saved not by preaching but by ritual. But the alarming proficiency of communism cannot be traced solely to the fact that she offered men bread and work in place of a meaningless piety. Her success is due, and I believe her ultimate triumph will be owed, to the fact that she is a convincing and accurate facsimile of the Christian faith.... Self-assured and ascendant Communism is to be viewed in the light of the fact that she is a brilliant imitation of the Christian faith. She has a god - the State; she has a prophet - Karl Marx; she has a holy book - Das Kapital; she has a saviour - Lenin, whose person and career have assumed almost sinless proportions'.

This is very impressive, and very significant, enabling us to see that the real point is not that communism is similar to Christianity, but meant as an alternative to it. The fact is, communism is, rightly understood, a secular apocalypse with all the salient features of apocalypse imbedded in it, the revolutionary crisis, followed by the utopia and the establishing of a new kingdom, the classless society, and claims to replace the Christian apocalypse with its promise of the new heavens and the new earth ushered in by the coming of Christ.

47) 6:9-17

The fifth seal introduces a picture of martyred souls under the altar of God. Are these the souls of those slain under the second seal? Whether this is meant or not, it is clear that what is referred to is the persecution unto death of the faithful, a grim reality that has happened again and again down the ages of Christian history, not merely in John's day, in the determined attempt of the Roman empire to destroy and eradicate the Church of God, but also in modern times, in the cruel and sinister oppression of ruthless totalitarian rule. Terrible as this thought is, we must not miss the force of John's words in 4 and 6 that 'power was given' to the oppressors to wreak such havoc upon the Church and the world. All this happens by God's sovereign permission, and all is still in His control. It could never be easy to hold on to this fact in time of fearful pressure, but surely the bare knowledge that it is so must act as an anchor when all around us might otherwise give way. The one great reality which offsets every other consideration is that vindication must come, and this is promised in 11. The martyred saints are here pictured as crying out for God's swift action in retribution (surely a righteous and right cry from glorified and perfected souls!) and God is not unwilling to answer them, but bids them rest 'for a little season', this for two reasons; first of all that the appointed number of martyrs be made up (remember how Paul says in Philippians 1:29 that it is given to us not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for His sake), but also, secondly, that opportunity might even thus late be given to men to repent and turn to Him. It is this that is brought out so movingly in 2 Peter 3:9 – 'God is long-suffering, not willing that any should perish.' How wonderful that even when all heaven is crying out for righteous retribution, God should still with yearning heart delay His judgments to welcome some late, reluctant penitence among men!

48) 6:9-17

The sixth seal introduces the judgment day, and pictures it in horrific symbolism, with the disintegration of the universe and the terrorisation of mankind. The imagery is drawn very extensively from the Old Testament (an interesting comment on the unity of thought between the two Testaments) - see, in order, Ezekiel 38:19; Joel 2:31; Isaiah 34:4; Isaiah 2:10; Hosea 10:8; Joel 2:11. This tremendous cataclysm cannot belong merely to the period of tribulation that is to afflict the people of God in the end-time. Obviously 17 must refer to the Day of Judgment. We may surely link John's words here with our Lord's in Matthew 24:27ff. What happens here comes after the tribulation and as a climax to it, in God's final judgment upon human wickedness. Some have seen a significance in the fact that there are six objects enumerated in this vision, and six classes of men. This, coming under the sixth seal, is linked with the reference in Revelation 13:18 to the number of the beast, six hundred and sixty-six, being the number of man. The inference is that what we have here is the judgment of man as such for his tragic failure to measure up to the divine requirement, and the victory of God over the greatest and proudest pretensions of sinful man under the dominating influence of Satan. Be this as it may, it is certainly clear that the judgment involves all classes of men, from the highest to the lowest, and all creation with them. This last is a prominent emphasis in other parts of Scripture also, and we shall do well to spend another day thinking about it in some detail.

49) 6:9-17

The reference to cosmic changes and convulsions should in itself convince us that what is envisaged here is the last or final judgment. When it comes to stars falling to the earth, it is surely the last of the earth! Prophets and apostles alike associate the final judgment with disturbance and upheaval in the natural order. The passage in 2 Peter 3:10ff is a good parallel to John's words here. Nor should this surprise us, for in the Book of Genesis, the fall of man through sin is said to affect creation also (3:17), and Paul takes up the thought in Romans 8:20ff and speaks of all creation in the bondage of corruption. Since this is so, it is clear that with the final eruption of sin in the last days (cf 2 Timothy 3:13, 'evil man ... shall wax worse and worse') the natural order would be likely to show signs of disturbance. This partly explains the 'signs' which John and other biblical writers - and indeed Christ Himself - mention as being associated with the end-time. But more, just as the final judgment ushers in the kingdom of God, and thus may be regarded as the birth-pangs of the new order, so also, on the cosmic scale, the death-throes of the old creation become the birth-pangs of the new, when it is 'delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God' (Romans 8:21). It has been left to our day to see that the idea of cosmic upheaval belongs not to the realm of fantastic dream but to cold, sober reality. The arrogant pretensions of man in the nuclear age have brought this vision within the dreadful possibility of fulfilment.

50) 7:1-3

The seventh seal does not, as one might expect it to do, follow immediately after the sixth. There is a pause in the progress of the vision, and for a whole chapter we are given to see the angels of God at work in human history. 'After these things' in 1 does not mean in relation to time, but to a fresh aspect of truth, and a new comprehension of it. The judgments mentioned in chapter 6 under the first six seals are now comprehended as winds held by four angels standing on the four corners of the earth. The reason why there is delay before the final seal is broken (which seal, as we shall see in chapter 8, opens into the seven trumpet judgments) is that something must first be accomplished, namely, the sealing of the 144,000. God's own are sealed against the trials and tribulations, that is, they are kept from falling and protected amid the judgments falling around them. We may recall the words of Psalm 91:7, 'A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee'. Sealed by the Holy Spirit, they are kept, amid all the temptations and trials of life, till He comes. On any interpretation (and there is wide difference on this point), it is very wonderful to realise that God will surely fill up the roll of His elect before Christ takes His power and reigns. None whom He has predestinated to eternal life will be missing, and the final reckoning is delayed until every last one is gathered out, sealed and welcomed into the Father's house.

51) 7:4-17

These verses contain two visions, and together they show the final outcome of the 'sealing' by God of His people - they are taken to glory when the day of wrath for unbelievers comes. But how are we to interpret them? The millennial view is that the 144,000 refer to Jews converted to Christ as a remnant out of Israel, and the great multitude in the latter part of the chapter to the Gentiles gathered in (both groups being saved during the Tribulation and after the Church itself is said to have been taken from the earth). This view is impossible for us to hold, as will be clear if our foregoing interpretation followed in previous chapters is held as correct. Indeed, the whole concept of a tribulation after the rapture of the Church is seen here to be a dangerously misleading idea. It presupposes and implies the possibility that there will be a work of salvation taking place after the Church of Christ has been caught up to be with Him forever, and after the day of grace has ended. But this is a contradiction in terms. Indeed, it is impossible, since it preaches a doctrine of 'a second chance' (not so far removed from the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory!) and cuts the nerve of the gospel summons and appeal, which insists that now, not afterwards, is the day of salvation. It is also, however, unthinkable, because it misunderstands the whole dynamic conception of the Second Coming of Christ. How could anything like this happen after He comes. His coming is the end of the age; it is the last trumpet that ushers it in, and there can be nothing beyond that save judgment, and the new heavens and earth. When He comes to reign, heaven and earth shall flee away! When He descends from heaven with a shout, the blaze of His glory will consume all things and make the elements burn with fervent heat. There will be no world left either for people to endure tribulation, or for sinners, Jew or Gentile, to be saved in. All the sealing of God's elect, be they Jew or Gentile, must therefore take place before the sound of the last trumpet, before Christ comes the second time. Whatever interpretation we place on these verses, this cannot be a valid one. In tomorrow's Note we suggest one which is both feasible and congenial to the facts.

52) 7:4-17

It is much more practical and likely to suppose that what John gives us here is a twofold picture of the Church, first the Church militant, then the Church triumphant. The point of the two pictures, the 144,000 on the one hand, and the innumerable multitude on the other, is this: in the first picture, which represents the Church on earth, the idea of protection is uppermost; God's people are sealed against the woes, and therefore all are individually numbered, every head marked and sealed with love and care. In the second picture, however, it is the wideness of God's mercy that is stressed, embracing a great multitude of people. The numbered are found to be numberless!

It is not certain whether we are to take the work of the angel in sealing God's people as referring to the calling out of men by the gospel, or to the protection of those that have been thus called out, but in any case we may legitimately infer that the true background of gospel work is the coming judgment of God, and that it is in this light that preaching must be done, for 'God hath appointed a Day' (Acts 17:31). The sealing itself may be said to have a threefold meaning, (a) as a protection against interference, (b) as the mark of ownership, and (c) as the certification of genuine character. Every true believer is sealed in this threefold sense. As Hendriksen puts it, 'The Father hath sealed him, for the believer enjoys the Father's protection through life. The Son has sealed him, for He has bought and redeemed the believer with His own precious blood. The Spirit has sealed him (Ephesians 1:13) for He certifies that we are sons of God' (Romans 8:16).

53) 7:4-17

We should not omit to relate this 'sealing' of God's people to what has already been said in general about the divine purposes in the world. In chapter 5 we pointed out that the book with the seals represented God's plans for mankind, and that these are put into operation through the death and resurrection of Christ. The implication is that all these woes and trials - the contents of the seals - are pressed by God into service in the work of calling men to Himself. The winds and the waves obey His will, even when the storms have been stirred up by anti-Christ himself. Thus, paradoxically - this is very wonderful - the fruits of Satan's wiles as he seeks to destroy Christ's kingdom on earth becomes, so to speak, the fruits of the Spirit, in that the very devices which are meant to corrupt and draw away men finally from God are made the means of winning them to Him and sealing them eternally for His glory. We heard only recently of a hard-bitten, irreligious man being constrained to think of spiritual things in spite of himself, because of the desperate world-situation that faces us in our time. This is something that the devil never really seems to have understood. Did he but know it, he generally goes too far, so that the extremity of his wiles so often becomes the means whereby his purposes are thwarted and defeated. There is in evil the seeds of its own destruction!

54) 7:4-17

One commentator thinks that the imagery in both the visions is drawn from the Old Testament, and suggests that in 4-8 there is a glimpse of the Passover story in Exodus, when God delivered His people from the judgment of death by the sprinkled blood. This is very suggestive, although we cannot be certain. But the associations in the following verses (9-12) are too striking not to have the Feast of Tabernacles behind them. This was the Feast when God's people rejoiced in His care over them in the wilderness, and expressed their gratitude to Him at the time of harvest or ingathering - the emphasis being, 'The troubles of the wilderness are ended, and the harvest-home of the Church is come' (see Leviticus 23:33ff). One of the ceremonies that took place during this festival was the ritual drawing of water from the Pool of Siloam in a golden pitcher, to be poured on the altar by the priests, to the accompaniment of the singing of the congregation, 'With joy shall ye draw water from the wells of salvation' Isaiah 12:3. This is thought to be reflected in 17 in the words, 'The Lamb...shall lead them unto living fountains of waters'. It is very wonderful to see how the elaborate rituals of the Old Testament are fulfilled and brought to fruition in Christ in the New, and to find ourselves saying with increasing surprise, 'Is this what that really meant?'

55) 7:4-17

We should not miss the contrast between the great tribulation of the last days and the glories and blessedness of heaven. What we read here well bears out Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 4:17, 'Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory'. We can imagine what this must have meant to John, enduring as he was then all the deprivations of his lonely exile, doubtless experiencing pangs of hunger and thirst, and aching, desolating loneliness. One can only marvel that the vision should have so completely met his present needs - no more hunger or thirst, no more of the fierce and merciless days of exposure to the elements, and especially no more loneliness, but in place of it the wonderful fellowship of the redeemed. But even this does not say the last or deepest word. The heart of the blessedness expressed in these verses lies in the prospect for him of personal fellowship with the Lord Himself. 'Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple; and He that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them... and the Lamb.... shall feed them, and shall lead them...' (15, 17). This is brought out even more wonderfully in later chapters (21:3; 22:4, 5). And surely this is the ultimate - and only - beatitude. For how should a man, such as Paul, who on earth could say, 'To me to live is Christ' be satisfied in heaven with less?

56) 8

The seventh seal, as we have already pointed out, opens out into the seven trumpets of God. The significance of this is that what is next unfolded to the Apostle is another vision, which we may take as covering the same ground as the previous two have done, - the entire dispensation of grace from the Ascension of Christ to His Second Coming, developing the theme a little further than the last. Thus, in chapters 8-11, John sees the course of world history from another standpoint, leading up to its final climax and judgment. That this is how the trumpet judgments should be interpreted seems to be borne out by the fact that there are several marked similarities between them and the seals in chapters 4-7. Thus in both, the first four stand distinct from the last three, and also between the sixth and seventh seals we have interjected the subsidiary visions of the Church militant and the Church triumphant, while between the sixth and seventh trumpets we have other subsidiary visions, the little book, the seven thunders, and the measurement of the temple of God. The two series of visions are not however identical but show development. They do not follow one another chronologically so much as stand alongside one another in the complicated pattern which is life as the Christian knows it. The trumpets follow the seals in this sense that if the seals represent the persecution of God's people, the trumpets are God's judgments on the persecutors, not however final judgments, but warning judgments, to lead men to repentance. (This is the force of the words 'neither repented they' in 9:21). Finally, the vision of the seals, as someone has put it, shows us the way through trouble to rest; the trumpets show us the way through conflict to victory.

57) 8:1

There are several interpretations of the half-hour of silence in heaven. One is that it is introduced to prepare us for the terrible character of the judgments to follow (cf Habakkuk 2:20, 'Let all the earth keep silence before Him'). Another is that it was to allow the prayers of God's persecuted children on earth to be heard in heaven. Another is that it illustrates human experience, in that we feel so often that God is doing nothing in face of our distresses, and that our prayers and cries go unheeded, whereas there is in fact only a little pause between evil and His reaction to it (cf 6:11). Still more likely, however, seems to be the suggestion that this verse properly belongs to the end of chapter 7 as signifying the peace that comes after the travail and the tribulation. Ellicot suggests that with the 'seven seals' vision now brought to an end, the vision now faded from John's sight, and there is a brief intermission before the next is vouchsafed to him. This is not to say that there is no truth in alternative explanations; indeed it would be presumptuous to claim that one was right and all others wrong, and Scripture itself does not require us to say so. Nor does this open the door to irresponsible wresting of Scripture, and to making it mean anything we care to. The truth is like a precious stone with many facets, each of them making its significant contribution to the whole. It is only contradictory views and incompatible ideas that cannot be allowed to stand together. This is a distinction that should be observed more than it often is in the study of the prophetic Scriptures.

58) 8:2-6

These verses form a preface to the 'trumpet' visions. The angel with the golden censer is distinct from the seven with the trumpets, and may be the centre of an introductory vision which describes generally all the activity of the seven trumpets to follow (5). This angel is said to have added incense to the prayers of the saints, after which the smoke of the prayers ascended to the throne of God. This is a vision, in symbol form of the work of our great Advocate on high, for it is Christ's atonement and intercession that makes our prayers prevail. While we pray to Him, He is praying for us. Now the significance of this appearing here is twofold: (a) in time of tribulation (such as that described under the 'seals') God will hear the prayers of His travailing people and will answer them, and (b) the seven trumpets sound out in answer to their prayers. That is to say, the seals make God's people cry out to Him, 'How long, O Lord?', and He acts, in the trumpets, in defence of His people. Here, then, is the picture: the prayers of the saints, the mighty Advocate on high, and the fire of God upon the earth, - such is the sequence of events in the economy of the gospel. Here, indeed, we see it in operation in the context of judgment, but it is just as true as a general principle. Christ said that He was come to send fire upon the earth - this is how He described His gospel - and what revolutions, what 'voices, and thunderings, and lightnings and earthquakes' it brings in its train to the lives of men! Men said of Paul and his companions as they preached the gospel, 'These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also' (Acts 17:6).

59) 8:7-13

The symbolism of the 'trumpet' is significant. So often in the Old Testament it was used as an alarm of war, a summons from the Lord. It signifies the warning voice of God, and the judgments here are the call of God to men to take heed and repent of their sins. We should also notice the marked similarity between the judgments recorded under the first four trumpets and the plagues in Egypt - the hail, the fire, the water turned into blood, the darkness, the infliction of death - the correspondence is too striking to be merely accidental, and this in itself should be a key to interpretation. For what were the plagues of Egypt but the warning voice of God to Pharaoh, in relation to his treatment of the people of God, and His judgment upon continued pride, arrogance and impenitence?

Opinions may differ as to what exactly the trumpets are meant to indicate, but it has been suggested that the first symbolises the disasters that take place throughout the age (7), the second, maritime disasters (8, 9), the third land-water disasters, such as floods (10, 11), the fourth abnormal functioning and disturbance of heavenly bodies. To be thus specific may in fact be to narrow interpretation overmuch and be too restricted in their application, and this is a temptation to be avoided. What is more important for us is to notice that in each case it is a third part of earth, sea, heavenly bodies, etc., that is affected. Two things may be said about this, first, that it is partial judgment that is indicated, not full or final, and this bears out the warning aspect of the trumpets in general; and secondly, that this represents an increasing intensity as compared with the 'seals' where a fourth part (6:8) of the earth was affected. This bears out the general development of the book of Revelation as a whole, and is what we might expect as we go on.

60) 8:7-13

The trumpets represent natural disasters that take place during the dispensation. It is significant that we often use the term 'act of God' to describe natural catastrophes, such as earthquakes and floods. We do so of course unthinkingly, without realising the import of the words. But these so-called 'natural' disasters are acts of God, and sorely need to be interpreted as such. They are not accidental nor inexplicable, but sent by God as warnings to mankind, to recall men and nations to Himself in repentance and new obedience. We may recall the prophetic word, 'I have smitten you with blasting and mildew... yet have ye not returned unto Me, saith the Lord' (Amos 4:9).

But we must go further. If we take the sequence of the vision seriously, we must see that these disasters are caused, ultimately, by the thrusting of the Word of the gospel and the fire of God into the earth. The gospel is a living thing. It not only brings life, it brings death, when men resist and refuse it. The presence of a praying Church and the fire of God in its testimony creates great and lasting disturbance and turmoil among men. This is inevitable, in the very nature of the case. It is this that gives such urgency to the work of the gospel, rightly understood. Well might one of the greatest theologians of our time speak of this as 'the theology of crisis'. Crisis indeed it is leading to a still greater when the warning voice of God is ignored or unheeded, for then the trumpets are followed by the vials of wrath.

61) 8:7-13

What is true on the world scale - the warnings and the urgent calls of God to repentance - is just as true for the individual, as we can see very clearly from the story of Moses' encounter with Pharaoh in Egypt. The progress of a soul that has been stirred and awakened by the Spirit of God is charged with urgent crisis. The concern, the conviction, the resistance, the renewed conviction as the patient Spirit of God pleads again with the soul, the further hardening until finally the Spirit is grieved away - this is one of the most solemn and most frightening things to see in the Church of God. What drama to see a man drawn by grace, on and on, to the place of decision, where mind must be made up, where it is only a step into the kingdom of God, where a destiny is in the balance for weal or woe, and at the last, the 'upsetting' proves too much, and there is a 'recoil', and he goes back and goes away. He has come face to face with eternal reality, and it has exposed him, and he will have none of it. This is one of the great mysteries - as it is one of the greatest tragedies - in spiritual experience. It is one thing to wake up; it is quite another to get up and do the one right thing. There is often an eternity of difference between the two! 'Neither repented they....' (9:21).

62) 9:1-12

This chapter continues the vision of the trumpets, and describes the fifth and sixth. There are two sections, one depicting the opening of the bottomless pit and the eruption of smoke, and in the smoke a plague of locusts, a fantastic picture, horrific and terrifying. In the second, four angels are loosed from the Euphrates in answer to a cry from the golden altar before God, and a prodigious army is loosed upon the earth, tremendous in its fearsomeness and horror. What meaning are we to place upon these manifestations? One commentator - in line with a previous suggestion in an earlier Note, that the thrusting of the gospel into society causes disturbance - maintains that this is what is expressed here. It is the Word of God that opens the bottomless pit of human nature, unveiling the secret depths of the human heart. It may be open to question whether it is legitimate or arbitrary to identify the star in 1 with the Word of God, but surely the general tenor of this interpretation is true enough. But there is much more to it than this - much more. There may well be an allusion in the falling star to Luke 10:17-20, where Christ speaks of Satan falling as lightning from heaven, and of giving His disciples power to tread on serpents and scorpions. At all events, we should certainly see in these verses an irruption of demons from the pit. This does not clash with the first idea, but complements it, and partly explains it. But this is a big subject and must wait until tomorrow's Note. In the meantime, we pause to realise, with great solemnity, that this monstrous irruption is one of the trumpets of God. It is His angel who unlocks the pit!

63) 9:1-12

The irruption of demons from the pit may be linked with the preaching of the gospel in the sense that the gospel's presence uncovers evil, and exposes it for what it is. And we see it for what it is as a demonic power. This is the deepest word that we can speak about evil - it is personalised in Satan himself, and the demons of hell. We may recall how in our Lord's lifetime, again and again, wherever He went, the devil-possessed seemed to be drawn like a magnet to Him. There is a great significance in this. Christ's presence was uncovering evil, exposing the works of the devil, and Satan could not hide when Jesus was near. This is, in fact, an abiding principle in the spiritual world. Wherever the Christ of God is, in the gospel and by His Spirit, there you will have the powers of darkness being drawn out into the open. Part indeed of the function of the gospel is to expose evil and to show it to be the work of Satan, and demonic in its essence. This teaches an important lesson. John has been dealing with events on a world scale, and unfolding the principles that underlie the workings of the world in the entire dispensation. Now, sooner or later, the real nature of the conflict becomes plain and clear. This is evident in the progression we see in the trumpets of judgment. The first four are severe enough in all conscience; but it is when we come to the fifth that we see this more sinister element appearing, and evil being manifested in its true colours, so to speak. There is little doubt that this is the real message of the chapter. It brings to us the revelation that evil is ultimately a personal, and personalised, force - with a king! (11).

64) 9:1-12

The origin and development of the demonic element in sin is something we shall do well to spend some time considering, particularly in relation to what this chapter suggests about the 'demonisation' of civilisation. The 'history' of sin begins in the Garden of Eden story in Genesis 3, when the serpent beguiled Eve. There are two aspects to human sin. There is that aspect which has to do, one might say, with the senses, and which expresses itself in waywardness and weakness and in the frailty of human existence. 'All we like sheep have gone astray' said Isaiah, expressing it perfectly. The other aspect is spirit, and is expressed in the revolt of the spirit of man against the living God. Now these two are quite distinct, and are present in greater or lesser degree in every sin we commit. Some sins are more predominantly sensual sins, having their root in the weakness and frailty of human existence, much more sensual than rebellious. Other sins, however, have a much greater element of rebellion and revolt and spirit than of the flesh. Sins of appetite, gluttony, licentiousness and such like, illustrate the former, while the sins of the spirit, pride, arrogance, ambition, illustrates the latter. Both these elements appear, though in different ways, in the Genesis story. The immediate appeal to Eve was to the senses - 'When she saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes...' - and this was Satan's beguilement, concealing the real force of his attack which was in his words 'ye shall be as Gods...' It was the revolt against God that was his real aim. And the full force of this is seen only in the later story of the tower of Babel, with its arrogant pretensions, clamouring up to the throne of God. It is here that we see the truly demonic element appearing - devilish ambition rearing its unholy and blasphemous head against the living God. The sensual recedes, and the spiritual takes the ascendant, takes over, so to speak, and becomes more and more devilish. This is the ultimate of sin. When Paul said in 2 Timothy 3:13 that 'evil men... shall wax worse and worse' he was simply recognising the inevitable outcome of the 'history' of sin, for in the end, the 'weaker' element in it is almost completely in abeyance, and the 'spiritual' is in full control, and the 'demonisation' of sin becomes a grim and terrifying fact.

65) 9:13-21

The demonic pretensions of modern society are surely reflected in this horrific imagery. It has been left to our age to witness the terrifying fulfilment of what to former times must have seemed an idle and fantastic tale. And perhaps the most terrifying thing of all is that the irruption of demons from the pit, this emergence of a gruesome army, with its terrible and terrifying breastplates and blasting forth of fire, is the fruit of a God-rejecting civilisation. It is the civilisation that has refused to repent that has produced such a monstrosity. Civilisation, as such, has thrown up this awesome manifestation of demonism. Reference was made in an earlier Note to the vision in Daniel 7 of the beasts coming up out of the sea - the sea there standing for humanity. That is the pitch to which civilisation comes in its revolt against God - it produces these monsters which will be its own destruction. It needs no great discernment to apply this in topical ways today. It is our own civilisation - our so-called Western, Christian civilisation, in its rejection of God and the gospel - that has given birth to the monsters that walk the earth today. Communism, this totalitarian blasphemy, is a production of modern civilisation. It is almost a commonplace now for Churchmen and Church Councils to declare that Communism is God's judgment on the Church for her failure to be Christian. This is exactly in line with what John indicates in this terrible chapter.

66) 9:13-21

There is yet another aspect to this that we must note. Sin, when it really comes to fruition, is completely outwith man's control. The following words, spoken by one of the greatest of modern secular prophets, Winston S. Churchill: 'It is probable - nay, certain - that among the means which will next time be at their disposal will be agencies and processes of destruction, wholesale, unlimited and perhaps, once unleashed, uncontrollable. Mankind has never been in this position before. Without having improved appreciably in virtue, or enjoying wiser guidance, it has got into its hands for the first time tools by which it can unfailingly accomplish its own destruction. That is the point in human destinies to which all the glories and toils of men have at last led them. They would do well to pause and ponder upon their new responsibilities. Death stands at attention, obedient, expectant, ready to serve, ready to shear away the people en masse; ready, if called upon, to pulverise, without hope of repair, what is left of civilisation.' Do we see the implications of these words? Evil is something that straightway gets out of man's control. Jesus spoke the simple truth when He said, 'He that committeth sin is the servant of sin.' Sin is no longer in a man's power to undo. He starts something over which he can no longer exercise any authority. Who shall deny that this is what we are now beginning to read on the frightened and apprehensive faces of our scientists and technologists, as the dawning realisation grips them that now, at the last, they have gone too far?

67) 9:13-21

As a final comment on the tremendous theme of this chapter we add some words from Dr Emil Brunner's Gifford Lectures, 'Christianity and Civilisation'. Speaking of the extraordinary developments of modern technology, which tempt modern man with a feeling of God-like power, and the arrogance of the totalitarian ideal in the modern Godless state, he goes on, 'It is then that man, identifying himself with that state, can believe himself to be God, the creator of his own existence, having in his hands unlimited powers and illimitable authority over other men. This totalitarian man is, in all probability, the monster of the Apocalypse who tramples down and devours humanity. And the totalitarian state is the most urgent problem of our civilisation at this present hour. For it is precisely in this generation that it should become obvious where the de-Christianisation of culture and civilisation -the main feature of the past few centuries leads. Humanity therefore is facing in our time, as at no time before, this alternative: either to continue along this road of the modern age, the road of emancipation from the Christian truth which leads to the total effacement of anything truly human and perhaps even to its complete physical annihilation; or to go back to the source of justice, truth and love, which is the God of Justice, truth and love in Whom only lies the power of salvation'. These words were spoken in 1947 in St Andrews University. And much - of fateful import - has taken place since then. We can only hope for humanity that even yet it is not too late.

68) 10:1-7

In this chapter we have a subsidiary section interposed between the sixth and seventh trumpets. This, as we before suggested, corresponds to the subsidiary vision between the sixth and seventh seals, and represents the witness and work of the Church of God in this world. This earlier interposition in fact, recorded in ch 7, is the key to an understanding of what we read here. There, we had the picture of the Church militant on earth being used of God to call out from all peoples and nations a people for His Name, and secondly the vision of the Church triumphant in glory, the great multitude that no man could number. It was the work and witness of the Church of God in its final gathering up to be with the Lord forever, that work taking place during the whole dispensation, alongside and in face of the oppositions and persecutions of the powers of evil. Now in chapter 10 we have precisely the same kind of pattern. Here is a picture of the Church's testimony, set over against the grim spectacle of world-disturbance and the increasing tensions of evil. In the first part of the vision in chapter 7, the emphasis was upon the believers in the Word of God; here, however, it is upon the Word of God itself.

This, then, is a message about the Word of God. In the vision of the mighty angel astride land and sea, we have the spectacle of the Word of God towering above the life of the world and dominating the ages. This is the first meaning we must place upon the vision of the mighty angel and the little book, but it by no means exhausts the possibilities of interpretation, as we shall see in subsequent Notes.

69) 10:1-7

We should be careful to notice the descriptions given of the angel - the rainbow, the cloud, the pillars of fire (1). This imagery certainly owes a great deal to the Old Testament. It is impossible to think of the rainbow without remembering that in Genesis it is the sign of God's covenant, impossible to think of pillars of fire without the associations of the wilderness wanderings of God's ancient people. The significance is this: the dark storm clouds are over the world, the world has gone mad and is writhing in a hopeless frenzy, but there is a covenant God in control of history and He will guide His people through. That was God's message to John on the lonely Isle of Patmos. Above all the turmoil and strife, there is a mighty Word from the living God, a word from on high, a sure word that can resolve all the conflicts of time and lead men into peace. We sometimes sing

Thou Whose almighty Word
Chaos and darkness heard
And took their flight...
That is the word that controls the world.

It keeps in check the violence of evil men. There is a limit beyond which that violence may not pass. All the power that evil men exercise is power that is given to them. And in the end that word will speak again and usher in the new heavens and the new earth out of chaos and darkness of this sin-cursed existence of ours. How it must have gladdened John's heart to be reminded so beautifully and reassuringly of the covenant, and what trains of thought rich in hallowed association must have been started in his mind! And have we not also found that this is how He speaks to us - a momentary gleam of light, and a whole world of spiritual awareness opens up before us.

70) 10:1-7

Another interpretation of the mighty angel standing alongside the first - is that the Word of God stands over against what we saw in the terrible vision of chapter 9 - the dark irruptions of evil from the pit, the principalities and powers, the rulers of the darkness of this world. The Word of God is the answer to the dark confusions emanating in clouds of smoke from the pit, the answer to the demonisation of our civilisation, to the increasing tensions of evil in the world, giving light in the gathering darkness. This, then, defines one urgent duty of the Church of God - to thrust the Word of God into society, into the counsels of men and of nations, to let it loose, to let it tower, and dominate the life of man. The fact that it is a 'little book' seems to have a particular significance. It is that God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the mighty, and the foolish things of the world to confound the wise. The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds. 'Take', says Paul, 'the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God' (Ephesians 6:17). Our own Scottish history has proved the validity of this thesis, for unquestionably the Bible has shaped and controlled -until recently - the life and honour of Scotland, cleansing the body politic of the nation - aye, and keeping it clean - and making possible the growth and development of true and godly character in her sons and daughters. John therefore gives us a timely reminder concerning the need of our day. The power of the 'little book' despised and rejected of men as it is, stands over against the moral and spiritual confusion of the modern world as the only bulwark strong enough to counteract the mounting evil. If this is refused, then there is no hope anywhere.

71) 10:1-7

There are two interpretations of the phrase in 6, 'there should be time no longer'. Professor Torrance puts it thus: 'In the presence of the mighty Word of God, time stands still. Time, as it were, is no more in that hour - it is the moment of eternal decision.' And he goes on: 'How dearly we human beings love to cling to the passage of time, and how we love to take refuge in days and months and years, to escape that decisive moment when we are dragged out of past and present and future to stand face to face with the eternal God. Man loves to clothe himself with time; he hides himself behind it and so hides from eternal God in the multitude of minutes and passing events. That hiding place is discovered when the word of God falls upon men out of the blue of God's heaven, for man is interrupted in his life, dragged out from his hiding place behind procrastination. The Word of God refuses to let him drift aimlessly down the current of time any longer; he is confronted with eternity, and at last he must decide. He cannot bluff himself any longer. This is the divine stroke that suspends the flow of time, the moment of eternal destiny and predestination -mankind face to face, in time, with the eternal word of God'. This is very devastating. There is a striking example of the truth of this in the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:16ff. There was a man who was hiding from time, hiding in time from this eternal moment of decision, and God called his bluff and said, 'Enough. There shall be no more time for you. Face this now.' And the man entered the eternal habitations unprepared, a lost soul, because he had never faced up to the challenge of the gospel.

72) 10:1-7

A second interpretation of the phrase, 'time no longer' is that it refers to the fact that there will be 'no longer delay'. This is in answer to the cry from beneath the altar of God (6:9) when the saints were crying, 'How long, O Lord...'. They were told to bide their time 'for a little season', but now, the angel of God comes and says, 'There will be no longer any delay. Finally, God's word will come. The last trumpet shall be blown, and the judgment ushered in'. Now, in relation to the general purport of the vision, and its meaning as referring to the work and witness of the Church, this is of decisive importance. For it tells us that our work is to be done in the solemn light of eternity, and against the background of a great urgency. It stands written in the Word of God that a day will come, we know not how soon - this is probably the meaning of the thunders in 4 which John was forbidden to disclose in his book - when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, and since this is so, all our gospel work and all our Christian testimony are done in a race against time. The time is short. There is no time for procrastination or delay in the things of the gospel. 'Now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation.' The full force of this urgency is seen in the next chapter, which speaks of a time when organised religion as such will no longer be possible. In a very particular and special sense therefore the time may be short for us who live in the latter days, and already the ominous signs are abroad in the world, of conditions in some lands which no longer permit the open confession of Christ or the gathering together for worship. Of this there will be more to be said in subsequent Notes.

73) 10:8-11

The eating of the little book borrows its symbolism from Jeremiah 15:16 and Ezekiel 3:1-3. The significance of this is that the gospel is glorious and sweet in itself, as it is received, but when it is proclaimed it is bitter for both the believer and for the world, and is ever followed by bitter persecution. This pattern is surely borne out in the Acts of the Apostles, where resurrection joy and power were ever accompanied by bitter persecution and tribulation. The Word is quick and powerful, and wherever it is proclaimed there will inevitably be reactions both of acceptance and rejection, concurrence and antagonism. This then is some indication of what our experience will be, and must be, in the witness we bear to Christ and His gospel. Jesus said, 'Woe unto you when all men speak well of you', and this is where the temptation lies, for pulpit and pew alike. The danger of compromise for the sake of peace and for the avoidance of unpleasantness is a very real one in the Christian life, but the Christian is committed to faithfulness, whatever the cost in terms either of embarrassment or the risk of social ostracism, or of active and bitter antagonism and persecution at home, at work or among one's friends. Nothing is surer, according to this word, than that if we bear true testimony and, as we must (11) prophesy faithfully, we shall encounter this kind of bitterness. Just how deep and radical and extreme it can be, and will yet be for God's people on earth, will, be seen in the next chapter, to which we turn tomorrow.

74) 11:1-2

Chapter 11 continues the interlude begun in chapter 10, and develops the thought of the latter part of it, viz, the bitterness encountered in the preaching of the Word of God. We are given a description of the bitter experiences the Church of Christ must pass through when it preaches the message of salvation. There are three unequal sections, describing the Apostle measuring the temple of God (1, 2); the ministry and fate of the two witnesses (3-14); and the final trumpet blown and the victory song of the saints in glory (15-19). We look first of all at the measuring of the temple. The 'court which is without' refers to the outer court of the temple, into which Gentiles were allowed to come, as distinct from the holy place and the holiest of all, the two inner courts. The 'measuring' seems to signify protection from profanation. As one commentator puts it, it means 'to set it apart from that which is profane, in order that, thus separated, it may be perfectly safe, protected from all harm. The sanctuary is 'accepted' while the court is 'rejected'.' The outer court given to the Gentiles indicates that practical heathenism and corruption have invaded the temple of God. As another commentator says, 'John seems to envisage a time when the outer courts of the Church's witness will be trodden underfoot by unbelievers'. Now bear in mind that we are at the stage between the sixth and seventh trumpets, awaiting the sounding of the last trumpet. Here, then, is a vision of what we may expect to see in the Church of God prior to that time. And we see, in the vision, a Church whose outer court has become prostituted by unbelievers and desecrated and made profane. This may well have been unthinkable and fantastic in John's day, when the Church was inevitably composed of men and women with a true experience of grace. But it has certainly become true - and is sadly true - of our own time. One does not think simply of the large numbers on the congregational rolls of our Churches who seldom, if ever, come to church, but of the division that exists among those who do come, and come regularly - between those who have known a personal encounter with Christ and those who are formally religious, however devout and enthusiastic they may be. It is certainly these latter who are largely responsible for the introduction of so much that is irrelevant to the Church's life - the worldliness and secularism that has all but driven the real message of grace out of the Church of Christ. So much so indeed that all over Scotland, when a man seeks to introduce the living gospel and a testimony of grace, you would almost think he was trying to introduce a plague into a congregation, such is the resentment, the opposition, almost diabolical at times, that he meets with in seeking to do his work. This is the kind of work that is adumbrated in John's vision of the measuring of the temple.

75) 11:3-14

It is against such a situation (yesterday's Note) that the real relevance of the two witnesses is seen. For they stand as the representatives of the true Church of Christ in the world. They are raised up to protest against the deadness and the worldliness of all around them. We take them to refer to the testimony of the living Church of Christ in every generation during the whole dispensation of grace. There is thus a link between what we read here and the latter part of chapter 10, which refers to the eating of the little book and the consequent 'bitter-sweet' experience. What the two witnesses underwent is meant to illustrate this. That we are not meant to take the vision literally, but symbolically, is surely clear from the reference to the candlesticks and olive trees in 4. The image of the candlesticks has already been used in the opening chapters of Revelation as referring to the whole Church of God in the world. The olive trees are almost certainly a reference to Zechariah 4 where the vision was given to encourage the dispirited exiles back from captivity in their work of rebuilding the Temple. They were shown, weak as they were, that there was a hidden strength, a sacred stream of oil, which could make them triumph over all their difficulties. 'Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord'. John is shown on the one hand - and this is but one half of the vision - the witness of the Church prospering in the face of all opposition, as if to say, 'However great the persecution may be, however great the testing and the trial, one thing is sure, Christ is building His Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it'. It is a vision of the work of the Church throughout the whole dispensation, an assurance that in spite of all difficulties, all pressures, God will continue His work, and fulfil His purposes, establishing the work of His hand.

76) 11:3-14

In 6 the vision changes, and the references change. Obviously we have here allusions to Elijah and Moses and the miracles they performed during their ministry (cf 1 Kings 17:1; Exodus 7:19). (Vision-wise, we should not be surprised that the details of the vision flash and change in quick succession). It is in relation to the reference to Elijah that we see the point of the 'forty two months' mentioned in 2 and the '1260 days' in 3 -these are not literal periods but symbolic, representing those particular times in O.T. economy when the testimony of God was made at such cost, speaking of the times of crisis through which the Church of God will pass. Elijah and Moses represent the faithful witness of the Church in an age of darkness and decline. Thus again, we have the picture of the work and witness of the true Church of Christ when, amidst opposition and adversity, she builds up the Kingdom of God. The 'fire' proceeding out of the mouths of the two witnesses has already been seen in chapter 8 in the fire of God coming down in answer to the prayers of the saints. The Church still in a very real sense smites the earth with plagues. She 'torments' the earth, as we read in 11. There is a 'torment' value in the gospel. We have only to think of the effect the apostolic message had upon Saul of Tarsus to see how maddening the gospel can be to those who will not bow the knee to Christ.

Such then is the assurance given to John, and one to be received today also when hearts are filled with misgiving about the fate of God's people behind Iron and Bamboo curtain - the assurance that the work of God is continuing, and being established, and not all the wiles of Satan can prevent the fulfilment of His sovereign purposes among men.

77) 11:3-14

But now, at 7, the temper of the vision changes. Here is a plain prophecy of what we must expect to happen just before the end of the age, prior to the return of Christ. The Church shall finish its testimony, and when this time comes, the beast from the pit will have his hour of triumph. The anti-Christian world, urged on by hell, shall battle against the Church and shall destroy it. The teaching of the passage is quite unambiguous. The two witnesses, representing the true Church, are slain, and general rejoicing ensues (10). This is the climax of the age-long experience of tribulation, which at the end-time will be notably increased, by the appearance of the beast from the pit. Nor does this contradict the emphasis made in the past two readings that Christ shall establish His Church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. For, in the first place, we must notice that it says this will happen 'when they shall have finished their testimony'. The Church is not cut off with its work unfinished, nor is the purpose of its witness unfulfilled. All that God intends through the Church will be accomplished. This does not detract from the terrible nature of these verses, but they need to be understood in their proper context. What they do mean is not that the gospel shall be destroyed - that were an impossibility - but that 'the Church as a mighty missionary organisation for the dissemination of the gospel and regular ministry of the Word shall be destroyed'. The public and official testimony of the Church will be silenced, its leaders liquidated, its organised witness broken and put out of existence. Certainly there will be individual believers left, although few (cf Luke 18:8) at our Lord's return. Now what we must realise is that this is not spoken of merely as a possibility for the future, but a prophecy. This day will come, according to the Scriptures. And of this, more in the next Note.

78) 11:3-14

This frightening reality is in fact already showing signs of taking place in the world of the twentieth century - in Russia, and even more so in China, where organised religion is being steadily suppressed, and only State-controlled travesties of the faith are now allowed. What has happened to the faithful leaders of the Church in China? What news we do have is enough to indicate that one by one they are being broken by the diabolic agency of brain-washing. What will happen if Communism sweeps the West? This pattern will begin to emerge, inevitably. A puppet Church would be allowed to remain, but the true Church would be silenced. Some time ago a TV film portrayed the stamping out by the Nazis of a living testimony in the Churches in Germany, and the replacement of real men of God by puppets who would speak the National-Socialist gospel, and God's true servants were dragged to concentration camps or shot. One could not help thinking with a strange thrill of dread, that, change the names and the nation, and you had a prophetic preview of what the Bible says will happen before the end of the age. If this happens in our lifetime - as well it may! - the question that must be asked is whether we in our general flabbiness of body and spirit will be able to stand up to it. Would we capitulate, or would we stand, until we were mown down as opposers of the new regime? Such a prophecy should give a new and graphic force to Paul's words in Ephesians 6:13 about standing in the evil day. We may yet have to prove how truly and how seriously we have taken the idea of the Christian armour.

79) 11:3-14

But that is not the end of the story. The rejoicing over the death of the two witnesses is however premature (10). After three days and a half, the Spirit of life from God came into them, and they stood upon their feet. Now this may mean two things. It speaks of resurrection, and can be taken as meaning a resurrection experience of new life after death for the witness of the gospel. The gospel of Jesus Christ cannot be finally destroyed. God buries His workmen, but carries on His work. Look for a parallel to this in the history of the Jews, God's ancient covenant people. Down the ages men and nations have sought to destroy them, but they could not be destroyed. They have risen, in our time, from the horrors of the gas chamber and concentration camp in Germany, and still maintained their identity, because God willed them to remain His people. So it is with the gospel. Christ has founded His Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. The Word of God can never be silenced, and if Communism obliterates the Church, the Church will rise again, aye, and in a new power and glory. But in the second place - and there is much to be said for this, in view of 12 - it may refer to resurrection in the final sense. Thus, 'Come up hither' seems certainly to refer to our Lord's Second Advent, and the calling up of the Church to be with Him forever (1 Thessalonians 4:16). In such manner, then, is Satan's seeming triumph, in the final clash between the powers of darkness and of light, brought to a speedy end by the mighty intervention of the Prince of Glory Himself.

80) 11:15-19

We have thus the sweep of Church history from the ascension of Christ to His Second Advent, leading up to this great climactic moment. Since this is a prophecy, and not merely a possibility to be considered, there are certain practical implications that must be faced. We must make ourselves ready for such an eventuality, and lay up the Word of God in our hearts, against the time when there will be no Churches to go to, and it will be punishable by death to have a Bible in our possession, let alone have organised diets of preaching. There must be many in China today who wish that they had learned far more of the Scriptures in their day of opportunity, before evil came upon them with such catastrophic completeness! The ancient Preacher of Jerusalem spoke more truly than he knew when he exhorted men to remember their Creator... 'while the evil days come not'. Men so often leave it too late.

Thus, finally, the last trumpet (15). In the closing verses of the chapter we have the assurance that the end of the story is glorious. Christ is Victor, and the final consummation is the opening of the Kingdom of heaven to all believers (19). It is what will come upon earth before that day that fills our hearts with such solemn fear. But in the same hour as the taking up of the Church (12) there is the great earthquake and the sounding of the trumpet of doom. Then we have, not a description of judgment (that comes more fully later in the book), but the glory-song of heaven, 'The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ; and He shall reign forever and ever'. It is little wonder that this magnificent spectacle should have inspired some of the greatest music ever written. Only the highest praise and purest worship could worthily express the glad exultation of this experience which is to be the crown of all the faithful's striving and enduring. To see Him take His great power and reign, Whose right it is - what joy and rapture this will be for those who have loved His Name and longed for His coming! 'Lo, this is our God', they shall say, 'we have waited for Him'. Blessed be His Name, forever and ever, Amen!

81) 12

With this chapter we come not only to the beginning of a new section of the book, but also to its second main division. It will be useful here to remind ourselves of the salient points in what has gone before, by way of summary. In the first half of the book, there are three main sections. In chapters 1-3 we had the letters to the seven Churches, reflecting conditions in the Church of God throughout the entire age, and to presence of the risen, exalted Lord in the midst. In chapters 4-7, we had the vision of the seven seals, opening upon the earth the troubles and persecutions and oppositions of evil. And towering over all, we had the vision of the Throne. There was also the subsidiary vision of the work of the Church during the dispensation, the elect being called out, and the final picture of the Church triumphant. In chapters 8-11 we had the vision of the seven trumpets - God's answer in judgments to the persecutions mentioned in the seven seals, with a subsidiary vision here also of the mighty angel and the little book, the measuring of the temple and the ministry of the two witnesses, representing the whole Church, and their fate at the hands of the beast, then the final victory of Christ. Now in each of these sections the theme is essentially the same - the conflict between the Church and the world. But now, in the second great division of the book (chapters 12-22) we are taken behind the scenes, so to speak, to see what lies behind that conflict between the Church and the world. We are thus introduced to a deeper dimension, and told that, that conflict is but the outward manifestation of the war between Christ and Satan. The world, and in particular the hearts of men, must be seen as the battleground of spiritual forces that strive for the victory. It is this intensification that we now turn to study in this and subsequent chapters.

82) 12

In the last verses of chapter 11 we read that the temple of God was opened in heaven, and there may in fact be a slight suggestion that now we are going into that temple and going to see from the heavenly standpoint, as God Himself sees it, the nature of the conflict in which we are engaged. And, significantly, we are introduced to the personalities involved in opposition to Christ, the Dragon, the beast and the false prophet, and those having the mark of the beast (chapters 12-14). In subsequent sections we are told their final fate. In 15, 16, we see what happens to those having the mark of the beast; in 17-19, the fate of Babylon, and the beast and the false prophet; and finally in 20-22, the fate of the dragon himself. This is a useful outline to follow, as it preserves the sense of continuity in the study of the book, enabling us to thread our way through some of the most difficult and confusing symbolism, and helping us to a clearer understanding of John's central message, which is the victory of Christ and His Church over all the powers of evil in the world and in the heavenly places. With this in mind, it is now possible to turn in some detail to the chapter before us.

83) 12:1-6

We have here the picture of a dragon standing before a woman about to give birth to a child, and ready to destroy it. The child is born, and is caught up by God. The woman flees to the wilderness, where God has prepared for her food and shelter. Bearing in mind that we are now being given an explanation of the ultimate issues that underlie the conflict between the Church and the world, it is clear that the message of this chapter is that the fundamental battle between good and evil in the universe centres upon Jesus Christ, Who is, of course, the child in the vision. The woman symbolises Israel, or the Church, as the community of God, not in the New Testament sense only, but as the one people of God throughout the ages. It is this Israel of God from whom the promised Messiah comes. What we have here is in fact a pictorial representation of the Incarnation, a telescopic picture of the history of Old Testament revelation, culminating in the fulfilment of the promise made in the Garden of Eden that the seed of the woman would bruise the head of the serpent (Genesis 3:15). The picture of the dragon standing at the ready to slay the newborn child must therefore be taken not merely to refer to the actual birth of Christ at Bethlehem - did not Herod make a determined attempt to destroy the infant Saviour? - but also to every attempt of Satan upon the royal line of the promise down the Old Testament ages, to prevent the fulfilment of the divine purposes of redemption, and indeed to all subsequent attempts to frustrate the forward movement of the gospel that brings hope and life to men. But more of this in the following Note.

84) 12:1-6

This pictorial representation cannot be confined to the Incarnation. The being 'caught up' unto God surely refers to the Ascension of our Lord. It is the whole of Christ's redemptive work, from His Incarnation to His exaltation and enthronement, that is envisaged. This reminds us that there lies at the heart of history a victory - Christ's triumph over the powers of darkness - the virtue of which reaches out into all the ages until His return to consummate it at the end. We are all too prone to forget this and to labour and wrestle as if the ultimate issue of our strivings were still in doubt. It cannot be too often or too emphatically asserted that the most important thing the Scriptures have to say about Satan is that Jesus Christ has conquered him, and that he is a defeated foe to the people of God. Every attempt by the dragon to beleaguer the saints and to foil the work of the kingdom must be offset by this basic truth revealed to us here. And even when the Church is harried and persecuted most bitterly - as she often has been, and may often yet be - the virtue of that victory is experienced in the provision God makes for His own (6). This is a dramatic application of the Psalmist's words 'Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies' (Psalm 23:5). But how indeed could this be, except He were in a position of undisputed authority and victory over them? This is a chapter to revert to constantly, for the much needed reassurance that the final issue in the kingdom of God is no longer in doubt!

85) 12:7-12

These verses speak of the repercussions in heaven of the 'taking up' of the Christ of God in His victorious ascension. There is war in heaven and Satan is cast out. As Paul puts it in Ephesians 4, 'When He ascended, He led captivity captive and gave gifts unto men'. It is surely misleading to think of this casting out of Satan with anything other than the victory of Christ on the Cross and in the Resurrection (Christ's own reference to Satan falling as lightning from heaven (Luke 10:18) and the casting out of the prince of this world (John 12:31) are anticipatory and prophetic of His work on the Cross). The context of 1-6 requires this understanding of it, and indeed what follows seems to confirm it, for it is through the defeat of Satan (on the Cross) that salvation 'comes' to men (10) and the kingdom established. Moreover, it is on the ground of Christ's death that the accusations of Satan need no longer distress God's people. As Paul puts it in Romans 8:33, 'Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, Who is even at the right hand of God, Who also maketh intercession for us'. Also, it is Christ's victory on the Cross that spells the final doom of Satan; the 'little while' between the Cross and the final consummation (which period the New Testament calls 'The last days') may be said to correspond to the interval between the formal condemnation of a prisoner to die and the actual moment of execution. Satan now knows that his time is short, that his days are 'numbered', and the nearer the final day comes, the more wrathful he will be. This is another explanation of the intensification of his pressures at the end. The wonderful verse 11 is worthy of more detailed treatment than we have given it in this general interpretation, and we shall return to it next time.

86) 12:7-12

The full force of the idea of Satan accusing the saints is brought out in a study of the first two chapters of the book of Job, where we are shown the Adversary in the presence of God speaking against Job, accusing him before God. (Significantly enough, an ancient Jewish tradition holds that Satan accuses men all the days of the year except on the Day of Atonement!) This accusation before God has its counterpart also in our hearts, in the sense of guilt and condemnation that can often prostrate us with fear and anxiety. There is one full and sufficient answer to it: the death and victory of Christ. John says, 'They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb...' i.e. 'on account of the blood of the Lamb', or 'by virtue of that blood having been shed'. The meaning is that their victory over Satan was grounded in, was a consequence of, His having shed His precious blood; without that, the Adversary's charges against them would have been unanswerable. But we must not forget the rest of what John says, 'and by the word of their testimony...'. It is because they have given a faithful testimony, even unto death, that they are victorious. The victory of Christ is appropriated, they stand in the virtue of the blood of the Lamb, only when a true and active response of faith is made in terms of a moral surrender of the will of God. In other words, this does not 'work' in the believer's experience unless and until the objective reality of the victory of the cross is met by the subjective consent of our faith 'that the effects of His death and resurrection should be imparted to us'. This consent is a consent to die. Our 'death' is the answer of faith to His. Only thus does His victory become ours.

87) 12:13-17

The dragon, having been cast down to the earth, persecutes the woman. It is this simple symbol that explains two fundamental historical realities - the persecution of the Jews, God's ancient covenant people, and the persecution of the Church of Jesus Christ. Behind even the fact of the Jews' rejection of Christ and their consequent sufferings, there lies this sinister pressure upon them from Satan because as a nation they brought forth the Messiah. It is the dragon turning his attention upon the woman. This also explains how, in any time of monumental arrogance on the part of dictatorial world-rulers, almost inevitably, and as a matter of course, they find a scapegoat on whom to vent their passions. And it has generally been either the Jews or the Church. Just as truly, history substantiates the words of 14 and 16, both in relation to the Jews and to the Church, for in spite of all manner of atrocities perpetrated upon them, both have been preserved down the ages by the sovereign hand of God. To use Paul's famous words from 2 Corinthians 4, both the Jews and the Church can say, 'We are.... persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus'. This is the theme of these verses. Help ever comes to God's beleaguered people, and the divine protection (14) sustains them throughout the ages, till He comes.

88) 12:13-17

As we have said the protection given to the 'woman' 'away from the face of the serpent' (14) does not contradict the emphasis in chapter 11, in which it was said that the two witnesses, representing the organised Christian Church, would be done to the death and crushed out of existence. For in chapter 12 what is before us is the whole dispensation of grace, from Christ's first Advent to His second, whereas in chapter 11 we were dealing with the events at the end-time, leading up to the great climactic conflict between Christ and the powers of darkness. The truth is that during the entire age of grace the theme for the Church will be: 'Persecuted, but not forsaken, cast down but not destroyed'; but in Satan's 'little season', at the end, and just prior to the coming of Christ, the organised witness of the Church will be broken. But Satan's triumph will last, to use Luther's words 'but an hour', and it will come not during but at the end of, the age. During the age of grace there will be the divine protection, albeit attempts from Satan will abound, as 15 indicates, to carry away the people of God. (Many commentators associate this satanic flood with the delusions and false doctrines and 'isms' that sweep across the minds of men. We have only to think of the deadly dangerous ideologies and heresies that have arisen in our time, both in the world and within organised religion, to realise the grim realism of these verses before us).

Such then is the experience of the Church of God in the whole dispensation of grace - Satan the great dragon standing ready to swoop, on the one hand, and on the other, the everlasting arms of God's grace and love and the bounty of his provision protecting us, until the last great and terrible time when Satan has his little season, then the end, and the establishment of the new heavens and the new earth, and the kingdoms of this world becoming the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ.

89) 13

This chapter completes what chapter 12 began - the description of the 'trinity' of evil arrayed against the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We have already been introduced to the dragon; here we have the beast from the sea (1-10) and the beast from the land who is the false prophet (11-18), and they are the agents the dragon uses in his attack upon the Church. On a first reading of the chapter what stands out most graphically is the fact that the powers of darkness and evil preponderate throughout. There is scarcely any trace of God. It is not of course that He is defeated, or no longer in control of the situation. On the contrary, the divine sovereignty is intimated in the words 'It was given unto him....' (7), and this constitutes a most important lesson for us, and one that is underlined in many other parts of the Scriptures besides Revelation. It is that God permits evil and gives it its head, far beyond anything we might understand or appreciate, because by doing so, He is drawing its fangs, so to speak, in order finally to destroy it. The best commentary on this point known to us is F.W. Faber's hymn 'Workman of God: O lose not heart' (R.C.H. No.520) which reminds us that 'God is on the field when He is most invisible', and that 'He hides Himself so wondrously, as though there were no God; He is least seen when all the powers of ill are most abroad'. It is with this faith that we must ever view the dark and sombre picture presented here.

90) 13:1-10

We must now seek to 'identify' the beast arising out of the sea. The first verse is better translated, 'And he stood' - i.e. the dragon, who proceeds to summon help for his nefarious purposes. It is in answer to this summons that the horrific monster emerges out of the sea. The sea, as we have already seen, represents humanity, and the emergence of the beast from the sea is meant to indicate that it is something that humanity throws up at the behest of the dragon. This is very terrible to realise, but it is starkly realistic, for we have in fact seen this happen in our time. Satan has in the twentieth century stood on the verge of humanity and called forth from it all the bitter dregs in the human heart and incarnated them in the mighty powers that stand over against the Christian Church in its intent and purpose to persecute and finally destroy it. The beasts, then, represent the 'incarnation' of the dragon who is behind the scenes. He is not seen here, except as the sinister power behind all that is done. And the beasts, it is important to see, represent concrete realities; they are not 'spirit' forces, but visible representations of spirit forces, at work in the world. This monster rising out of the sea speaks of world dominion directed against God's people whenever and wherever it appears in history - hence the many heads and horns (1). It is in this way that the persecuting power of the evil one becomes visible. Of this, and of the 'origin' of the vision we shall have more to say in the next Note.

91) 13:1-10

That this 'beast' should be taken as referring to the general idea of the opposition of world government against the people of God seems to be confirmed when we realise that what John saw on this occasion certainly owes much in its imagery to one of the visions in the Book of Daniel, chapter 7, where we see four beasts coming forth from the sea. John's vision 'amalgamates' all the characteristics of Daniel's four beasts in one composite picture. This alone should indicate that John is not speaking about any one particular world-power, although he would certainly apply the vision to the circumstances of his time, to the Roman Empire which even then was persecuting so terribly the Church of God. But the vision has a much wider application, and must be taken to refer to all the world powers down the ages of history that have set themselves up against His people. This is the 'Incarnation' of the Dragon's attitude of opposition against the man-child of chapter 12, and the woman that brought him forth, an opposition that continues throughout the age. Thus, we read in 3 of one of the heads of the beast wounded to death, and being healed. One application of this is surely relevant to John's own day, when the persecution under Nero was revived after his death by his successor, Domitian. But another, and similar, death and resurrection has been evident in our own time, when that 'maniac of ferocious genius' as Churchill called Hitler, terrorised the world and was cut down, only to give way to a still more terrible and fearsome manifestation of evil in the ascendance of Communist totalitarianism. Such is the interpretation we must place on the emergence of the two beasts from the sea.

92) 13:1-10

We must notice once again the emphasis made in 7 - 'it was given unto him to make war with the saints and to overcome them...'. This should be compared with the parallel vision in chapter 11 which spoke of the overthrow of the two witnesses. This is a quite unmistakable emphasis, and it repeats to us the grim warning given in the earlier chapter that organised religion as such will be overcome and destroyed by the power of Satan in the end-time, prior to our Lord's return. This indeed looked as if it might be true in John's time, when the might of Rome crushed down upon the young Church (the picture of the dragon standing at the ready to destroy the man-child and the woman who gave birth to him, is true of every age). But it was not, as we know; but it will be true in the end-time, when the beast's endeavours will at last be successful and the church will be overcome. The words 'power was given him over all kindreds, and tongues and nations' are charged with meaning for our own time, and it is not surprising that many think we are in a fair way towards their fulfilment already. When one thinks of the spread of Communism since the October Revolution in 1917, when there were but nineteen communists in the whole world, and now a great part of the nations under its sway, one begins to realise just how sinister and deadly it is as a power in opposition against God. The disquieting news from behind the bamboo curtain about what is happening to God's people in China only serves to confirm the grim truth contained in this prophecy, and indicates that the end-time may not be very far away.

93) 13:11-18

These verses introduce us to the other beast, rising up out of the earth. This beast we identify with the false prophet mentioned in 16:13 and 19:20. His introduction completes the description of the trinity of evil. It has been suggested that the first beast represents Satan's 'incarnation' on earth, the second the propaganda and efficiency which are associated with this. Thus, the second beast (which we shall afterwards refer to as 'the false prophet' appears 'like a lamb' (11). Here again we have the blasphemous imitation of the Lamb of God; but also we have the deceptiveness of Satan. He comes with soft words and fair speeches, and it is only later that his real character is discerned for what it is. He is said to symbolise false religion and false philosophy in whatever form these appear throughout the entire dispensation, and to work in perfect co-operation with the first beast, representing anti-Christian government. We have seen in our time a very remarkable expression of this unholy alliance, in the Communist stranglehold upon the Church in China. What is known as the 'Three-Self Movement' in Chinese religious life has in fact co-operated with Communist political power, and capitulated to it, in effectively suppressing the true Church of God and bringing it to the place spoken of here. The measure of the subtlety of this deception is seen in the inclination in the Christian West to accept the 'Three-Self Movement' Church as a true and authentic expression of the faith once delivered to the saints. As 14 says, he 'deceiveth them that dwell on the earth'.

94) 13:11-18

In a booklet on 'Communism and Christianity' a C.I.M. missionary, Mr David Bentley-Taylor says: 'It is a matter for great regret that the book of Revelation is so little expounded among Christians. Nowhere else in Scripture is the position of the Lord's people in China so vividly and accurately depicted as here. If you want to sense the atmosphere, read the 13th chapter of Revelation and set down Chinese Christians and missionaries in the midst of it. The first ten verses suggest the force which faces them; the remaining eight verses give an idea of the propaganda and efficiency which are associated with it'. These are words that have come right out of the heart of the oppression that the Church in China has faced in our time, and indeed that whole situation serves us with an eloquent commentary on what John unfolds here. Readers of the book, 'Come Wind, Come Weather', by Leslie T. Lyall, another C.I.M. missionary, will know just how grimly these prophecies have been fulfilled. Speaking of the advance of the Communists, he tells of how a Colonel of the Nationalist Army gave him this warning: 'The Communists will soon be here; we are about to withdraw and go to Formosa. But don't trust the Communists; they will not interfere with you at first, and will be very polite. On no account fall into the trap and be deceived by fair words. When they have gathered all the information they need, then after a year, or perhaps two, they will act. You have been warned'. So startlingly similar in spirit and atmosphere to this chapter are these words that one might be pardoned for suspecting that the Chinese Colonel had been reading it. 'Fair words.... very polite....'. The second beast came 'like a lamb' and 'deceiveth them that dwell on the earth'.

95) 13:11-18

What followed in China bears out the message of this chapter fully, and the warning of the Nationalist colonel. For after the Revolution was an accomplished fact, the Church began to say to itself, 'It is not so bad after all; we are being left alone; we are free to meet, we are free to preach, to read the Word'. And this went on for quite a time. It was only at a later stage that the pressure began, and that only in the most 'gentle' subtle ways. In the atmosphere of 'approval' and 'co-operation' shown by the Communists, it began to be suggested that it was up to the Church to purge itself of all imperialist taints, so that the Church might take its place honourably in the new Chinese society. The Government disclaimed any basic antagonism against the Church itself, but only against the way it had been used as a tool for imperialistic designs in China. Significantly, Mr Chou-en-lai is reported to have said, 'While China is putting its house in order, it is undesirable for guests to be present'. This was the thin edge of the wedge which finally led to the expulsion of the missionaries. Next, the Communists went to the Church and said, 'You agree with everything we are saying, of course? Then why do you still welcome the presence of these foreign, imperialist missionaries?' No Government edict expelling missionaries, no direct action to interfere with their work, only subtle pressure on the Christians to act themselves. Sadly and fearfully they sent delegations to see the missionaries. That was the beginning of the exodus of the great missionary band, of all denominations. And so it went on, until at last the organised Church as such had a stranglehold upon it, and a puppet Church under Communist domination and control largely taking its place.

96) 14

This chapter completes the section begun at chapter 12, dealing with the manifestation of anti-Christ on earth. And from the horrific pictures of the 12th and 13th chapters - pictures which we illustrated from the experiences of the Church in China in our time - our eyes are lifted up to the vision of heaven and glory, to the Lamb on Mount Zion. This is a very necessary corrective to what has gone before, and it needs to be emphasised that although the organised Church as such is prophesied as being broken and extinguished (the death of the two witnesses), there will of course be true believers on the earth at the end-time. Of course the light will persist in the darkness, and individuals will stand firm, in spite of the most fierce and unspeakable persecutions, and will triumph - and prevail - in their faith. But the extinction of the Church as an organised, evangelistic agency is an indication of the extent to which God is prepared to give evil its head, in order finally to destroy it. The vision of the redeemed here assures John that evil does not have the last word. Not only so, John is given the vision at this particular point to offset all the grim horror of what he has already seen. The words of the hymn 'For all the saints' provide a near-perfect commentary in this connection:

'And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,
Steals on the ear the distant triumph song,
And hearts are brave again and hearts are strong.
Hallelujah!'

How wise God's Word is, and how well balanced, in the contrasts it gives! Even the darkest prophecies are made to flash with light.

97) 14:1-5

These 144,000 correspond to the like number in chapter 7. There is this difference, however – there, these saints were still on earth, being called out by the gospel, and surrounded by the pressures and tensions and persecutions of an evil world; here, they are in heaven, with all their distress behind them, and saved to sin no more. In 4, a number of things is said about these saints. They are 'the first-fruits unto God and to the Lamb'. This is a picture from Old Testament usage; the first-fruits of the harvest were offered to God as representing the whole harvest, and as indicating that all of it belonged to Him. Thus, these saints here are not an elite, a specially chosen few as compared with other believers, but representative of the whole company of the redeemed, as indeed the same group in chapter 7 were (In James 1:18, this phrase is used of the Church). That they were 'virgins' means that they were faithful to Christ, and undefiled amid all their temptations and trials (cf 2 Corinthians 11:2); being 'without fault' means that by grace they were justified in the sight of God. To compare the two references to this symbolic number of saints in chapter 7 and here provides a whole message of comfort and strength and encouragement in itself. How wonderful to realise that those sealed on earth by the Spirit of God through the gospel are really kept safe for glory by His power, and are never lost. Those whom God protects are safe for evermore. Well might they sing the new song!

98) 14:6-13

The vision of the gathered elect of God, preserved and protected from all ultimate harm and brought through it to His eternal glory, is one well calculated to bring encouragement and reassurance to beleaguered saints in any age, whatever the persecutions and perils they might face, and we must think of it in relation to the fearful prophecies of chapter 13. This is just as true of the vision that follows, in which John sees another angel flying 'in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth'. Here our attention is turned once more to the earth, but we see it from the divine standpoint. And now, over against the fearful manifestation of the blasphemous trinity of evil, we see the activity of the Holy Trinity represented by the angel proclaiming the everlasting gospel. We must reject any suggestion that this is a different gospel from the gospel of grace. There is, and can be, but one gospel, and it is no argument to say that here the emphasis is different (7) from that made, for example, in the Acts and the Epistles. There are in fact different notes in the gospel - this we shall turn to later - and elements of fear and warning are just as authentic as those of grace and joy, as we see from Paul's preaching. This vision has in fact a close connection with the preceding verses. It is the presence and preaching of the gospel that is the decisive factor in the bringing about of vv1-5, and it is this that stands over against the 'sealing' of men by the beast (13:16, 17), indicating that even when Satan is doing his worst, the work of God goes on uninterruptedly to its appointed end.

99) 14:6-13

With reference to the different notes in the one 'everlasting gospel', someone has commented 'This final proclamation by the angel is universal, and stresses the unalterable destiny, for good and ill, which is governed by men's acceptance or rejection of it. As the first appeal to men may be love (although the law needs to be thundered out to convict men of their sin), the final appeal, to those who have refused its every gracious overture, must be fear. Many who have not been attracted by the love of God, so blind were they to the appeal of the cross, have been driven into the arms of everlasting love by fear'. The fact is, in these last days of God-forgetting, perhaps the only message men will finally listen to is one with warning and fear in it. When we think of the arrogance and vaunting pride of technological man, reaching for the stars, we begin to see how relevant this message of the angel is, and how needful for man to be reminded that he is but man. Why should it be thought strange or unusual, then, that God should in our day seek to re-interpret His everlasting gospel in terms that will be grasped and understood by the nation as a whole? It may well be that those who see a little beyond the glib shibboleths of accepted patterns in evangelicalism are those very people whom God is laying hold of, through whom to say something to the nation that will be listened to and heard, in a way that other more acceptable and 'orthodox' pronouncements, that identify the gospel with one stereotyped pattern, are not. The fall of Babylon is not accomplished by the preaching of sugary sentiment, but as here, by a gospel that warns men, 'Fear God, and give glory to Him'.

100) 14:6-13

If the fall of Babylon were not enough to convince us of the relevance and power of this 'everlasting gospel', and its 'evangelistic' impact, surely the next verses should do so. For they indicate with the utmost clarity that God places an 'either/or' before men in and by His Word -there is the warning of woe for those who have the mark of the beast and yield to his seductive charms, and there is the blessedness (13) of those who die in the Lord. Ultimately there are only two ways, life or death, and we must not be frightened of a message which seems to lay far more emphasis upon law and upon warning than upon what we are used in our ignorance to call 'the evangelistic note'. The evangel is never absent where an 'either/or' is placed before men. Nothing could be clearer than these words (9-13). There are only two alternatives, two categories, two ways -there are those who submit to the beast and have his mark, and there are those who submit to the Son of God and receive His seal. There are no other kinds of people - only the saved and the lost, and all men are either the one or the other. That this categorical choice should be so distasteful to a generation that loves to sit on the fence, speaking of 'many roads into the kingdom', and preferring innumerable intermediate shades of grey to the 'harsh realities' of black and white, is simply an indication of how well the beast and the false prophet have done their work in the minds and hearts of men. But scales will fall from all eyes when Jesus comes to reign, and the final distinction will be utterly clear. This is the urgency that the 'everlasting gospel' sounds out, entirely at one with the message of the early Church and the preaching of the Apostles.

101) 14:14-20

The last vision of the chapter is that of final judgment. Two figures are used - that of harvest and that of vintage. These have been variously interpreted. It has been thought by some that the first, the grain harvest (15, 16) refers to the gathering in of the saints, while the second, the grape harvest (18, 19) refers to the unbelieving. Others believe that both pictures are of judgment, the elect of God having already been gathered into glory. It is certainly true that the wheat-harvest is associated elsewhere in Scripture with the gathering of the elect (cf Matthew 3:12), and that the winepress almost invariably refers to the wrath of God, and it may be that we are to think of this two-fold reaping at the end in terms of the urgent 'either/or' given in the previous verses. At the same time, however, the reference to the sickle brings to mind the passage in Joel 3:13, which seems to be the origin of John's vision, and there it is judgment alone that is in mind. Whichever view we may take, the great thing to recognise is that at the end of the day there comes a reckoning, and that underlying this there are inflexible logical principles of righteousness. It could not be otherwise. The only alternative to eternal destruction is the destruction of God - and God is not prepared to be destroyed by the thing He has made. He is determined to be, and remain, God. That is why we are warned in the gospel to fear Him, and give glory to Him in a life that yields to His claims, and own Him Lord of all.

102)15/16

The next two chapters constitute a further section of the book of Revelation. They deal with the seven vials of wrath. It is important to see the connection with what has gone before. We have already dealt with the seven seals, and the seven trumpets, and now the seven vials, in direct sequence. Indeed we can see the general progression of the whole book at this point as unfolding a great historical pattern, as one commentator has shrewdly pointed out. Through the preaching of the Word, Churches are established - this is the situation represented in chapters 1-3. Then, wherever the Word has made its way, persecution follows - this we see in the opening of the seals (chapters 4-7). Then come the answers of God in the trumpet-judgments, to induce repentance in men (chapters 8-11) and when these fail to make men turn ('neither repented they') - because of the sinister, demonic powers at work behind the scenes (chapters 12-14), the final judgments of God are poured out in the vials of wrath (chapters 15, 16). The over-all pattern unfolded in Revelation corresponds therefore in a marked way with what history itself teaches us about the experience of the Church down the ages. We shall turn to a further consideration of this thought in tomorrow's Note; in the meantime it is valuable to pause to take a general, panoramic view of the argument as a whole, so as to keep the main picture and the main message in our minds.

103)15/16

It will be noticed that the vials bear a marked similarity to the earlier trumpet-judgments which, as we saw, referred to the entire age of grace. It would seem therefore that these vials also span the whole of Church history. Just as the trumpets expressed God's reaction to the persecution of His people, so the vials express His further reaction when men refuse to repent. The trumpets warn; and when the warnings are unheeded, the final judgments of God inevitably follow. These judgments are final, not in the sense that they constitute the Last Judgment (how could they apply to the whole age if this were so?), but in the sense that they represent the chastisement of God (as distinct from His warning) upon sin. The nemesis that came upon Hitler and Hitlerite Germany in 1945 was a judgment and punishment of God in this respect - not His last judgment indeed, for that will come assuredly at the last Day - but the final downfall of an iniquitous system brought about by the retribution of God. It is a solemn and sobering fact that the trumpets of warning are very generally followed by vials of wrath - both in the history of nations and in the lives of individuals - just because nations and men alike are so unwilling to repent of sin. The oft-repeated phrase 'neither repented they' (cf. 9:20, 21; 16:9, 11) expresses only too plainly the tragic perversity of the human heart. It is all very well for sensitive (or sentimental) spirits to react in distaste or horror against the very idea of judgment by a God of love, but what alternative is left Him, when men heed neither the overtures of His love nor the solemn warnings he gives them. For those who in spite of all He can do still refuse to repent, there is nothing left but judgment! Surely this must be seen to be logical and inevitable.

104) 15:1-8

The vision of the sea of glass and the victory song in 2-4 is surely based on the story of the deliverance of Israel from the hosts of Pharaoh at the Red Sea. It is very natural that this should be so, since the ancient history of God's people is a foreshadowing of the experience of the Church in its conflict with the world. Indeed precisely the same principle operated in Moses' tussle with Pharaoh as always does in the Church's battle throughout the age. The word of the Lord came when Moses was sent to him with the challenge, 'Let My people go'. Then came the opposition and resistance - 'Who is the Lord that I should obey His voice?' In answer to the opposition came the trumpets of warning, the plagues with which God visited Egypt (it is significant that the trumpets in Revelation 8/9 bear a marked similarity to them). Finally, when, Pharaoh refused to repent, the angel of death came to Egypt, and this represents the vials of wrath upon the impenitent king. Not least among the lessons we may learn from this is that of the patience and longsuffering of God, not only with Pharaoh but with mankind in general. This is something it is very necessary to remember in our study of a book which speaks so much about the judgments of God. The divine wrath is conspicuous in its long delays in history. This is the real answer to those who say, 'If God is a God of love why does He allow this or that?' referring to the wars that afflict mankind. But when we look at the facts, and see the long and continued unrepentant state of mankind, we shall begin to marvel, not that God should send judgment, but that He should have been so long in sending it.

105) 15:1-8

Another lesson taught by this OT story – and this shows that aptness of the allusion in relation to the principles unfolded in Revelation - is the progression of evil and the hardening of sin. It is plain that although there were in fact two points at which Pharaoh was in the valley of decision (Exodus 9:27; 10:16), when he was under the conviction of the Spirit of God. But he hardened himself against God, and the conviction that was resisted led finally to the quenching of the Spirit until Pharaoh went beyond the pale, and God judicially hardened the heart that had refused His Word. This hardening of the heart on Pharaoh's part corresponds to the 'demonisation' of our modern situation. For demonisation does not come by accident, but by courting the devil. In the earlier stages of sin it may well be the waywardness of our hearts that leads us astray; but there is that admixture of rebellion and revolt against the will and word of God that, when sin is persisted in, soon takes over in a man's heart, until the demonic assumes control and man is possessed by the powers of darkness. It is this that invites the judgment of God, and brings it upon mankind. Thus the judgment of Pharaoh, and the ultimate victory of God's people reflects the final overthrow of evil in the world and the rejoicing of the saints in glory in the vindication of righteousness.

106) 16:1-21

The progression of evil spoken of in yesterday's Note is evident in the course of the seven vials of wrath here, and the sense of approaching climax is very marked. In 9 and 11 we read that in the midst of the vials of wrath being poured out men repented not, but blasphemed the name of God. Following this blasphemy, the sixth vial prepares the way of 'the kings of the east' - a reference to the gathering of the forces of godlessness against the Church and its Lord (cf Psalm 2:2, 3) - and then, significantly in association with this, and explanatory of it, the issuing of frogs -unclean spirits - out of the mouth of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. No one could read these words without recognising that here is an intensification of evil, building up to the great climactic of the battle of Armageddon (14). The truly awesome fact in all this is that in face of all the judgments of God there comes a hardening process in man, and they pass from craven fear to blasphemy of the name of the God of heaven; and after the blasphemies there comes the eruption of the demons from the pit. Who shall be disposed to doubt that this is the deepest insight into our world-situation today? A few generations ago, anyone speaking in this vein would have been laughed out of court and counted mad; but some of the deepest thinking men today, not only in the Church but in the world, are speaking precisely in these terms - speaking as if some sinister power had laid grip on humanity, as indeed it has. Man, in his pride and arrogance, fed and inflamed by the achievements of our modern age, has arrogated to himself god-like powers, and sold himself to the devil, and it is in our time that the accounts are beginning to be presented.

107) 16:1-21

The final victory in the book of Revelation thus corresponds to the victory on the shores of the Red Sea, in which God was vindicated and His people delivered. And the parallel extends even to the rejoicing of the Church over the downfall of evil. Nor must we be squeamish about the thought of the glorified saints rejoicing in the judgments of God. There is a divine perspective from which judgment is seen to be good, and proper, and righteous, and something to rejoice in, and something to agree with, not to be ashamed of. There is a certain irony in the fact that it has been left to a generation which has produced the H-bomb and the monstrous horror of Hiroshima to bleat piously against the concept of a holy God who punishes iniquity and visits with His wrath the continued impenitence of men. The fact that men in our day shrink and recoil at the very idea of God being a God of judgment is a measure, not of our superior spirituality but of the confusion and distortion of all our thinking. And we must be very careful, when we disagree with this, lest we should be taking sides on the question of judgment against God, as many do. The attitude which expresses itself thus, 'We should never do such a thing', besides being manifest hypocrisy in face of modern man's inhumanities to man, simply indicates the blurring of the absolute distinction between right and wrong, good and evil, which in itself is evidence of the final issue of sin in the minds and hearts of men. God not only does such things, but He is right to do so, and He brings glory to His Name by doing them. As such, they are worthy subjects for praise and rejoicing among His ransomed saints. It is only because we are sinners, and almost incapable of being angry without sinning, that we find this difficult to accept. One day, however we shall see that God's judgments are as much the expression of His love, and just as much to be gloried in, as His salvation.

108) 16:1-21

The intensification of the pressures in the last days may well, as we have already seen, dismay the faithful, and for this reason the voice that speaks in 15 in the midst of the approaching crisis is all the more comforting and re-assuring to them - 'Behold I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth....'. This is a word that the ear of faith may always hear, and is meant to hear, in time of trouble, and it reminds them that although they may be confronting the perils and dangers and hazards of this mortal life, battling and wrestling with the powers of darkness, at any moment, as in the twinkling of an eye, they may be clothed upon with immortality saved to sin no more, and presented to Christ at His coming not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, and brought to share the majesty of His glory. What this quiet word to the Church means, in the midst of this great ascending climax of evil, is that the costly disciplines and lonely agonies that make up her earthly discipleship may at any moment, and without any warning, be transformed into everlasting splendours the like of which we can scarcely conceive, let alone understand. The paroxysm of earthquake and thunder that heralds the final nemesis of God upon evil is all glory and love and fulfilment to those who love His Name and have stood faithful to Him in the gathering darkness. This is indeed the message that rings throughout the entire book of Revelation, from the first chapter to the last, nor are we ever allowed to forget it. This, says John, is our comfort in our affliction. Comfort indeed, and much else!

109) 16:1-21

As a postscript to our study of this chapter, we add a Note written by the Rev. William Still in his studies in Revelation: 'The seventh and final judgment does not reveal hideous vengeance so much as the terrible One who lies behind them. This will be an ever-increasing source of wonder to us, the close connections between the divine torments and the glory of the Divine Person. God is shown to have been personally behind all the horrors which have already emanated from His throne. We may be ashamed of His vengeance upon wicked man, but He is not. He comes forward at the end of the 'play', not at all afraid to show Himself the 'author' of the 'piece'. How bold our God is, and we must learn to appreciate His boldness, else at the last day we may find ourselves in sympathy with His enemies and not with Him! That would be rather inconvenient, for we are at the point of the great divorce when men are divided finally because they are shown, these creatures of infinite shades of grey, to be black and white. How final it is may be judged by the fact that these men are now adding to their miseries by their defiant blasphemies in face of almighty upheavals and excruciating tortures and seem to know it and either cannot or will not stop. We wonder how long it takes to dawn upon wicked men that the evil they chose had chosen them and is now their master. But then, a Christian thinking this could not understand because he hates evil, whereas they love it, and hate the good. They cannot be happy in hell, but at least they are at home.'

110) 17:1-18

Another new section now begins, embracing this and the next two chapters, and again the theme corresponds to that of previous sections. In the second half of the book, from chapter 12 onwards we have been introduced to the enemies of Christ, the dragon, the beast, the false prophet, Babylon and the men with the mark of the beast. John deals with the overthrow of these enemies one by one, but in reverse order.' Thus, in chapters 15/16, the judgment of impenitent men is before us, and now in chapter 17, the fall of Babylon is dealt with. (The destruction of the beast and the false prophet comes in chapter 19 and the final overthrow of the dragon in chapter 20). These judgments are not to be thought of as consecutive so much as more or less simultaneous, although obviously they must be described one after the other, and this is borne out by the fact that both in these later chapters and earlier in the book we have had descriptions of the judgment day (cf 6:12; 11:19; 14:19; 16:21). Now John has already mentioned Babylon on two occasions, in chapter 14:8 and in 16:19, and obviously he must sooner or later deal with the subject more fully, and elaborate it for us. This he now proceeds to do, at length. Before we turn to this, however, we must note something that is becoming increasingly clear and significant. The tone of these later chapters is changing. We have read through and studied some very grim and frightening passages that have made our hearts almost fail within us for fear, at the thought of what will yet come upon the earth in the last days. But now we have the steady emphasis upon the victory of Christ over the powers of darkness and the rejoicing of the saints of God in that victory. It is as if we were beginning to emerge from the dark and terrifying crisis of history - into the glow and assurance of the triumph of God. John has not hidden from us the very worst that Satan can do to the Church; but having said this he can still say something deeper and more wonderful, that the victory lies with Christ. And as we read on, this emphasis becomes more and more pronounced until in the end we are caught up in the vision of the new heaven and the new earth and the eternal reign of God and of His Christ.

III) 17:1-6

Just as there is a trinity of evil, dragon, beast, false prophet, in opposition against the Holy Trinity, so also in opposition to the Church, the true and holy Bride of Christ, there is the harlot, Babylon. Now this, it would seem, is the key to proper and worthy interpretation of the vision, for it means that it stands for a principle which is valid for every age in the history of the Church. There is no doubt - and this is verified in 9 and 18 - that for John the harlot was Rome, pagan Rome in all her imperial arrogance and power. But if we were to refer to the writings of the Reformers or the Westminster Confession of Faith, we would certainly discover that Luther and Calvin and their successors identified the harlot with papal Rome, the Catholic Church in all its evil oppression of the peoples of the world. Similarly, modern interpretations have not been wanting which have referred this vision to modern totalitarian powers. Now, endless confusion has arisen here, and true insights have been ignored, because it has not been recognised that what John is unfolding here is a permanent principle in symbolic form. John was right in thinking of pagan Rome, that godless empire that was drunk with the blood of the saints and martyrs, under Nero and Domitian, and the other. Caesars that wasted and harried and decimated the Church of God. But Luther was right too, when he pointed at the Pope of Rome and said, 'That is what the book of Revelation speaks of'. Anything, in fact, can be an embodiment of this evil principle. And insomuch as papal Rome in Luther's day 'Wielded tyrannical power, and turned persecutor, and stood between the souls of men and Christ, and depraved men's consciences and withheld the truth from them, and connived at all manner of evil, and sought political aggrandisement, and become a political engine in the world, then she inherited the features of Babylon.' Anything fitting this description deserves this title today, whether it be in the political or religious scene. The danger is lest we become exclusive in our interpretation. It has just as much reference to Communism as to anything else in history, for Communism is doing just the things today that pagan Rome did in John's, and papal Rome did in Luther's.

112) 17:1-6

The danger of specific and exclusive interpretations is to curtail and limit the vision, and often bring it into disrepute. Extremists who during the last world war confidently identified these sinister figures in Revelation with Adolf Hitler, working out elaborate calculations to prove that his number was 666, were only fantastic in the sense that they were too exclusive in their interpretation. They did hit upon the truth, as John and Luther did before them. It is a thousand pities that wild and fantastic assertions tended to obscure and discredit real insights into the meaning of Holy Writ. The fact that there might still be other, and even more serious and sinister manifestations of the principle beyond their time does not seem to have occurred to them as a possibility. But the repetition of heads and horns in the vision should serve to tell us of the multiplicity of expressions of this evil in the world. And we in our turn must beware, even if we read the menace and spectre of Communism in these pages as we have been doing lest we say that it is the last, final manifestation - it could be, but it need not be. There may be something far more terrible than even this bestial, devilish thing that has terrorised our post-war age, who knows. But it is one expression of it, and we must be content with recognising the principle in this vision, and be prepared to apply it to any and every eruption in history or in our own time.

113) 17:7-18

The reference in 8 and 10 to past, present and future ('was, is not, shall be' etc) bear out the interpretation we have suggested in the foregoing Notes. For these have relevance not only with reference to the persecution in John's day which stopped for a time when Nero died and was renewed by Domitian, his successor (cf the legend in the ancient world that Nero would come back again) but also to the principle of evil in every generation, which was just as evident in pre-New Testament times as it was later. The weird prophecies in the book of Daniel bear this out. It is a matter of history that successive empires rose up in ancient times which persecuted and oppressed God's people - Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, as well as Rome. In this connection it is instructive to remember the origin of this word 'Babylon' in the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 6. It is the arrogant ambition of man rearing up against God that constitutes the spirit of Babylon, and it is this that is constantly 're-incarnated' as an evil reality in history, right down to the present age. The dramatic insights of that ancient story have much to contribute to a true understanding of John's visions, not least that it reminds us of how high God allowed men to build their tower before He chose to intervene for its destruction. The mills of God grind slowly....

114) 17:7-18

By no means unrelated to the story of Babel is the lesson of the last few verses of the chapter, which speak of the revolt of the nations against the harlot. For ambition is a sin which contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction, and disintegration must eventually come to those who are committed to it. In 13 and 17 it is stressed that there was one mind among the enemies of God, and that they were united in their allegiance to the beast and the harlot. But this unity is only a seeming one, and it is seen to be a delusion when God has fulfilled His purposes with them. Their agreement simply furthers His will (17), and then when divine restraint is removed they are seen in their true colours. It is very wonderful to see how perfectly God is in control of the confederations of evil powers arrayed against His people, and still more so to see Him in His own good time loosening the knot which binds them together, and straightway the beast and the harlot are at each other's throats! This is how evil powers in history are brought down. God causes His enemies to destroy one another! It is common knowledge now that for a considerable time before the end of the last war there was increasing tension within the German High Command between Hitler and his generals which led to more than one attempt on his life and finally ruined the German war-machine. And even more recently we have seen the tensions arising within the Communist bloc itself, both in Russia itself, in the deadly jockeyings for power in the Kremlin, and between Russia and China. That this is an inevitable biblical principle is seen in the story of Jehoshaphat and the war with Moab and Ammon in 2 Chronicles 20:1-23, in which the enemies of God helped to destroy one another. Well might the Psalmist say, 'He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh'. (Psalm 2:4)

115) 17:7-18

Before leaving this chapter with its solemn message about the self-destruction of evil, we should realise that it has an application on a personal level. In Hebrews we read, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord', and this reminds us that when in the work of God we are faced with injustice and hurt, and when evil things are done to us, God says 'Leave it to Me. They may be harming My work, and doing despite to it. Do nothing. Do not retaliate. Wait. Things will begin to go wrong with them'. And don't they just! When God's work is attacked by men who oppose themselves against Him and refuse the message of grace, we must learn to suffer this, hard and distressing though it be, and leave God Himself to deal with them. That evil thing has within itself the seeds of self-destruction. Men unite in their common resistance to the gospel and the will of God - men who have little else in common with each other - but God says, 'Watch them: see what happens to that pocket of resistance and rebellion; see what happens to their homes; see what happens in their families; see what happens to their health; things will begin to go wrong'. Of course, because the seeds of destruction are inherent in the rebellion they have adopted against the Lord. This is one of the saddest and most tragic realities in spiritual experience, and borne out again and again in the lives of those who have made shipwreck of faith, As the prophet Isaiah puts it, 'Behold all ye that kindle a fire, that compass yourselves about with sparks; walk in the light of your fire, and in the sparks that ye have kindled. This shall ye have of mine hand; ye shall lie down in sorrow'. (Isaiah 50:11)

116) 18:1-24

This chapter needs to be read through in its entirety in order that the full import of its message might be realised. What strikes one very forcibly is the impression of wealth, opulence and luxury, with all the voluptuousness that goes with these things, that runs through the whole passage. The weeping and the mourning are for the passing of an age of godless materialism and prosperity, and it is this that underlines the message of the chapter for us today. We have already pointed out that there are dangers in a too specific and particularised identification of Babylon, and even when we insist that it refers to a principle that is repeated in different ages, the tendency is to think of modern equivalents of John's or Luther's Rome. And, grim though the reading of these horrific prophecies is, there is a certain comfort in being able to point the finger at this or that manifestation in history or in the contemporary scene. But here we come much nearer home, and find it to be much more uncomfortable and ominous than we might have supposed. It is true that Babylon is identifiable in any age as anti-Christian power in its seductive aspect, as it beguiles men. Now it is certainly true that Communism is utterly materialistic in its creed and outlook, and blatantly proclaims this as its gospel to men. And in this it fulfills the pattern unfolded here. But surely this does not exhaust the application. What of the 'Christian' West? What of Great Britain? It can only be our almost incredible complacency that makes us think that this is straining interpretation. Babylon is not bound or confined by iron or bamboo curtains!

117) 18:1-24

Only a dreamy-eyed idealist could fail to see that the prevailing characteristic of Western society and culture is materialism. This is - in Britain - the age in which we 'have never had it so good', the age of bingo and premium bonds and double-time on Sundays, and dreams of big fortunes on the football pools, the age when material prosperity has beguiled the hearts and seduced the minds of millions of people from the things of God. This is not a unique phenomenon. In the course of history the pattern has repeated itself many times. We see it in the times of the Old Testament prophets, for example, when increasing wealth and prosperity in trade and commerce drew the heart of Israel from the true and living God and brought them in the end into captivity. It has been seen in empires that have grown lax through every luxury and opulence, as for example Rome itself, in the early years of the Christian era. Wealth and affluence never seems to come either to nations or to individuals, without the danger of preoccupation with material things and final capitulation to the materialistic spirit. And the progression is simple, clear and devastating. Christ said, 'Ye cannot serve God and mammon'. But men, failing to perceive the radical nature or the mutual exclusiveness of this 'either/or', dispute this categorical verdict, and opt for 'God and mammon'. In this they are quite sincere, for as yet, in the earlier stages, there is no positive thought of defection from the things of God. It is only later, when it becomes clear that 'both/and' will not work, that they finally say, 'Very well; mammon it shall be'. The capitulation is complete, and God is excluded from their lives.

118) 18:1-24

There is something more however than a merely negative attitude in the materialism of our time. It is not merely that there is no room for God, though that were bad enough. But God is not excluded from His world by a negative. There is a positive here, and it is the arrogance and self-assurance that such materialism brings to men's hearts. This is aptly expressed in the voice of Babylon in 7, 'I sit a queen, and am no widow, and shall see no sorrow...' It is this arrogance that invites the divine judgment. It is significant that Babylon's sins are spoken of in 5 as having reached unto heaven. The reference here is to the story of the Tower of Babel, which we so often have to turn to in this connection. The real danger in modern civilisation is not merely that it should have built up a structure that has no place for God, but that it should strive against God and seek to replace God and dethrone Him from the place of His glory. Look what modern materialism has produced today! A feeling of god-like power, an ability to reach up to heaven, to make planets and satellites, to break out of man's appointed order and habitat. This is the ultimate goal of the materialist conception of life, which communism has already formally expressed, and which we in the West already live. The arrogant claim to be master of our fate, and captain of our own destiny - it is this that God is determined to bring down.

119) 18:1-24

It is in relation to the over-all picture of materialism given in the chapter that the call to separation in 4 is understood in all its force and challenge. For if materialism is in its essence basically 'anti-God', then no believer can afford to have any truck with it. Probably the best illustration we could find of this is the story of Lot in the city of Sodom (Genesis 19), not only in the doom that overtook that wicked city, but also in the pattern of events in Lot's experience that led to his being almost dragged out of it by the angels of God. The manner in which Lot first lifted up calculating eyes on the cities of the plains (Genesis 13:10), then pitched his tent toward Sodom (Genesis 13:12), then dwelt in Sodom (Genesis 14:12), and was finally found sitting in the gate of Sodom (Genesis 19:1), is some indication of the subtle power at work in the spirit of materialism, gradually and imperceptibly corrupting the heart and conscience of a man who allows its first attractiveness to make its appeal to his soul. Complicity with the spirit of the world is dangerous not only in one's witness, but also to one's safety, as Lot proved, too late, to his cost. This whole story in Genesis has lessons of great importance for the Church today, and there are two points in particular which will require another day's consideration.

120) 18:1-24

The two lessons that stand out in Genesis concern Lot and Abraham respectively. We are told that in the hour of crisis, when Lot tried to warn his sons-in-law of the impending doom of the city, he seemed as one that mocked. This is a direct consequence of his conformity to the spirit and manners of Sodom. Why should they listen to one who suddenly assumed the role of prophet of the most high God after living so much like themselves? Why indeed! This is one main reason why the nation listens so little to the voice of the Church in our time, the Church has become so worldly, so materialistic, so ambiguous in its testimony, that men are impatient when she takes upon herself to speak words of warning to them. One of the most pathetic of all experiences is to see the fumbling and abortive efforts of a worldly Christian, who has mortgaged his conscience to the materialism he has grown to cherish, to bear witness to the reality of an unseen world that he has persistently neglected and ignored in his own life. Why should such a man imagine that his words will carry any weight with his fellows? If his life proclaims his disavowal of the pilgrim life, why should he suppose that his words will be of more avail? By the same token, why should a Church that has capitulated all along the line to worldly considerations, and gladly admitted the spirit of the world into its corporate life to such an extent that the Spirit of Christ has effectively been excluded (cf Revelation 3:14-22), imagine that in time of crisis the nation should listen to its voice, or be surprised when its own internal life shows such ominous signs of decay in manpower and finance? The Church, as Harnack the great scholar once said, has been most powerful in the world when she has least in the world. Is it too late for the Church to learn this hopefully in our day?

121) 18:1-24

By contrast, however, Abraham wielded an influence impressive and sustained in the world of his day. Commentators have always been quick to point the difference between his whole attitude and Lot's. While Lot sat in the gate of Sodom, he sat in his tent door, content to be a pilgrim and a stranger on the earth. The inspired commentary given in Hebrews 11:8-16 makes it very plain that the secret of Abraham's effectual witness and his impact on his day and generation lay entirely in his forward look for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God. For this reason the things of this world hung lightly upon him, and it is this attitude that provides the answer to the very real question posed in this chapter of Revelation, as to how God's people can 'come out' of Babylon, while remaining 'in the world'. We must live as Abraham did, with his roots in the world to come, drawing its sustenance daily from its powers and virtues. 'Ye are in the world' said Christ to His disciples, 'but not of the world'. This means not so much separation from the world - that is often too simple a solution to the Christian's relationship to the world - but separation in the world, an attitude very much more difficult and costly, involving a continuing rather than a once-for-all crucifixion of natural desires and interests. This is the life that tells our witness for Christ; it is also the only life that happens to be safe. All others are fraught with danger and peril to the soul.

122) 18:1-24

Two final thoughts before we leave this chapter. The first is that the final paragraph (20-24) indicates the final and irreparable character of the fall of Babylon. The casting of the millstone into the sea means the complete engulfment of the evil thing that has paralysed and bedevilled God's good creation from Babel's primal arrogance through the ages to the end of time. The words 'no more at all' recur with awful solemnity in 21-23, and this is the forerunner of the glad proclamation in 21:5, 'Behold, I make all things new', for in this new creation the former things are passed away. It is little wonder that the redeemed are called upon to rejoice over the fall of Babylon in 20, which rejoicing is described in full, as we shall see in the next chapter.

The other thought is to see the debt that John owes to Old Testament imagery and quotation. Compare 7, 8 with Isaiah 47:7-9; and 21 with Jeremiah 51:63,64 (Christ also uses the imagery of the millstone in Matthew 18:6); and 22, 23 with Jeremiah 25:10. These comparisons show how deeply John's mind was imbued with the Old Testament, and indicate the inestimable value that a knowledge of the Scriptures proves to be in times of affliction and persecution. They also serve to corroborate our interpretation that 'Babylon' is a recurring principle throughout the ages, and may not be tied to any one in particular.

123) 19:1-21

There is a glory shining in this chapter that is brighter than the sun. It is a picture of the blessedness of the redeemed in heaven. It corresponds to the earlier vision in chapter 7, but is greater and fuller. We have seen how, as section follows section in the book, the visions become more elaborate. This is certainly true of the grim picture of judgment, but it is also true of the final consummation, and here we have a swelling majesty that is almost indescribable in its beauty and intensity.

In the previous two chapters we have witnessed the destruction of Babylon; here in ch. 19 it is the turn of the beast and the false prophet. But, in fact, their destruction is not the central message of the chapter, for it is eclipsed by something grander and greater, the marriage of the Lamb. The beast and the false prophet come at the end of the chapter, almost as an afterthought. The significance of this 'playing-down' is that the real subject of God's programme is not judgment, although there has been much of it here in this book, but the blessedness of the redeemed. Judgment is His 'strange' work, the 'shadowed' side of His purposes, and stands alongside grace as its cloudy aspect. Thus, there are the two feasts here - that which celebrates the marriage of the Lamb, and that for the destruction of the enemies of Christ (17-18). These bear a necessary and inevitable relation to each other, since judgment and grace are both alike appointed by God.

124) 19:1-6

The growing volume of praise in these verses arises from the call in 18:20 - 'Rejoice over her, thou heaven....' after the fall of Babylon. It is the celebration and jubilation of heaven over the victory of Christ, over the harlot that sought to seduce His holy bride, the Church. It is a passage full of happiness, but it is the happiness of victory (2), - not happiness in vacuo, but in relation to the triumph of righteousness over unrighteousness. In heaven this is such a glorious reality that music is the only medium that can worthily express it. And this is a passage for the musicians indeed! Look at the fourfold 'Alleluia' in 1, 3, 4, 6! Look at the growing volume of power and praise as glory succeeds glory! First 'much people', then 'the four and twenty living creatures', then 'the solo voice' (5), then the great chorus (6) with glorious diapason like the voice of many waters and the voice of mighty thunderings. What a libretto for an inspired musician: Handel, Bach and Beethoven together could scarcely do justice to such a theme. (This is the passage on which the great 'Hallelujah Chorus' from Handel's Messiah is based.) One thinks of the vastness of the sound and the greatness of the music at a specially augmented performance of some masterpiece, and imagines the physical vibration, and the emotional upsurge as the great orchestra is supplemented by the deep bass of the organ pedals thundering throughout the auditorium, making the very foundations shake and tremble - and yet, this would be but a faint shadow of this reality! In view of the overpowering rapture and ecstasy this would bring, unsupportable by our frail mortal frame, it is easy to understand how we shall need to be changed if we are ever to be able to stand such intense torrents of delight and joy!

125) 19:7-10

The reason for the rapture lies in the glorious reality of the marriage supper of the Lamb. This is a picture as rich in fruitful suggestion as any in the New Testament. It says so much to us about the nature of the spiritual life. In Eastern lands then - and even today - marriage was a much more elaborate system than ours, and had several distinct stages. First of all there was the betrothal, corresponding to our 'engagement' but much more binding, almost as binding indeed as marriage itself. In it the terms of the marriage are accepted in the presence of witnesses, and God's blessing is pronounced upon the union. Then there comes the interval between the betrothal and the wedding feast, during which the bridegroom pays the marriage present to the father of the bride. At the close of the interval, the bridegroom, in wedding attire, accompanied by friends, proceeds to the house of the betrothed. He receives the bride, now prepared and adorned, and conveys her to his own house where the wedding feast, including the marriage supper, takes place. All this underlines the relationship between Christ and His Church. It is not so much that human marriage is the pattern of which our relationship to Christ is an example, as vice versa -the latter is the reality, of which human marriage is a faint shadow and illustration, and which gives meaning to it. The Church, thus, is now betrothed to Christ; the 'interval' is the waiting time between Christ's first and second comings. Thus, the blessed hope of the Christian is the hope of the glorious consummation. The hymn 'the Church's one foundation' is particularly useful as a commentary on these ideas:

'From Heaven He came and sought her
To be His holy bride
With His own blood He bought her,
And for her life He died.'

126) 19:7-10

The analogy of marriage can be pressed very considerably to give illumination to some of the deep things of spiritual life, and to emphasise the essential forward look of the Christian faith. For just as human marriage is one fulfilment of two lives in their human longings and aspirations, so this marriage is the fulfilment of our true destiny. God has set eternity in our hearts, and during this waiting time we pine -our hearts ache for a fullness that we never can find here on earth. It is this that Paul speaks of in Romans 8:23, 'we groan ... waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.' Hence the unbounded joy recorded in this chapter. It is the joy of fulfilment.

But this is not all. An even richer and more exhilarating concept is that the consummation is both a fulfilment and a new beginning. For marriage is not only an end but a beginning also. It is the end of the longing and the waiting, and the preparation, but it is not the end of the story; it opens out into a richer and fuller experience, with unimagined joys and delights, enchantments, responsibilities and privileges. It is this that makes the Christian religion essentially an optimistic faith, for becoming a Christian is an engagement to be the Lord's, and the prospect is bright with hope and promise, and it is always true that the best is yet to be.

127) 19:7-10

In the interval between betrothal and marriage the bride was to make herself ready. This is a particularly fruitful and challenging thought in the spiritual application, for this is the time, now, for making ready for the great day. It is not the time for seeking happiness, or satisfaction or pleasure in Christian things, but for the discipline and energy of preparation. Happiness comes at the later stage. This is the point of emphasis in 8 - 'the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints'. This can mean only one thing - the work of sanctification. It is of God, and yet the bride is to array herself. This is in line with the emphasis Paul makes in Philippians 2:12, 13, 'Work out your own salvation... for it is God that worketh in you...', and is a variation of the idea of 'character-building'. How we will be dressed on the wedding day will depend on how we live here. We are busy making that dress now, in the sense that it is how we prepare here, in terms of faithfulness and steadfastness, that will equip us and give us our capacity for the glory that is to follow. Suffering for Christ's sake will enlarge our capacity for grandeur and glory in the world to come, just as a wife who brings to her marriage a sound training in practical godliness and faithful living will immeasurably enrich her married life, and make it a thing both of beauty and usefulness, and charged with possibility. Viewed in this light, the training and discipline, with the privations these often entail, are infinitely worthwhile in both human marriage and spiritual. The end is worth all the waiting and the wanting!

128) 19:11-16

The invitation (9) is to the redeemed, and the redeemed are the Bride. There is no contradiction here, only two different images of the same reality (cf 22:9, where the Bride is also the Holy City). It is only here that we are able to see in proper perspective all the grim horror of the previous chapters. All the bitter costliness and persecution involved in the Christian life, and unfolded in Revelation, is true, - but oh! the sweetness and blessedness of being among the number of those called to the marriage supper of the Lamb! These are the two sides - the toils, tears, dangers, and persecutions of the Christian life, and its joys, delights and rewards. So often from the human standpoint, and perhaps inevitably so, we are preoccupied with the dark side of experience, but here the vision gloriously eclipses all else. To see the King in His beauty, and to see Him come thus, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, the joy or the terror of the universe - joy to those who have owned Him Lord, terror to those who have resisted and refused and opposed His gospel - this is ultimate reality, for weal or woe. The only thing that will matter for anyone, then, will be to have been on His side, and to have His smile of recognition and commendation. Even to read of it is benediction enough, but to participate in this great event, and experience it, defies expression. There is a wonderful passage in Isaiah 25:9 - 'Lo! this is our God, we have waited for Him' - as if to cry: 'We knew it would be wonderful, but this.... It is beyond all imagining, and almost beyond belief.'

Such is the great climactic event. And in the meanwhile, it is still the interval, and the blessed invitation goes out calling men to prepare to meet their God. 'O, be swift my soul to answer Him....!'

129) 19:17-21

The final 'show-down' is not so much described as mentioned here at the end of the chapter, not only because it is not the final account of it in the book of Revelation, but also because there is not a great deal to describe. For it is not to be thought of as a long protracted battle, as decisive battles usually are in military campaigns, but rather as a swift and summary judgment upon the gathered forces of evil. What we must learn is that God is not stretched to the limit to overcome His enemies, as if it were only with difficulty that He could gain the victory. His is an easy superiority. The fact that final victory takes so long is merely an indication that He chooses His time to strike, in order that, until that hour should come, He might use to the full the whole complex pattern of evil for His own sovereign purposes, taking the wise in their own craftiness, and destroying them utterly. As someone said: 'It is always easy for God to defeat evil in any shape or form, but to do so prematurely would be to lose the strange service of its goads and frictions. To deal with evil too soon would fail to allow it fully to show itself, and thus to fail to prove how utterly evil it is and how ripe and right for destruction. But when the moment is come it is polished off as with the passing swipe of an inconsequent duster. So much for the deceitful miracles of the false prophet!'

130)20:1-3

In no chapter of Revelation has controversy raged more thoroughly than in this. There are two issues in the main involved: the question of the millennium and the problem of the two resurrections. These two are linked together, and interpretation of the second depends upon the interpretation placed on the first.

We are told that Satan is bound for 1,000 years and cast into the bottomless pit, after which he must be loosed for a little season. We are then told of the saints of God who were beheaded for the witness of Jesus being raised to life and reign with Christ for a thousand years. This is called the first resurrection. Then we are told that at the end of the thousand years Satan is loosed and goes forth to deceive the nations and gather them together in the final battle in which he is destroyed and cast into the lake of fire, and the final judgment is heralded and ushered in.

The controversy rests on the differing interpretations of the book as a whole - one, which we have followed in these Notes, taking the view that there are several parallel visions in Revelation is each of which the entire period between Christ's first and second comings is covered, the other, the dispensational, maintaining that each chapter follows on historically from the previous one. In the first, chapter 20 is taken as referring to events connected with Christ's first coming, but in the second, to the second coming. Clearly there can be no kind of reconciliation between two such diametrically contradictory views, and we must spend some time therefore in elaborating and substantiating what seems to be the more likely of the two, namely the first.

131)20:1-5

The basic mistake in interpretation here is to assume that the events spoken of here take place at the end-time, - the last days, associated with Christ's second coming. But this is an impossible assumption, on the view that we have consistently followed in these Notes which is that Revelation we have a series of parallel visions, rather than a serial story with each chapter going on from the end of the previous one. Chapter 20, it should be clear, begins the seventh and final section of the book. The purpose of the latter half of Revelation has been to introduce us to the enemies set up in array against Christ, and show their destruction, one by one. In chapter 20 we come to the last of these - the dragon, that old serpent, the devil. But it is a new section, and each new section has been seen to go back to the beginning again, to the first coming of Christ and proceed to the second coming. And if there is to be any consistency of interpretation at all, the opening verses of chapter 20 must be taken to refer to events associated with Christ's first coming to the earth. What they give is an 'apocalyptic' account of what goes on behind history, the story from the viewpoint of the kingdom of God, and of its breaking into the midst of our sinful world in the Incarnation and Atonement of the Son of God, and its reign in the midst of our time.

In this connection it is significant that the work of binding Satan referred to here in v 2 is associated in other parts of Scripture with Christ's first coming, and supremely with His cross and Resurrection, cf Matthew 12:29 where 'binding the strong man' has the same word as in 2. Compare also Luke 10:17, 18, where Satan is spoken of as falling as lightning from heaven -surely this corresponds to the description we have here in 2, 3, as do John 12:31 and Colossians 2:15. A careful comparison and consideration of these references should make it plain that they 'fix' the time of Revelation 20:1-5, as being our Lord's atonement and victory.

132)20:1-3

The parallel nature of the successive visions in Revelation seems also to substantiate this interpretation of the binding of Satan. In 12:5ff, (also the beginning of a section) we read that 'the great dragon was cast out' - this in association with Christ's atoning work and ascension and coronation, when He was 'caught up unto God and to His throne' (12:5). The identity of reference is surely unmistakable and incontrovertible.

This means, however, that the thousand years cannot refer to a literal period of time, but are symbolic of the entire age between the first and second comings of Christ. But why should we take them as literal? The seven churches in chapters 2 and 3 do not mean that there were only seven churches in Asia (Acts can name others); the seven-horned, ten-headed monsters were not to be taken literally, nor were the 144,000. Why should the thousand years be an exception? The reign of Christ is spoken of as lasting a thousand years, because it is the symbol of completion and fulfilment, - of new time that has broken in, of the perfect life of eternity that has entered into time. In harmony with this idea is the apostolic assertion in the early Church, 'Jesus is Lord'. In a very real sense they recognised that with His atonement and victory Christ's reign had begun already, and what we have here is a pictorial representation of what to them was a basic, glorious reality. To them Satan was a defeated foe, and Jesus Christ, the Lord, had defeated him. It was this that John was being reminded of in the vision, in spite of all that in his circumstances at the time might seem to contradict it.

133)20:4-6

The next question that arises is that of the two resurrections. The dispensational view maintains that a literal period of a thousand years separates the resurrection of the righteous from that of the wicked. But this does violence to the general teaching of Scripture which elsewhere says something very different. And here an important principle of interpretation must be called into operation. It is that where there are seeming contradictions between statements in Scripture, we must start with those that are plain and unequivocal and interpret in this light those that are symbolic, and never vice versa. And since in Revelation we are dealing almost entirely with the symbolic, it is dangerous and misleading to seek to interpret plain statements made elsewhere, on the basis of symbolic categories that could mean something else, and could have a different interpretation.

The plain statements we need to consider here are those such as are made in John 5:28, 29, 'The hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall.... come forth.... unto the resurrection of life...and... unto the resurrection of damnation'. Here one hour is specifically for one general resurrection. This emphasis is likewise made in Acts 24:15, which speaks of a 'resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust', and in Romans 2:5 (cf also Matthew 13:30, 42, 43, 49; Matthew 22:12, 13; Matthew 25:1-12, 14ff, 31ff). Since the preponderance of Scripture teaching is on one general resurrection, not two, these verses must necessarily refer to something else than the final resurrection. And this in fact is the case. For it is the souls (4) of the martyrs, not their bodies, that John sees. The reference is therefore to the translation of departed saints and martyrs to heaven. To understand this is to have a flood of light shed on what has been admittedly a difficult and thorny problem and to have innumerable complexities and perplexities swept away.

134)20:4-6

The view expressed in yesterday's Note is one supported by the sublime words of the Westminster Confession and the Shorter Catechism. We think it worth reproducing them for our meditation today, without further comment:

'The bodies of men after death return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls (which neither die nor sleep) having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God Who gave them. The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies; and the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. Besides these two places for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledges none.

The bodies of the unjust shall, by the power of Christ, be raised to dishonour; the bodies of the just, by His Spirit, unto honour, and be made conformable to His own glorious body.' (Confession, chapter 32,

Catechism, Q.37 'What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death?

A. The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection.

Q.38 What benefits do believers receive from Christ at the resurrection?

A. At the resurrection, believers, being raised up in glory, shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment, and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity.'

135)20:1-6

Having sought to clear the confusions we must now try to seek the real point of the chapter's message for John and for ourselves. It is this: it proclaims a Satan bound! That is its central affirmation. It is sometimes objected to the interpretation given above that abound. Satan does not correspond with the experience of John in his day, or ours. But this is to misunderstand the meaning. Satan is bound in the sense a dog is bound by a chain. Keep out of the radius of the chain and no harm will come; within, the dog can still do much damage! Satan is not bound the absolute sense, any more than he is destroyed in the absolute sense, although he is said to be destroyed in the death of Christ (Hebrews 2:14), but in the sense that he is in the control of God, and has lost the initiative since his defeat at the Cross. Christ now has the devil on a chain! Nor is this a new message in Revelation. It is in fact the message of the entire book; we see it in chapter 1, in the vision of the Living One in the midst of the candlesticks, in chapter 4 in the vision of the Throne; it is the message of the seals, it is the message of the trumpets; it is the message of every vision. We have seen repeatedly that power was given to the evil one to do this or that; the monsters rage by His sovereign permission, and the Word of His power is astride all the conflicts and turmoils of the world. Thus even when it seems in our day as if all hell is let loose in the world, we must remember it is but Satan's 'little season' at the end, prior to the final 'show-down' in which all evil will finally be destroyed, and the new heaven and earth ushered in. Satan is a defeated foe. We battle, not towards, but from victory!

136)20:7-10

Scripture plainly teaches that in the end-time there will be increased activity of evil, leading to an almighty clash, and here we have a description of Satan's little season, in which he is loosed, and which heads up into his final destruction. This idea of a 'show-down' is no 'accident', for it is inherent in the moral sphere that evil develops alongside good, and, as it were, parallel to it. The fact is 'progress' is a very ambiguous word as applied to civilisation, for with every development towards good in mankind (whether socially, technologically or otherwise), has come a corresponding propensity towards evil. The potential for evil of 'good' inventions, is infinitely greater and more sinister than it was a hundred years ago, or even fifty! But why should Satan be loosed after being bound? It is not that he escapes from God. He is loosed by Him, and this can only be in order that God may draw evil out into the open so as to destroy it utterly.

The operative phrase in this binding and loosing of Satan is the deception of the nations. Broadly speaking, it is true that since the time of the early Church there has been a 'Christianising' influence in the world (cf - the parable of the mustard seed in Matthew 13) largely under the direction of the 'Christian West' - that is, until now, when disorder and chaos are on a world scale, and gigantic movements are dividing nations as if by superhuman powers. It is not difficult for us today to see the force of this prophecy, or to imagine that it is beginning to be fulfilled before our eyes, when we think of the pressures that have been laid upon God's people behind the 'curtains' of the East, and try to assess the significance of the 'anti-missionary' trend in most missionary lands. Whether this is the end-time or not, what seems to be happening in our day is fundamentally a deception of the nations. It is surely plain for those who have eyes to see that Communism has exercised an almost mesmeric power over a large part of our modern world, and this may well be the forerunner of even grimmer things to come.

137)20:11-15

This picture of the final great assize is awesome in its simplicity. The battle now is over and the time of reckoning has come. Little needs to be said, although much could be, about the arraignment of men at the great white throne of God, before Whose face earth and heaven flee away. The position of the dead before the final judgment, so wisely and succinctly expressed in the words of the Westminster Confession (see Note for Sunday, 26th) - and so Scripturally - makes it clear that 'hell' here in 13, and in the parable in Luke 16, does not refer to the final state of torment, but to being 'reserved unto judgment' until the time of the great assize, when death and hell give up their dead, to be judged, when they themselves will be cast into the lake of fire.

One important point which must not be missed is this: the reality of the great assize is part of the message given to the early Church (cf Acts 10:42) and as such should be part of the preaching of the Church. No doctrine has been so neglected as this in our pulpits in this 20th century of turmoil and convulsion. Modern preaching does not even match the spirit of the times, let alone underline the sanctions of the Word of God, and this is one compelling reason why the Church's voice tends to be treated with indifference as irrelevant. The need is very great now for the re-establishment of the validity of the moral law and its sanctions, and for the reminder that there is a price to be paid for the neglect of holy things. God means that we shall take His grace seriously - on pain of punishment! To preach judgment, it is true, is not to preach the gospel. But such preaching is a necessary pre-evangelism, to establish the need for the gospel, and it is only against the dark background of the law's condemnation that the good news is seen to be good news - a fact which Paul saw very clearly when he planned his opening chapters of the Epistle to the Romans. That the Church has been so blind to this for so long is a measure of how the deceptions of Satan have touched even the minds of the elect! (Matthew 24:24).

138) 21:1-8

The last two chapters of Revelation bring us to the final consummation, in a vision that is breathtaking and glorious in its conception. By way of introduction we should notice first of all the close connection the vision has with the first coming of Christ. In its fullness it is, of course, related to the Second Coming, which in fact ushers it in, but it is nevertheless the fulfilment of the meaning of the Incarnation. This can be seen in 3, although the full force is obscured in the AV translation. The words should read, '... they shall be His people, and He shall be God with them, their God' (so the Greek). This is precisely what the word 'Emmanuel' means (Matthew 1:23). The reference to the Tabernacle of God being with men is likewise an echo of John 1:14 - 'The Word was made flesh and tabernacled among us'. The significance of this is that the new heavens and new earth are a blessed reality here and now. John saw them when he was on lonely Patmos. Faith can pierce the barriers of the seen and temporal and see the unseen and eternal through all the travail and turmoil of the old world. It is there now, that new order, and we can by faith taste the fruits and powers of the world to come. Since the Incarnation and Atonement, the kingdom of God is there, it is a present, unseen reality to the eye of faith. It is established now, and it will be unveiled in glory when Jesus comes to reign. A new day really did dawn, and a new order was ushered in, when Jesus rose from the dead. It is its hiddenness, though a present reality, that the New Testament proclaims, and it is its unveiling, not its establishment, that will take place at the end.

139)21:1-8

It is significant to realise that what is unfolded here is the complete reversal of the tragedy of the Garden of Eden. There, man became estranged from God through sin, as the cherubim and flaming sword placed at the east of the Garden to guard the way of the tree of life are meant to indicate (Genesis 3:24). Here, the great reconciliation has been effected, and God and man are again at one. The Hebrew epistle begins with the sublime words, 'God.... hath spoken.... in His Son', and in that tremendous word the gulf was bridged, the silence of sin broken, and the tragic isolation penetrated by the Incarnation and Atonement of Jesus Christ. Here we have the final act, so to speak, the consummation of a great drama inaugurated in the gathering darkness of Eden, when the primal promise of redemption was given in the assurance that the seed of the woman would bruise the head of the serpent.

This reversal, however, is not simply a return to the status quo. Christ's redemption brings about something infinitely more wonderful - a new heaven and a new earth. This new creation, however, bears an integral relation to the old, as the word 'new' indicates. In the Greek, there are two words for 'new', and John uses one which means 'new' but not 'other', in the sense of being completely and unrelatedly different. In other words, there is a continuity between the old order and the new. It is the same heaven and earth, but gloriously transformed and transfigured into a new thing. (This is a principle that is paralleled throughout the New Testament theology; the same kind of relation exists between the Christ of the flesh and the risen Christ - it was the same Jesus, yet gloriously - and indefinably - different. So also the relation between the old man and the new - it is the same person, yet undeniably changed. It is seen even more graphically in Paul's teaching about natural bodies and spiritual bodies; we shall be changed, but it will still - recognisably - be we who shall have been changed, and clothed with new bodies).

140)21:1-8

But now a further point of great importance. A new heaven we may think we can grasp, but - a new earth? This is a stumbling block to many, and a word or two by way of elucidation will not be amiss. It used to be the fashion in theological circles to speak of heaven as a state rather than a place; to speak of it as an actual place was regarded as crude and literalistic. This is very plausible. But unfortunately it is wide of the mark as far as biblical teaching is concerned. As a matter of fact, the idea of heaven as a (very spiritual) state of mind rather than a place owes its origin to Greek philosophy, not the New Testament. For the Greek idea was that of the immortality of the soul. They thought of the continued existence of the soul after death, 'an existence disembodied, attenuated, rarified'. But the Scriptures teach something far beyond this - the resurrection of the body, a solid and substantial doctrine. This is why 'heaven' must be a place, as well as a state of mind, and must include also the idea of a new earth. For the new creation is to be peopled with a new humanity - God has a new kind of man prepared for this new creation, with spiritual bodies. The life to come is a solid reality, far removed from the dismal conception of disembodied spirits haunting a ghostly existence, which often does duty in men's minds for their idea of the afterlife. It is not too much to say that it is because of the persistence of this pernicious error in the thinking of the Church that so many believers consciously or unconsciously regard heaven very much as an insubstantial 'consolation prize' that follows upon their losing the solid experience of life as they have known it upon earth. It is time that the robust biblical 'materialism' of the world to come came back into its own, for it is time that the Church lost its desolating 'earthboundness' and became truly heavenly-minded.

141)21:1-8

It has not escaped the notice of commentators that John seems obliged to use many negatives in his descriptions of the New Jerusalem - no more sea, no more death, no more pain, etc. One reason for this is that 'eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him', and so, almost of necessity, the unknowable is spoken of in terms of 'No, not like that, not like that...'. Even the negatives, however, carry a very positive meaning. The sea in Revelation is ever the symbol of unrest and evil; the beast rose out of the sea (13:1); Babylon sat on many waters (17:1); the thrashing of its waves and its convulsions represent the working of evil in the world. Also, and in a much more literal sense, the sea separated John from fellowship with the Church he loved - and now, in the vision, he sees all this forever done away there was no more sea. Death, the last enemy to be destroyed, shall likewise be no more. Death is the enemy because it sunders what God once joined together, body and soul. To say therefore that there shall be no more death means that that ancient wound in the constitution of man will be finally healed, and new bodies, the perfect vehicle of expression for redeemed souls, will be given to Christ's people. Thus, the final effects of sin will be done away, and all that clouds our days and dogs our footsteps, pain, sorrow, tears, darkness, will be removed - no more curse, and no night there. Even in negatives, John conveys so much blessed meaning!

142)21:9-27

The vision is not all expounded in negatives, however. Indeed, it is too big and grand to be confined to negatives, however mysterious and unknowable it may be, or to one symbol only, and here the picture of the holy city alternates with that of the bride, the Lamb's wife. This need not confuse or dismay our orderly (?) minds, but rather stimulate them by the very wealth and richness of the changing conceptions. The identification of the bride with the city is valuable for us in that it gives us fresh insights into some of the wonderful characteristics of the life to come. The dimensions of the city have something to say to us about the spaciousness of the life that awaits us. It is as if we were meant to learn that the saints in glory will enter into a fullness and completeness of experience that knows no bounds, and there will be, as someone has put it, 'room for blessings of mind and heart that human frailty, the exigencies of life, the claims of vocation, denied them here; room for capacities which found no outlet here, for such things as friendships that life would not let us begin....'. This is very wonderful. In the glory, the inevitable limitations that fallen nature impose upon the best of God's children, and the voluntary restrictions that the law of love brings upon the liberty of the believer, restrictions that are gladly accepted, at whatever cost to the crucified heart, for Christ's sake, will no longer cramp or hinder; we shall be able to stretch to our full height in the wide open spaces of God's fullness, and enter into our fullest and truest destiny. Then, and only then, will we know what it really means to live.

143)21:9-27

Another significance in the measurements of the holy city is that they speak of a complete symmetry. The city has perfect proportions, and this speaks of a glorified Church perfectly proportioned and with no kind of imbalance. What is suggested is the harmony and symmetry of a perfectly proportioned life, and one has only to think of the sometimes ludicrous, sometimes tragic 'lopsidedness' of character that we see in those around us in the Church, and suspect also in ourselves. The question of imbalance is, as a matter of fact, one of the most vexing of all problems in the Christian life. Sometimes our minds develop far more than our emotional natures, and when this happens, we have the unedifying spectacle of a man with a first class intellect but emotionally quite adolescent and immature. The fact that perfection of symmetry and proportion is the final fruition of God's dealings with us should encourage us to realise that even in this life grace (which is but 'glory begun below') can effect at least some approximation to that blessed state. At all events, we should seek to avoid the dangers of a merely traditional and orthodox concept of sanctification which is content with the removal of generally accepted marks of worldliness and carnality, and forgets the work that needs to be done in the deeper reaches of personality and which can produce increasing maturity of character and all-round development towards wholeness. It may be that in this connection there is significance in the idea of the precious stones (19ff), for it is only whole men that really sparkle with life and vitality. The truth about most of us as we are is that we are rather dull and uninteresting people. This, did we but know it, is the mark of our sinfulness more truly than other more obvious manifestations of it. Nor can any pattern of sanctification that leaves us dull still, be an authentic, biblical pattern. It is time we realised that the question whether we are dull and colourless or vital and sparkling is one of first importance for the Christian. A great deal depends on the answer!

144)22:1-5

None of the descriptive and symbolic excellencies that we have thus far touched upon exhaust the meaning of the new creation, however, or say the deepest word about it. For the kingdom of God centres upon the King Himself, and consequently no merely impersonal categories can fully unfold its glories in the consummation. This is why the simple statement in 4, 'They shall see His face', is the best and most profound in all the final section of the book. Almost the whole of Christian theology can be adduced from what it says. We have already pointed out that in the vision of the new heaven and new earth what we have is the complete reversal of the tragedy of the Garden of Eden, and this in fact is the key to the whole picture, and must be the starting point for a true understanding of John's words. Sin compels separation, and Adam's disobedience brought about an estrangement between man and God which, contrary to Satan's beguiling promise, meant that a great darkness came upon man's spirit. Sin put out his eyes, and the good things of God were hidden from him; he could no longer 'see' the kingdom of God, and became blind to spiritual values, blind to eternal things, to the higher values of the spirit. And from that point man is seen stumbling and groping down the long ages of history. The German Goethe enshrines this very movingly in words immortalised by Brahms in the Song of Destiny:

'But man may not linger,
and nowhere finds he repose;
We stay not but wander
We grief-laden mortals,
Blindly, blindly, from one sad hour
To another,
Like water from cliff to cliff
Ever dropping,
Blindly at last we do pass away.'

This would indeed have been the fate of mankind, but for the gospel. God was not willing that any should perish, and even thus early in the Garden gave the hope that the darkness would not last forever. That is the background against which we can best understand John's final words here.

145)22:1-5

And so the age-long preparation began. God spoke. He made the first overtures of friendship. He came to man, at sundry times and in divers manners, speaking to the fathers by the prophets, by shadow, by suggestion, by type and illustration, speaking to them in the darkness, reassuring their hearts that one great, glad day all would once again be well, creating faith and hope in their hearts. A new kind of light, a new kind of sight came to them - the insight of faith, and by this they began to learn to walk. They saw - but not as they once did - but this was a sure token and promise that once again they would. Thus the 'suggestions' to faith throughout the time of preparation. Eden's river of life was 'echoed' again in the wilderness, when water came forth from the rock. Rivers in dry places were promised through the prophets, and soon there arose an unbearable longing in man's heart for final healing. And in the fullness of the time Jesus came, the Light of the World. But full healing is not yet, even in the coming of Christ; we walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). The reconciliation is effected in His death and resurrection and the estrangement annulled - but only in the word of promise. The great Swiss theologian, Emil Brunner, writes in this connection: 'Forgiveness does not cancel the actual effects of sin. The ruin which began with sin still takes its course, even where the guilt of sin has been forgiven.... The roots of sin have not been eradicated. Living fellowship with God has been promised to him, and in this promise it is present in the Word; but it is not yet present in power.... The real working out of the new life which has taken place in Christ is more a foretaste and a suggestion than an actual effect. Therefore the Christian remains above all one who hopes'.

146)22:1-5

In His own wise purposes God keeps us waiting for the final act, the final consummation. For walking by faith is an indispensable discipline in the whole process, a necessary ingredient in the composition of the new order. Thus, in the New Testament, it is significant that we do not ever have a description of what Jesus was like to look at - His face is not described to us. Faith perceives that He is fairer than the sons of men, that He is chiefest of ten thousand, and altogether lovely. But this is viewed by the inward eye. We do not as yet see Him, but only hear His voice. The paradox and mystery of this experience is expressed perfectly in 1 Peter 1:8, 'Whom having not seen, ye love; in Whom, though now ye see Him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory'. This is the point to which God, in the grace of the gospel, brings us. It is almost like being led by a loving hand blindfold to the gates of the city; for it is there, so to speak, that finally we are given eyes with which to see Him. And as we stand there, we shall hear the Voice that we have learned to recognise on our pilgrim journey, but now no longer soft and gentle, but glorious as the sound of many waters, saying, 'Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord'. And then something will happen. A Hand will touch our sin-scarred faces, and we shall receive our sight back at last and - we shall see His face. And we shall say, 'Lo! this is our God....' That will be the signal for the divine rejoicing and merriment to begin, for God will then say, 'This My Son was dead, and is alive again; He was lost, and is found'. That will be glory indeed!

147)22 6-22

The 'message' of Revelation finishes at 5 with the words 'and they shall reign forever and ever' - a fitting ending to the glorious unfolding of the plan of God's redemption, whereby His primal purpose for man which was vitiated in Eden by sin is now at last brought to pass, and the god-like destiny intended for Him fulfilled. What remains now is an epilogue, in which various notes are sounded, the first of these being an insistence on the authenticity of the visions of the book (6, 7, 16, 18, 19, particularly 6, 18 and 19). On the one hand there is the assertion that these sayings are faithful and true; on the other there is the warning that any who either add to, or take from, the message of the book will do so to their eternal peril. There are several points here. In the first place, we are reminded that what we are dealing with is not a series of predictions of the future by an inspired and far-sighted man, but a revelation given from above. That is to say, Revelation is not an aggregate of possible or probable events that may well take place in the future, but an unveiling of basic principles underlying human existence, an unveiling of the truth about our world, and therefore the unveiling of the certainties of things to come. These are 'things which must shortly come to pass'.

In the second place, it is not without significance that this warning about the trustworthiness of God's Word should come here. We have already seen how marked the similarities are between the last book of the Bible and the first. It is striking to recall that the fall of man followed the doubt cast by Satan on the Word of God. 'Yea, hath God said?' was his fateful jibe. Small wonder that this solemn warning stands at the end of the Bible!

148)22:6-22

Thirdly, it is significant that this warning stands at the end of the canon of Scripture, for it thus, by implication, lays its strictures not only upon the Book of Revelation itself, but on the whole Bible. This means that all its teaching should be proclaimed to men, and that it is not permissible either to add to its truth one's own ideas that have no basis in the revealed Word, or to withhold any of its unpalatable truths. Well might the seer be warned in 10, 'Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book'. But the Church has often been guilty of this, withholding unpopular doctrines from men in an effort to accommodate them and maintain their adherence to its membership. This doubtful expedient has never in fact succeeded in holding men to the Faith, but rather led them to despise it. It is not, however, because of its ineffectiveness, but because of its error that we deplore it, for it is one that has cost the Church very dearly in its spiritual life. This is why it should be incumbent upon ministers to be able, with Paul, to say, 'I have not shunned to declare all the counsel of God', whether he follows the Church year in his preaching (there are worse ways than this!) or by systematic exposition of the Scriptures. This should be a matter, not merely of diligence, but of honesty, for any man who is called to be a preacher of the Word. If God has ordained that the whole Word is necessary for the full development and growth in grace of His people, how should any man lightly neglect any part or aspect of its truths? God make us and keep us faithful and true to His Word!

149)22:6-22

The solemn urgency of the gospel invitation in 10-17 reminds us that the purpose of the book of Revelation is not speculative, nor that we should merely have a better knowledge of the principles that govern the world, but that we should be challenged to come to grips with the truth of the gospel. It is eternal destinies that are at stake, and how we react here to the gospel word will determine our eternal destiny for weal or woe. This is the force of 11, 'he that is unjust, let him be unjust still...'. What a man becomes here he will remain forever. Men are inevitably, inexorably, by their reaction to the gospel, building up their destiny now; acts, habits, attitudes, in one direction or the other - these are the fateful choices by which men are consciously or unconsciously determining character and its outcome in the eternal order. It is true that Revelation has stressed the sovereignty of God and His electing grace in salvation, but the fact remains that that eternal election has to be settled in time by response to, and appropriation of, the truth of the gospel. This also underlines the urgency of the admonition, 'Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book'. At all costs men must hear the message, and know that there is a heaven to gain and a hell to shun, and that entrance into life is by Christ, the living way, and by none other. This makes 11 very solemn indeed; for we are all, by nature, making a wrong choice. By nature we do not like to retain God in our knowledge, but turn our backs on Him, and by nature we become people set against God, and invite against ourselves the law by which act ripens into habit, habit into character, and character into destiny. But God is greater than this inevitable process of hardening; He is Alpha and Omega, that is to say, sin does not have the last word in this story; He can break into the terrible chain of cause and effect that drags men down into lostness, and in Christ holds out the wonderful invitation to come to Him Who breaks the power of sin and cleanses from all its defilement and corruption. (14 should read, with the Greek, 'Blessed are they that wash their robes'.)

150)22:6-22

Nothing could be sweeter or simpler than the invitation to 'Come', given by Jesus Himself, through the Spirit and the Church (17). This is the Spirit's testimony throughout Scripture. The tugging that we have known at our hearts, the stirring within us at the sound of the gospel, the feeling within us, wistful and longing, wanting it to be true, the sudden awareness of the persuasiveness and power of its message - all this is the Spirit saying 'Come'. And the Bride, the Church likewise adds her persuasion to the pleading of the Spirit (cf John 15:26, 27, for a felicitous illustration of this blessedly fruitful co-operation - 'The Spirit shall testify of Me: and ye also'). The Church is commissioned by the Lord to invite men to come to him. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 5:20, 'We are ambassadors for Christ...we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God'. And who could invite men more warmly or eagerly than those who themselves have come to Him and experienced His grace and power! The invitation continues, 'Let him that is athirst come'. This is the only qualification a man ever needs. How wonderful that a book that has sounded out so many stern and frightening notes should end so tenderly and winsomely, and with an appeal as wide as the world itself - 'whosoever will....'! This serves to underline still more conclusively that judgment is God's 'strange' work, and that His 'proper' work is to love and to save. It is when we call Him 'Saviour' that we give Him His best and sweetest Name!

151)22:6-22

As a further comment on the gospel invitation, we quote from the Notes of the Rev. William Still: 'How sweet to the weary is that word 'Come!' Think of the disillusion of those who have drunk most deeply of what men call life, and whose cravings have thereby been increased and intensified. That bitter experience is enough to put men off tasting life at all. But when the Bridegroom and the Bride in the ministry of the Word issue that sweet call, and they come and drink - ah, not only does the new life charm them, but the jaded appetite for lawful things is stimulated, and the simplest things become charged with pleasure - the laughter of children and a sense of humour, gratitude for the homeliest meal and the most elementary comfort, the beauties and glories of nature and the nobilities of human nature at its humble best; above all, the answering light in another Christ-drenched eye. These follow the response to the gracious invitation, and it is as agents of its free offer to all mankind that we are set in our God-appointed places in the world. The mission and mission field and the evangelistic effort is where we are and where we meet the folk who most sorely need the invitation. We thank God for every weary worldling who has heard it at a mass rally, and we praise God for the message so powerfully made plain, but it is a question whether it is not a far better thing for Christ to be heard in a life that is watched day by day, than in a stentorian utterance which must necessarily limit the application of its message to daily life. The contemporary fault is not that campaigns have been waged, but that they have been almost exclusively trusted in as evangelical means. When Christians begin again to show forth Christ in their daily lives, that will not mean that evangelical meetings should cease, but it should mean that they have become at most an equal part of ministry with private and individual witness. God speed the day, for the reason for advocating recognisable Christian character is not merely to the end of evangelism, but because that is the ultimate test of entrance into heaven, and, possibly, of our placing therein.'

152)22:6-22

The urgency of the gospel invitation is further, and finally, emphasised by the fact of the imminence of Christ's Coming. 'Surely, I come quickly' says Christ in 20 (see also 12). There are two things to say in this connection. There are two seemingly contradictory lines of teaching in the New Testament about the Coming of Christ, one stresses its imminence, the other its delay (cf 'My Lord delayeth His coming' Matthew 24:48). The explanation of this seeming riddle is sufficiently given in 2 Peter 3:4ff. The Lord is not slack.... but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. That great Day is delayed for evangelical reasons, to give men further opportunity to turn to Christ. But and this is the second point - delayed as it may be, it is still imminent, and always has been so. It has been suggested that we should not picture this question as if the coming of the Lord were at the end of life's road, away yonder. Rather, our life, in time, is like a long corridor with only thin walls separating it from the outside, from the eternal world which surrounds it. At any moment, the eternal world could break through. And the walls of the corridor are so thin that we can sometimes, as it were, hear the voices and sounds from the other side, as if there were something building up behind those thin, thin walls, ready to burst through and engulf us. This is how we are to look at the situation. How dramatic! We live day by day with the Lord's presence at hand like that! This is the urgency of the gospel invitation, and the source of the glad and eager cry of the people of God, 'Even so, come, Lord Jesus'.